

Indian Muslim campaign aims to break stereotypes

REUTERS, Kolkata

A powerful Muslim group in India, home to the world's third-largest Islamic population, has launched a campaign to spread progressive values in the community and break stereotypes, its leaders said yesterday.

Thousands of clerics and volunteers of the Jamaat-e-Islami Hind, the biggest body of Indian Muslims, are meeting fellow Muslims in towns and villages with the message that a right understanding of Islam would defeat perceptions that Muslims are "fundamentalist" and "militant".

"Our aim is to explain to the community that the true values of Islam do not talk about jihad as an excuse to take up arms," Rahamat Ali Khan, a senior Jamaat leader, told Reuters in Kolkata.

None of India's 140-million Muslims have been found to be members of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda but dozens of Islamist militants have been arrested or killed in recent years in connection with separatist violence or terrorist

attacks.

The Jamaat commands widespread influence among Muslims, especially in the countryside, and has around 5 million members and volunteers.

About 80 percent of India's 1.1 billion people are Hindus and Muslims account for about 13 percent of the officially secular nation.

Jamaat's campaign started last month after a study ordered by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on the status of Muslims revealed they felt they were seen by other communities as unpatriotic and needed to prove they were not terrorists.

It also said Muslims were among the least literate and poorest, along with Hindu Dalits, formerly "untouchables", and were likely to be in prison in disproportionate numbers.

The literacy rate for Muslims is lower than the national average and the status of Muslim women is worse, with many unaware of their rights.

"We are calling for education for all family members, especially girls,

and equal rights for women as this is what Islam really preaches," Khan said.

Muslims, especially in rural areas, often follow the Fatwas or edicts of local Islamic clerics. Many Muslims also live in urban ghettos and worry about the possibility of religious riots breaking out.

Analysts say Muslim alienation has increased since the early 1990s after hardline Hindus razed a disputed mosque in northern India, sparking riots that left thousands dead.

Jamaat members are telling Muslim women that under Islamic law, if their husbands die, their brothers-in-law and fathers-in-law have to look after them and not allow them to become destitute by throwing them out of their houses.

They are also meeting Muslim families and educating them of their rights and leaders say thousands are attending meetings in several states.

"The response to our call has been overwhelming," said Syed Qasim Rasool Ilyas, another Jamaat leader.

Iran women chip away at male political supremacy

AFP, Qazvin

Banned from becoming president and with just a dozen MPs, women have started making inroads in the male-dominated world of Iranian politics by boosting their numbers on local councils.

Former high school teacher Fatemeh Ashdari, 42, was one of dozens of women who made a strong showing in December's municipal elections by winning a seat on the city council in the city of Qazvin northwest of Tehran.

"Somebody has to take the first steps to pave the way for the next generation," the energetic, chador-clad Ashdari, a conservative, told AFP.

"Women cannot just have the decorative jobs of an advisor or a consultant. Men have to allow us to make our mistakes and learn," she said.

Ashdari is one of four women who will sit in the new nine-member council in Qazvin after the December 15 elections, where women represented just one-sixth of the 180 candidates in the city.

While Iranian women have yet to make a major breakthrough on a national stage, their success in the municipal polls was startling – out of 264 seats available on councils in provincial capitals, 44 went to women.

And in a number of cities and towns, it was female candidates who polled the most votes, most notably in the cities of Shiraz and Hamedan where two women who are still in their 20s pocketed the highest number of votes.

Ashdari said she won her second term on Qazvin city council with "the least publicity as people were happy with my work in the council and got me in again simply by the word of mouth."

She attributed her success to "being there for people and following up persistently on their demands" after resolving property disputes, expanding green spaces and promoting cultural centers for women."

"I miss out on a lot of family life but it is a very rewarding job," said Ashdari, who is juggling motherhood and chairing two charities and council membership.

Qazvin resident and civil servant Mohammad Taheri, 31, voted for Ashdari as he said he was "fed up with male candidates with big titles who do not deliver on their promises".

"Women did not let us down in the two previous councils", he said. "And they run households so efficiently, the city is just like a big house."

Fakhrosadat Mohtashamipour, a former deputy interior minister for women's affairs, said it was no surprise that Iranian women, who now outnumber men at universities, had done so well in elections.

"Despite their small role in politics there are large numbers of educated women who are doing all kinds of jobs. There is no surprise they fared well in municipal polls," he said.

"Women are generally more caring and in the council there is room for attention to people's individual needs."

Ashdari spends hours in her office listening to people's complaints about their problems, some of which are not relevant to her municipal duties such as needing an urgent kidney transplant or a legal dispute over an inheritance.

The ambitious councillor's next target is the parliament and she deplores the fact that there are so few female lawmakers in the body – just 12 out of 290.

Mohtashamipour believes Iranian society is prepared to accept more women in key decision-making roles but partly blames the major political parties for not doing enough to attract and involve women members.

"In legislative elections, people mainly vote for party candidates," she said, adding her reformist Participation Front party had initially decided to nominate five women in the municipal polls for Tehran, but had to reduce it to three in a coalition with other groups.

"The reformist parties in particular have to invest in women and explore their potential," she said.

Mohtashamipour is also an advocate of affirmative action and positive discrimination to allocate a certain quota for female members in parliament.

"It is true that women have to be empowered first, but if there is no will to use their expertise, they will only be disappointed and alienated."

Since the Islamic revolution, no woman has served as a minister in an Iranian cabinet.

Reformist president Mohammad Khatami, who swept to power with the help of female voters, started a new trend by naming two women to serve as vice presidents for the environment and women's affairs.

Hardline successor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has kept up his predecessor's tradition by filling the same portfolios with women, but all ministries are still headed by men.

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