

Oklahoma Muslims wary after Shari'a referendum

by [Omar Sacirbey](#) in the [November 30, 2010](#) issue

Born and raised in Oklahoma, Sarah Albahadily will wear her headscarf to a Brad Paisley concert and her cowboy boots to a mosque. There are two things she says she never misses: Friday prayers or a University of Oklahoma football game.

But after seven in ten Oklahoma voters on November 2 approved State Question 755, a constitutional amendment that prohibits courts from using Islamic law known as Shari'a, Albahadily suddenly feels a little less at home in the Sooner State.

"It's disheartening. Even though it was expected, you still feel the blow," said Albahadily, 27, as she drove to the Mercy School, a K-12 Islamic school in Oklahoma City where she teaches science.

In many ways, State Question 755 will likely have little impact either in Oklahoma or elsewhere. Muslims quickly point out they never lobbied for Shari'a law, and many wouldn't support its use anyway.

What really worries Muslims is the anti-Muslim fervor that fueled it. It's the same sentiment behind the aborted Qur'an bonfire in Florida and the opposition to an Islamic community center near Ground Zero. The bottom line: Muslims increasingly feel unwelcome, unwanted and viewed by their neighbors as un-American.

And if that sentiment can be legislated in one state, they say, it could be legislated in another.

Yet

rather than retreating from public life, Oklahoma Muslims like Albahadily are vowing to increase their involvement in community affairs and raise their visibility, confident that when fellow citizens get to know them, their prejudices will dissolve.

Albahadily said she

would put on a brave face for her teenage students. "If they see me upset, they're not going to want to participate in civics or community life. But if I can be upbeat, and say, 'OK, we're going to stand firm,' they'll respond."

Less than 24 hours after the polls closed,

Albahadily's mother was organizing local Muslims to meet newly elected lawmakers; local Muslim groups and the ACLU announced a bid to have the referendum declared unconstitutional.

[The measure was challenged

as unconstitutional in court by the Oklahoma chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations. Federal Judge Vicki Miles-LaGrange on November 8 issued a temporary restraining order blocking certification of the ballot measure. She set a November 22 hearing on whether the restraining order should be extended until a final determination is made in the case, according to news reports.]

There are an estimated

30,000 Muslims in Oklahoma, which has 3.7 million residents. They describe themselves as well-educated, prosperous and attracted to Oklahoma's friendliness, its slow pace of life and its safety.

The

referendum was primarily authored by Republican state representative Rex Duncan and sailed through the state's legislature. In 2007, Duncan made headlines when he refused a copy of a Qur'an given to lawmakers by the Governor's Ethnic American Advisory Council. On November 2, he won a bid for a county district attorney position.

Muslims say the

referendum worsened anti-Muslim prejudice that was already enflamed by

the Ground Zero controversy, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and frequent visits from Islamophobic speakers like Brigitte Gabriel, hosted by local churches and conservative organizations. "It's really brought the Muslim-haters out," said Allison Moore, a Muslim activist in Tulsa.

Since

the referendum was introduced in June, Moore and other Muslims said, mosques saw an increase in hate mail and threatening phone calls. Children walking home from a Muslim school in Tulsa were harassed by people in passing cars. Some Muslim women left their headscarves at home.

Muslims found a small measure of optimism from the balloting. "At least 30 percent of Oklahomans are educated about the issue," said Imam Imad Enchassi, president of the Islamic Society of Greater Oklahoma City. "This is a very red state. But people are being educated."

Muslims say they were also buoyed by support from non-Muslims. Almost 20 organizations in Tulsa—from the Police Department to the local Interfaith Council to the Jewish Federation of Tulsa—formed the "Tulsa Say No to Hate Coalition," which condemned the referendum for fanning "flames of bigotry." —RNS