



DR. ABDUL HAQQ BAKER

Dr. Abdul Haqq Baker is the founder and Managing Director of the 2009 award winning youth initiative, Strategy To Reach Empower & Educate Teenagers (STREET) UK, a former Lecturer in Terrorism Studies at the Centre of Studies in Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV) in the University of St Andrews and Research Fellow for the University of Exeter's European Muslim Research Centre.

He was also chairman of Brixton Mosque, London between 1994 and 2009 where he successfully countered external extremist threats to the local Muslim community and successfully challenged the destructive propaganda that accompanied it.

His strategic focus involves intervention frameworks that enable strategic community based and statutory collaborations/partnerships to address the multifaceted challenges faced by violent extremism and environments at risk of developing them. His STREET programme was subsequently cited by the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and British think tank DEMOS, among others, as a model case study. Its effective approach towards youth engagement and intervention led to it winning the Preventing Violent Extremism Innovation award (17th February 2009) for the most innovative youth programme in 2008.

Abdul Haqq's insight, experiences and expertise in successfully challenging violent radicalisation has led to him being widely acknowledged as an authority on violent extremism and counter-radicalisation in the UK as well as an expert in the field of youth intervention projects. He has acted in the capacity of adviser and on occasion, expert witness regarding international terrorism cases.

SURVIVING IN BRITISH POLITICS AS A BLACK MUSLIM HIJABI WOMAN

BY COUNCILLOR RAKHIA ISMAIL

Black people are marginalised in politics in Britain. In my experiences and in those of other Black British Muslim politicians that I know they are twice marginalised. As the first British mayor to wear a hijab in the UK, and the first Somali female councillor too, I felt that we are not included, nor respected, are treated as nothing other than to fulfill a tick box exercise. This is extremely frustrating and sometimes depressing because the needs of our communities are not met and often ignored. Unfortunately, this means over 10% of the UK British Muslim population are voiceless within the government and national parties.

Census data suggests that over 10% of the UK Muslim population are 'Black.' A Muslim Council of Britain (Ali, 2015) study further states that the number of Muslims in the 'Black African' and 'Black Other' ethnic categories is rising.

It was a difficult decision to put myself forward to become a council candidate, but after thinking it through, I decided with the support of my husband and children.

I put myself forward in the 2012 Holloway ward by-election, where I only won the Labour party nomination by 1 vote to become a council candidate. It was difficult to gain the party nomination due to lack of a strong personal network within the party and competing with six other candidates who were better known and connected within the party. On election day, I won the seat by 57% of the electoral vote. Although this area has been a known Labour seat, it was a surprise that I was able to gain this majority in votes, which only happened once in the past in 1995. I attribute this win to my work within the local schools and community as well as it suggests that there is a desire in the community to see diversity and change within the local council.

I also became the UK's first Muslim refugee councillor. It was a piece of delightful news for many communities in Islington and across the UK, inspiring so many Somalis and others to both join the Labour party and become councillors in the UK. It also engaged communities in politics at a time when the Black Muslim community and youth needed to integrate and have a voice in local and national politics.

As a Black woman and Black Muslim mother, in public office, I see increasingly the challenges that the Black Muslim community and youth face on daily basis.

The Black community will continue to face numerous obstacles in trying to achieve parity, and the Black Muslim community will face additional barriers due to being historically ignored within the Muslim community and wider Black British community. This is a result of successive governments' lack of drive to understand the ethnic diversity within the Muslim communities in UK.

As a result, many Black Muslims feel excluded as a lot of times they don't see people like themselves holding public offices in the British government. This includes the Houses of Parliament and Lords, the London Assembly and most, if not all, local government and services.

As a Black young Somali Muslim woman in London, I felt caught in the confusing web of culture,

faith and race when it came to my identity. I was often told that 'I am not Black enough' by the Black community and 'not Muslim enough' by the wider Muslim community. It was difficult for both communities to understand the intersectionality of my identity as a Black Muslim woman. As someone who wears the *hijab* (headcover), it helped assert my identity as a Muslim and ease my acceptance by the Muslim community. However, there is still resistance due to being Black and not from the dominant Muslim ethnic groups in the UK.

This has become increasingly more apparent and concerning to me since I became a councillor in Islington Council in 2012. My identity seems to affect how I am perceived and treated professionally. Within local government, the intersectionality of my identity is often not perceived as representative of either the Muslim or Black communities; but more often as an anomaly and without categorisation. As a Black Muslim female councillor, my voice is often ignored, my views are not included and sometimes I felt bullied. Being a victim of unconscious bias is all too familiar.

When I became the first Muslim Black councillor in Islington, I realised the gravity of the marginalisation that the Black Muslim community faced in the council, which resulted in them having no voice in local matters. This was surprising considering the large population of Black Muslims in the local area. I started proposing ideas to reflect the diversity of the local community and their needs, rather than projects which did not reflect the aspiration of the local residents. This I believe would have saved the Council wasting resources and avoiding duplications of services. I encountered strong resistance to the ideas that I proposed. My ideas around advancing the local community enterprise were disregarded and never discussed in meetings. I then began to contemplate my role within the executive council team and decided to resign. It seemed that I was only included within this executive team to provide visual diversity and not to make a tangible change in the operations of the council.

I resumed my role as a backbencher so I can challenge and advocate for inclusivity, and community cohesion for residents. I realised the leadership was not interested in meaningful engagement other than advancing their political agenda, which leaves behind those who put us in power in the first place. Therefore, as a Muslim woman and local politician, I found it hard to sit back and watch as we all seek a sense of belonging, be it culturally, religiously, emotionally, or professionally.

I started asking myself this question, when I was working in schools a long time ago, "how can we tackle the sheer lack of political representation of Black Muslims in the UK?" As observed earlier, there are hardly any representations for Black Muslims and youths in our school system or local government. Young people growing up need to see people who look like them and they can identify with. This will encourage them to pursue a career in politics to empower and amplify the voices of our community.

While overcoming a number of hurdles to represent the people of Islington, there were times where I was excluded from decision making. In 2019, I was denied access to social media accounts of the Mayor by the Council Labour leadership. This was odd considering previous Mayors' had autonomous control over their contact with the local residents and utilised

these platforms for political gains. Additionally, I have been excluded from discussions where approvals for local events were revoked such as ‘Eid in the Park’ where approval was given initially. These are examples of how the Labour leadership team at Islington council have undermined my position as a Mayor. I represented Islington with graciousness throughout all my work as mayor and councillor. I concluded my year as Mayor, winning Portrait of Britain 2020 Competition, despite all the discrimination I faced inside Islington’s Labour Leadership.

An example of this is that at the end of my year as Mayor I was due to be given my mayoral badge in a ceremonial event by the Council Leader. I was informed by the council leadership team that this will not be the case and instead my mayoral badge will be delivered to me by my chauffeur. This contradicted the usual protocol for the council and was in line with the consistent mistreatment that I have experienced at the Council.

This is my personal experience in Islington council, which was quite traumatic for me and inflicted by the Labour council leader and his leadership team, both on a personal and professional level. It also demonstrates the wider experience of BAME and specifically the Black Muslim community in politics. In my experience, I find the Islington Council establishment has institutionalized discrimination against minorities like me.

I decided to join the Conservative party, which was not an easy decision to make. I decided to approach the Conservative party to make a political statement about the need for diversity of representation for the Muslim community, rather than relying on a single party to advance our interests. It became imperative to cross party as I have waited to see a meaningful change within the Labour party’s treatment of BAME colleagues.

I am quite aware of the Conservative party’s history of Islamophobia and discrimination. Yet, I have decided to join the party with the hope of driving change within the party. I also hope that this will encourage other Muslims and specifically Black Muslims to pursue their interest in politics without limiting themselves to a single party. This will also broaden their scope of influence within the society as voices like mine are needed in all political parties.

I want to stress that changing my political party has not changed my value in life or commitment to fairness and justice as a Muslim woman.

In other words, I think it is deceiving, misleading, and too dangerous democratically that the Muslim, Black and ethnic minority voices should be locked up to single political party. The Black Muslim community, which I belong to, are fairly new to political engagement in the UK. To tackle institutional racism, Islamophobia, inequality and discrimination, we should be seen in all the political parties in the UK as the future of our children’s prosperity depends on inclusivity of British society at every level.



COUNCILLOR RAKHIA ISMAIL

Cllr Rakhia Ismail is a multi award winning British Somali local politician in Islington, a committed grassroots community activist, and by profession fashion, textiles and shoe designer.

She is the mother of young adults, and got involved in politics through Arts in the community by giving a voice to the voiceless as arts speaks volumes, to engage and encourage voiceless

communities. Rakhia is a natural campaigner for social justice, youth crime, inequality and brings attention to all kinds of inequalities. She is the first Somali female politician in the UK and became councillor at a time when the Somali community needed a voice in local government, London region, and nationally. As a result, she inspired many Somali females and other minorities in public office as well as the general public to engage in politics.