



MUSLIM RESEARCH AND
DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION



Referendum on the Alternative Vote: Advice for British Muslims

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Contents

Executive Summary	2
1. What is the AV System?	3
2. How will this change our voting?.....	3
3. What impact will AV have on politics in the UK?	3
3.1 <i>Less Tactical Voting</i>	4
3.2 <i>Less Divisive Politics</i>	4
3.3 <i>Will right-wing/anti-Muslim parties benefit under AV?</i>	4
3.4 <i>Muslim “safe seats”</i>	6
4. Conclusion.....	7

Executive Summary

On 5th May 2011, a referendum will be held in the UK to ask voters whether they wish to change the current way MPs are elected into parliament, replacing the existing “First Past the Post” (FPTP) system with the “Alternative Vote” (AV) method.

Such a decision will have an impact on the nature of future British governments and will significantly alter the political dynamic in the UK. As such, the Muslim Research and Development Foundation (MRDF) felt it necessary to issue advice to Muslims in the UK regarding the potential impact of the proposed change and what is perceived to be the most suitable option, and Allah knows best.

Whilst it is difficult to make definitive statements regarding the impact of the change under AV, it is clear that the AV system will force candidates to work harder and engage more with their constituents should they wish to be elected. At the previous general election, over two-thirds of MPs were elected without a 50% share of the vote – under AV this will not be possible. Should no candidate reach the 50% threshold, the candidate with the least number of “first-preference” votes will be eliminated and their votes redistributed. Therefore it will be incumbent upon candidates to gain widespread support from members of their constituency.

Whilst it is difficult to predict the outcome of a general election under the AV system, this document provides relevant scenarios and posits that under AV, there will be a significant impact on politics in the UK and will result in:

1. Less tactical voting – where individuals vote for either Labour or Conservative, as opposed to the smaller parties, so as to make their vote count;
2. Less divisive politics – where candidates seen to be pandering to the far-right or the far-left are likely to be unpopular with the majority of voters;
3. Less chance of fringe or extremist parties winning seats.

As a result, we posit that the AV system will provide a drastically improved electoral system allowing for more representative and inclusive elections. Would-be MPs will have to work harder to satisfy more of their constituents. Muslims constitute the largest minority in the UK and stand to make substantial gains given the greater value and relevance of our votes.

1. What is the AV System?

Under the current electoral system, the candidate who obtains the most votes in any constituency will become a member of parliament (MP). However under the proposed Alternative Vote (AV) system:

- ⇒ Votes can be cast in order of preference i.e. 1, 2, 3...
- ⇒ If no candidate gets over 50%, then the candidate with the least number of 'first preference' or '1' votes will be eliminated and their 'second preference' or '2' votes redistributed amongst the remaining candidates.
- ⇒ The process will be repeated until a candidate has over 50%, at which point the candidate will be considered the elected MP of that constituency.
- ⇒ It will still be possible to vote for only one candidate.

2. How will this change our voting?

The principle aim of the AV system is to be more representative. Requiring political parties to get over 50% of the votes will result in MPs having to seek support from parts of the electorate who they have not traditionally appealed to nor campaigned for, including Muslims.

Under the current voting system (First Past the Post), if a candidate gets the most votes with 30-40%, he/she will win the seat and all other votes are discarded. Under AV, if the candidate is unable to secure a simple majority (over 50%) then the supporters of the other parties can still have a say in deciding who gets elected through their 2nd preference votes. For example, a Conservative candidate who has always won with 40% of the vote will be forced to campaign to secure the further 11%.

This should put an end to MPs whose traditional support base is on its own the largest, but who are unpopular with the vast majority of constituents. Under AV, even if your 1st preference candidate is not elected, you will have a say in deciding who finishes last.

3. What impact will AV have on politics in the UK?

The potential impact of the AV system is far reaching with around half of all current seats in parliament considered "safe seats". "Safe seats" refers to constituencies where the same candidate/or party is elected year upon year due to a significant support base that always votes for them. Additionally around two-thirds of seats in the previous election were won with less than 50% of the vote. Thus under AV, candidates will have to work harder to keep their "safe seats" and win over people who have not traditionally voted for them. The end result should be that the elected MPs can claim to represent the preferences of more people within their constituency.

3.1 Less Tactical Voting

Under the AV system, the level of tactical voting would likely be reduced. The vast majority of voters approach the election with the aim of making their vote count. As such if they support a party which the polls show is unlikely to win, then they restrict their choice to Labour and Conservative. This was one of the main reasons that Lib Dems pushed for the referendum. They felt many voters despite supporting them have made the tactical decision to vote for Labour or Conservative.

3.2 Less Divisive Politics

Under AV, it is likely that parties indulging in divisive politics will be penalised. This includes not only the BNP but also the Conservatives, as became evident in Cameron's recent Munich speech and recent tougher stance on immigration. This is illustrated by the previous elections where Muslim participation increased mainly due to the rise of the right – BNP, UKIP and Conservatives. Muslims did not necessarily know who the best candidate was for them, but were sure who they were against. This partly explains the spike in Lib Dem votes among Muslims.

The result of apathy towards Labour and apprehension towards Conservatives was clear in the last election resulting in a hung parliament. Under AV, the effect of divisive politics would become more acute and the Conservatives could no longer afford to engage in such politics as votes against them will count as well as votes for them. They will be forced to rethink their policies to appease a larger cross-section of British society.

If a political party fails to adopt in this manner, such as the BNP, then they will be further sidelined from mainstream politics. Apart from the very small number of people who vote for the BNP, everyone else is incredibly averse to them. Those who do not put them as 1st preference will likely put them as their last preference. Overall the AV system should result in a much needed shift in British political culture in the current context of rising Islamophobia, towards a more inclusive politics.

3.3 Will right-wing/anti-Muslim parties benefit under AV?

Despite the above argument, one of the main and most worrying claims of the "No to AV" campaign is that the BNP will gain greater prominence and may even win more seats. It is worth briefly laying out and assessing these scenarios to gauge their likelihood:

Scenario 1: Under AV, due to the end of tactical voting, an individual may put a right-wing party as their 1st first preference, safe in the knowledge that even if that MP not be elected, their vote would be transferred to their 2nd preference. Hence their vote, even if the 1st preference be for a right-wing candidate, would never be wasted. Whilst this may not have an impact in the coming general election, any potential gains (be it an increased proportion of votes) would be widely

publicised by such parties especially given the ever-increasing levels of Islamophobic sentiment sweeping the UK.

The likelihood of this scenario materialising is remote especially as it is premised on a large number of people supporting or having sympathy with the BNP despite voting for the mainstream parties. This is simply not the case given the results in the last election and the size of BNP membership. In fact the BNP and even UKIP are detested quite universally with the exception of their core support. Furthermore the introduction of AV is likely put off such would-be voters more as it would make it even harder for the BNP to win a seat given the required 50%.

Scenario 2: Whilst it may be considered unlikely that a right-wing candidate is elected outright under the AV system, it is likely however that MPs from more prominent parties will have to make concessions with other parties so as to secure the 2nd preference votes of their membership. Whilst MPs providing concessions to attain the support of the membership of right-wing parties already exists under the current system, this will only be further exacerbated under AV. MPs under AV will need to work harder to obtain the 2nd preference votes of other parties, and it has become increasingly clear that Muslims are an easy scapegoat by which to attract more votes. Hence MPs which previously had “safe seats” would now have to woo voters under AV and it is likely that a means of attracting 2nd preference votes would be to demonstrate an increase in anti-Muslim policy and rhetoric. Furthermore even if the BNP and others like them prove to be as divisive and polarising as many expect and they consistently finish last or close to last, then inevitably it will be the 2nd preference votes of their supporters that are counted first.

This second scenario has more substance in that there will be a movement towards the centre in terms of seats won, but at the same time the influence of fringe parties on mainstream party policies could become greater. While this threat is real its relevance is far less than many claim. For example the mainstream parties shifting their policies to pander to the right-wing already takes place without it being explicitly observable. The Conservative and Labour parties having noted prior to the previous election that the BNP seemed to be attracting a number of disaffected and disillusioned voters, came out in public to vigorously attack the BNP. Subsequently both their manifestos demonstrated shifts on policy positions such as immigration, in order to absorb some of the BNP's newly acquired support.

Given that BNP voters' 2nd preferences in most cases may be the first to be counted due to their unpopularity, the mainstream parties may then try to pander and make concessions to the BNP. Here we must also acknowledge that if such deals and concessions are so obvious that they are visible to the public, then it will negatively affect the credibility of the mainstream parties to be associating and collaborating with the BNP. Furthermore the votes of the BNP supporters are unlikely to make a significant difference especially if they total 1-2%. As such the claim that mainstream parties are likely to shift towards anti-Muslim policies once again overestimates the presence of such feelings towards Muslims amongst the British public at large.

Not only this, but it overlooks the influence of the Muslim vote. Despite whatever anti-Muslim sentiment there may be in UK, it definitely does not compare to the negative sentiment present towards the BNP. The Muslim vote far outweighs the BNP vote standing at a potential 2 million plus. Thus it seems more likely that mainstream parties especially in “safe seats” would rather get the 1st and 2nd preference of Muslims rather than the 2nd preference of BNP supporters given the larger

numbers of Muslims and stigma attached to the BNP. For example this could force the Conservative party in their many “safe seat” constituencies to soften their stance towards Muslims in the hope of maintaining their “safe seats”.

A preoccupation with fringe/right-wing parties overlooks two essential and much larger elements of the debate. The first is that the positive influence Muslims can exert on the electoral process as opposed to the negative effect of the BNP. Secondly the real threat to Muslims are the anti-Muslim policies of the mainstream parties especially the Conservatives as opposed to the BNP and UKIP.

What remains most likely is that the AV system will spell the end of divisive politics. The minimal effect that the BNP may have in negotiating policy shifts with the mainstream parties in exchange for their 2nd preference votes, is outweighed greatly by the widespread unpopularity of the BNP as well as the increased influence of the Muslim vote. **The most telling fact is that the BNP and Conservatives themselves are staunchly against the adoption of the AV system.**

Thus the central reason for voting in favour of the AV system on 5 May remains that Muslims will have more of a say than ever before and how this has the potential to influence the policies of the mainstream parties especially the Conservatives. It also seems highly likely that the BNP and UKIP will be further sidelined from mainstream politics.

3.4 Muslim “safe seats”

From a solely Muslim perspective some may ask whether we really want to put at risk or jeopardise the existing “safe seats” that various Muslim candidates hold in constituencies with substantial Muslim populations.

To begin with, it is not necessary that such Muslim candidates will lose their seats under AV, unless they are divisive in that while all Muslims vote for them, all others are completely against them. Even if this is the case the other candidates will not be elected without the 2nd preference support of a large number of Muslims from that constituency.

Additionally we should give importance to significant Muslim minorities in many other constituencies. They will now have a say in who gets elected forcing the candidates to include those Muslims within their support base.

We should keep our objectives as Muslims firmly within our sights. Our primary objective is to secure the interests of Muslims as opposed to Muslim candidates. Let us not simplistically equate the interests of Muslims with electing a Muslim candidate as a member of parliament. In fact we often find that the Muslim candidate is absent when it comes to matters concerning Muslims or even against the Muslim cause. One of the main reasons is that Muslim candidates, especially those of the main parties, are required to have allegiance to their party line before all else. If they occupy a senior post, they have likely got there through precisely being one of the party faithful. Such Muslim politicians are of two types:

- i) they either blindly follow the party line at any cost even if that be to support anti-Muslim policies;
- ii) they not only try to reconcile the two but are a positive agent of change within their party and government representing not just their constituents but also the interests of British Muslims at large.

If a Muslim occupies a “safe seat” but is from the first category then we are not that concerned with keeping that individual. If however he/she is of the second type, then we should do all that we can to keep them in their seat.

In other words we should focus on putting power in the hands of the Muslim voters as opposed to Muslim candidates. This way we will make sure that issues of concern to us are put at the forefront of the promises made by candidates. This will not only assure that Muslim candidates give weight to Muslim issues but will also lead to non-Muslim candidates in each constituency to pay special attention to our needs and concerns.

4. Conclusion

Disaffection and disillusionment with the political process are widespread throughout society with voters asking whether their vote really matters and whether they really have any influence over the formulation of party policies. Turnouts are at best around 50%. This problem is even more acute within the Muslim community with many apathetic with the political process and others feeling as if their vote makes no difference and that all parties are equally as bad and disadvantageous for Muslims.

Under the AV system, these will no longer be valid excuses. For those in the Muslim community who say “what is the point, what difference does it make”, they will no longer be able to rely on this as an excuse. Everyone’s vote can have an effect on who wins a seat and who becomes the most unlikely to win. It will also force MPs to work harder to win the support of more of their constituents, including Muslims.

There needs to be a fundamental shift in the Muslim mindset. From trying to contain the BNP and keeping Muslim “safe seats” to a mindset where we are positively influencing local and national politics through policy concessions in mainstream parties that favour Muslims. A mindset where we are making all candidates work harder for the majority *and* the minorities including Muslims.

There also needs to be a greater understanding and engagement from the Muslim community in the political process. Regardless of which system is implemented following the referendum, there will only be a change if there is a shift of attitude and level of engagement within the Muslim community. Despite being the largest minority, the Muslim community does not possess an effective lobby relative to other minority lobby groups, and this will need to be an area for improvement.