

The Muslims as a Minority in New Zealand:  
An Analysis of the Relationship between Muslim Community and  
New Zealand Government

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Abstract

This study delves in depth into the Muslims as a minority and the analysis of their relationship with the government of New Zealand. The study starts with the overview of Islam and related background on Islam in New Zealand, then the historical inquiry into Muslims in New Zealand, which was traced back to 1850s, followed by a discussion on Islamic organisations in New Zealand and their chronological description. After that, the research further shares an insight into the relationship that existed between Muslim community and New Zealand Government. However, in the course of the fieldwork carried out by the researcher,

and due to the feedback as well as broad events around the globe, it was clear that, there is misunderstanding in most Western countries about Muslims, and there is silent hostility towards Islam due to colonial racial discrimination and orientalism. Although, New Zealand is different as it encourages religious diversity, cultural differences and ethnic community in acknowledgement of the “Waitangi treaty” of 1840. The findings also suggested that the Muslim community should continue to formulate a better working relationship with NZ government for safer and peaceful society.

1. Introduction

The religion Islam has its origin in Mecca, Saudi Arabia and the Prophet Muhammad introduced it to humanity. After Christianity it is the second largest religion in the world and has approximately 1.8 billion followers around the globe. The people who follow Islam are called Muslims. The meaning of the word "Islam" is submission to the will of God. It is believed that the words of the one God, Allah, that the Muslims have faith in, have revealed his words through the angel Gabriel to his beloved Prophet Muhammad. The holy book of the religion is known as the Quran and another important book is the Hadith. The religion contains a vast number of prophets who are believed to have been sent by Allah to spread his word and teach his laws.

It is religion of peace and teaches its followers and the world at large to believe in the rightful path of life as well as to do good to others so that the same is gained in return. The legal system of Islam is known as Sharia Law. It provides the code of

conduct for the followers of Islam and the way they should lead their daily lives. The basics of the faith of Islam are explained as its five pillars. The five pillars are Salat, Zakat, Shahadah, Sawm and Hajj. Salat means the prayers that need to be offered five times a day. Zakat means to provide help to the needy. Shahadah means to believe and have faith in the teachings of Allah and that to follow the path of the Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) is to practice the fasts that need to be done in the month of Ramadan. Hajj is referred to as the pilgrimage that needs to be done to Mecca by every Muslim if they have the physical and financial ability to do so (Joshnloo, 2017).

Islam began in New Zealand in 1850s with the first Muslims Indian family who settled in Cashmere, Christchurch (Drury, 2015), then followed by the presence of an Arab Muslim sailor from Muscat in 1861 (Drury, 2016), and another Indian Muslim man in 1869 who worked in the goldfield in Kyeburn. Then, in 1870 with the arrival

of Muslim Chinese gold prospectors that worked in the Dunstan gold fields of Otago (Kolig, 2010, pp. 21). Kolig (2010) deduced that a few Muslim sailors from Southeast Asia and South Asia may have settled in New Zealand around 1888, as the first Muslim to be buried in New Zealand was Mohamed Dan, a Javanese sailor who died in Dunedin in the same year (pp. 22-23). Also, in 1890 a set of Punjabi Muslim immigrants were settled in Christchurch. The early 1900s also observed the arrival of the three important Gujarati Muslim families from India who contributed in the development of the country (Oppenheimer et al., 2016).

The country also saw the settlement of Muslim immigrants from across the globe in it from the early 1900s. The various war torn countries and their adverse situations have forced the people to relocate to other countries. New Zealand seemed to be a place of peace to such people and they have found shelter in it. There are various Muslim communities scattered in the main

cities of the nation such as Auckland, Hamilton, Christchurch and Wellington. At present a sudden increase in students from across the globe has given a rise in the number of Muslims present in the country (Mahli, 2017).

The first Mosque to be established according to Drury (2006), which served as the development of Islam in New Zealand was built in 1979, at Ponsonby, central Auckland after thirty years of hard work and struggle of migrants and refugees that were the inspiring people behind the structure. The construction serves as a landmark in the account of Muslims community in New Zealand, and the Ponsonby Mosque was the main congregational mosque for many years in Auckland before the spreads of smaller Islamic centres in 1990s. Also, it was the oldest and only New Zealand major Mosque before the building of Al Noor Mosque in 1985 in Riccarton, Canterbury, which was considered to be the southernmost mosque of the world till

1999. The mosque has a large prayer hall that can accommodate 1000 worshippers during prayers and provide nightly shelter during Ramadan.

The New Zealand Islamic community comprises of majority of Sunni and as well as a large Shia population. The first Islamic organization of the country was the New Zealand Muslim Association (NZMA), which was founded in 1950 at Auckland. It worked towards creating a scenario of peace and unity between the Muslims and the other communities in the country (Mohsin et al., 2016). There are numerous Islamic organizations functioning in New Zealand at both the regional and national levels, and this research examines the relationship between Muslims and the Government of New Zealand.

## 2. Literature Review

The topic concerning Islam and Muslims in New Zealand is not a new one. There have been a number of studies conducted by scholars on this topic since 1980s.

Khan's two-page "Muslims in New Zealand" (1981) published in *The Muslims may well be the first writing on Islam and Muslims in New Zealand*. He briefly introduces one of the earliest accounts on this topic including a history of the first arrival of Muslims in New Zealand.

Ashworth (2010) examines the "implications of New Zealand's unique Muslim community, as well as the Government's approach to multiculturalism". She focuses on the implications of the size and composition of New Zealand's Muslim community. The author further argues that: "New Zealand's cultural make-up has changed markedly in recent decades, with a diverse range of ethnicities immigrating to New Zealand from all over the world. This pattern of immigration has impacted significantly on both the size and the composition of New Zealand's Muslim population" (pp. 44).

Some scholars then continue the academic study of this community in New Zealand. For example, Kolig of Otago University and

Shepard of the University of Canterbury are worth mentioning in regards to pioneering scholarly studies on Islam and Muslims in New Zealand. They contended that: "Muslims in New Zealand may be viewed from at least two angles. Viewed from New Zealand, they represent a part of the recent immigration that is beginning to change the face of this society from its Maori and Anglo-Celtic past. They are a relatively small part of this movement, but are distinctive and high-profile for various reasons. Viewed from the world outside, they are one of the smallest and most far-flung tentacles of the modern Muslim Diaspora" (2006, pp. 1-7).

In a related study Shepard (2006) states that "The Muslim community in New Zealand is small, remote and relatively new, but not as small, remote or new as it was once. Over the last three decades it has become effectively organised and has grown vigorously, but not without growing pains" (pp. 8-44). Shepard further elucidates that: "The present

Muslim community began with a few Indian immigrants early in the twentieth century and now includes some forty nationalities, including people from various Arab countries, Malaysians, Indonesians, Iranians, Somalis, people from the Balkans, Afghans and some Pakeha. Though still small in number, the community has in fact increased almost thirty-fold since 1976 and roughly doubled in each five-year Census period since 1986.

Moreover, Shepard (2006) in his paper argued that after World War II, the New Zealand government accepted a limited number of refugees for immigration, and among these were some Muslims from Turkey and the Balkans, including perhaps twenty to thirty who came to the Auckland area, where the resident Indian Muslims helped them to settle in. This group appears to have been more inclined to adjust into Pakeha society and mitigate their Muslim identity.

Nevertheless, have remained active in Muslim and ethnic matters and have publicly expressed their concern in the recent crises in Bosnia and Kosovo. The Censuses of the 1950s reported about 200 Muslims in the country. Further significant but still limited growth began in the mid-1960s, when a period of liberalised immigration policy paved the way for a small number of Muslims, mainly South Asians, including Fijian Indians and some professional and white collar workers. A few overseas Muslim students also came to the universities (Adam 1999). The small community grew rapidly in relative terms, according to Census figures, trebling between 1961 and 1971 from 260 to 779 and reaching 2500 by 1986, while the actual number may have been even higher.

He added that since the late 1980s Muslim numbers have risen dramatically, partly as a result of political events elsewhere and partly as a result of changes in the government's immigration policy. The 1987 coup d'état in Fiji caused a

considerable arrival of Fijian Indians, many of them Muslims, in the Auckland area in particular; and the continuing uncertainties in Fiji presumably still encourage people to come. Since 1993 probably two thousand or more refugees have come from Somalia, and they form a significant presence in several centres. Smaller numbers of Iraqis, Bosnians, Kosovars and Kurds have also come as refugees as well as some numbers of Afghans in the last few years.

Apart from applications by refugees, immigration regulations introduced by the government in 1991 established a point system that favours immigration by wealthy or well-educated people from any ethnic background. Under this system a number of Muslim professional people have entered, especially from the Middle East. Also, a small number of Kiwis have become Muslims, often in the context of marriage, although in some cases their interest in Islam had begun before meeting their future spouse. Some have made

significant contributions to the community, including contributions at the leadership level.

According to the Census of 2001, there were 23,631 Muslims in New Zealand, representing 0.7 per cent of the population. The estimates run between 30,000 and 50,000, with 40,000 being a reasonable guess. This would represent about 1 per cent of the total New Zealand population. The majority of Muslims live in the Auckland area, while most of the rest live in Wellington, the nation's capital, or four other major cities". However, the latest estimates of Muslims population according to the census of 2018 obtained from Stats NZ was 57, 276, which is around 1.2% of the total population.

In addition, many scholars have produced extensive writings on many aspects of this community. This includes the history (Drury, 2015; Khan, 1981), demography (Foroutan, 2015), as a minority (Shepard 2002), theology (Kolig, 2001), daily life (Gardner et al 2014; Jasperse, 2009),

multiculturalism (Kolig & Voyce, 2016; van der Krogt, 2015; Gosh & Leckie, 2015; Kolig, 2010; 2005; Clarke, 2006;), halal food (Wan-Hassan & Awang, 2009; Hassan & Call 2003), representation (Kabir & Bourk, 2013), practices and traditions (Kolig, 2015a; 2015b), ethnicity (Kolig 2003), and organisation (Shepard, 2006).

On the other hand, Kolig (2003) furthered that the Muslim community in New Zealand is relatively small when compared with immigrant Muslim communities in other Western nations such as USA, France, Britain, and Germany. According to the latest census figures (of 2001) there were 23,631 Muslim residents in New Zealand. The majority arrived as migrants, with only a minority actually born in this country. For instances, In European countries, Muslim numbers have in recent decades been swelled considerably by the immigrants' offspring, who are citizens by virtue of birth and are linguistically and educationally adjusted. There is only a

small proportion of New Zealand converts from the Western background.

Despite that, the present number represents a steep increase on the past situation; when compared, for example, with the 1996 census, which recorded 13,545 Muslims resident in the country. In the 1980s, there were no more than a mere 2,000 (cf. Shepard 1985:181). Furthermore, Muslims are of various and quite diverse ethnic background and national origin, which brings of course its own problems of forging a common ground of worship, communication, and coordinating religious interests and predilections. Multi-ethnicity also makes the formation of a tight-knit organisational structure encompassing the social and political interests of all Muslim residents much more difficult. In the multi-ethnic mix of New Zealand society, Muslims are not prominent.

Although, the cultures and societies of the Muslim are indeed diverse but despite such differences, Muslims are united by their

religion and belief in Islam (Hassan & Hall, 2003). However, Muslim are well-organised in a nation-wide umbrella organisation, FIANZ (Federation of Islamic Associations of New Zealand), and several smaller, especially regionally based organisations (such as OMA: Otago Muslim Organisation, MSYANZ: Muslim Students and Youth Association of New Zealand, MUSA: Muslim Student Association of Otago University), New Zealand's Muslims are politically inconspicuous.

However, specific scholarly works on the relationship between Muslim community in relation to their organisations and the government are hardly to be found. This research is filling the gap left by scholars. This research studies how the NZ government treated Islam and Muslims by establishing cooperation with Islamic organisations. In this regard, this research will give a scholarly contribution at least on this aspect.

### 3. Discussion

New Zealand is different as it encourages religious diversity, cultural differences and ethnic community in acknowledgement of “Waitangi treaty” of 1840. New Zealand government does not deal with religion in particular, rather it relates with ethnic community.

The researcher found out that, there is lack of continuity in government policies and relations with religious communities because when there is new government there is likely to be new policies and changes in its relationship with religious communities.

Currently, the finding shows that the Imam appointments in New Zealand is not standardised, because various Muslim organisations practice its own operational structure.

From the findings, it occurs that, in order to cement the continuous relationship between Islamic organizations and New Zealand Government, it would be better if the Muslim organisations come together

under one umbrella with credible elected representatives. Because as it is in New Zealand today, apart from FIANZ, there are so many Islamic organizations around who are operating differently under different leadership. Although, the NZ government deals with FIANZ as Muslim representative body, but many Muslim New Zealanders are disenchanted with the operations of FIANZ and kept on asking whether the body really represents Muslims in New Zealand at all. Besides, disintegration among Muslim in New Zealand will make it difficult for the government to have a close working relationship with smaller groups within the Muslim community.

The security of people and all ethnic communities in New Zealand should be guaranteed, and constant police surveillance around religious buildings needs to be promptly carried out to avoid any likely apprehension. Equally, Muslim community should work in partnership with Police. Frequent inter-faith based dialogue or meetings should be

encouraged to further strengthen sturdier relationship among ethnic communities. As well, Muslim community as a minority in New Zealand still need a lot of inclusion into the main society and this can be achieved through community outreach and inclusivity initiatives. Similarly, Muslim representative in government will be another opportunity to realize minority ethnic community views. On the other hand, Muslims should stop building barriers to themselves by keeping only to their ethnic sub-communities, or their local Mosque, they need to associate with other Kiwis and their local community that is different from their working surroundings. With this, they will not be disconnected from the mainstream society. Muslim community and Islamic organisations should form a common unity with no disintegration for proper representation with government in New Zealand. Also, Imam Appointments in New Zealand should be standardized in order to eliminate any form of radicalization in the

future. As well, orientation should be given to the future Imam about the New Zealand societal framework. Additionally, local halal certification should be regulated and one unifying standard should be introduced with government and Muslim organization consent.

#### 4. Conclusion and Future Work

This research is unique because it is the first of its kind in NZ according to the researcher's knowledge. The study delves in-depth into the Muslims as a minority and Islamic organisation relationship with government. From the findings, it occurs that, in order to cement the continuous relationship between Islamic organizations and New Zealand Government, it would be better if the Muslim organisations come together under one umbrella with credible elected representatives. Conclusively, this research on Muslims as a minority and Muslim relationship with the government can be further enhanced through future research by looking at a comparative study between

New Zealand and Australia. This could illuminate the study by developing the area of similarities and differences. Furthermore, future research can investigate whether FIANZ as a body really represent Muslims in New Zealand

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