



## **COMMUNIQUE**

### **From the Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV) to the Muslims of Victoria**

#### **Regarding the ICV's nomination for AFIC President**

**Melbourne, 12 April 2006**

Assalamu `alaikum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatuhu

The purpose of this communiqué is:

- to announce the ICV's nomination for AFIC President in the upcoming elections; and
- to explain to the Muslim community of Victoria the reasons for the ICV's decision.

The ICV issues this communiqué in the interests of transparency.

#### **Background:**

Elections to appoint the new executive committee of the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC) are scheduled to take place in Sydney on the weekend of 29-30 April 2006. There are four positions up for election: President, Vice President, Secretary and Treasurer.

In order to be considered for election, candidates must be nominated by at least one state council. Each state council will then cast one vote for each of the four elected positions.

Nominations for candidates closed on Friday 31 March 2006. Each state council therefore had to settle on its nominations by that date.

Several people had approached the Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV), seeking its nomination for the position of AFIC President. No one sought a nomination from the ICV for any other elected position.

The ICV executive committee felt that such an important decision should only be made after consultation with the Muslim community of Victoria. Accordingly, the ICV thought it necessary to invite those wishing to be

nominated for an elected position on AFIC's executive committee to address the community at a public forum and answer questions from the floor.

The aim was to open the nomination and election process up to the community, and to make any potential candidates accountable to public scrutiny. In the week beginning 21 March 2006, the ICV sent out public notices by letter and email calling for people wishing to be nominated, and announcing a public forum to take place on Wednesday 29 March 2006, at the ICV's premises in Jeffcott Street.

The forum took place, and the ICV called for feedback from the community to be given either on the night, or by the next day.

The ICV pledged to take the feedback of the community into consideration in deciding who, if anyone, it should nominate for AFIC President.

Two potential candidates agreed to come to the meeting to address the community. They were **Ikebal Patel** from Canberra, and **Shujat Mantoo** from Victoria.

Ikebal is presently the Treasurer of AFIC. Shujat is currently AFIC's secretary.

Two other candidates for the position of President, Rahim Ghauri from Perth and Abbas Ahmed from Brisbane, were received, but declined to attend the session. The ICV therefore did not consider nominating them.

#### **Outcome:**

The ICV executive committee has decided to nominate **Ikebal Patel** for the position of AFIC President for the next term.

#### **Reasons:**

The reasons for the ICV executive committee's decision are as follows.

#### *Priority issues of concern:*

In making this decision, the ICV considered which issues relating to AFIC are the most important in the eyes of the community. The executive committee of the ICV has received much feedback from the broader community about AFIC since its election a year ago, and has monitored community attitudes to identify which issues are of greatest concern to the community. The ICV also took into account the issues that were raised by the audience at the public forum and subsequent feedback.

The ICV executive committee found that the most pressing concern the Muslims of Victoria have about AFIC is its transparency and representativeness.

The community feels very strongly that AFIC is a closed, unrepresentative and therefore irrelevant organisation. Of particular concern is:

- The **criteria for nomination** to AFIC: the requirement that any nominee has served two years on a state council or society excludes the vast majority of Australian Muslims from nomination. It also ensures that the same people keep returning to the AFIC board.
- The **secrecy of AFIC's financial documents**: community members were concerned that they did not get to see and retain documents outlining AFIC's true financial position.
- The complete **absence of women and youth** in AFIC.
- AFIC's **ability to control membership** of the ICV and other state councils.
- AFIC's **lack of consultation** with state councils and Muslims generally.

Other concerns raised by the community were:

- The security of the ICV's continued tenancy at Jeffcott Street; and
- AFIC's poor performance in media.

Much discussion from the floor also concerned Islamic schools. Several people expressed a desire for AFIC to open a school in Victoria. A minority thought that since there were already several Islamic schools in Victoria, this was a waste of funds that should be directed at other programs.

#### *Statements of the potential candidates*

Both potential candidates gave an opening address before fielding questions from the floor that raised the above areas of concern.

**Ikebal Patel** stated from the very beginning that he thought the **criteria for nomination to AFIC** were ridiculous and should be changed. In particular, Ikebal specified the requirement of two years' service on a state council or society. Ikebal said he believed AFIC was an "old boys' club" and that he would like to open it up. He accepted that this required constitutional amendment which could be difficult but said he was committed to attempting it.

**Shujat Mantoo** disagreed with Ikebal that AFIC was an old boys' club, saying he supported the current nomination criteria. However, he did subsequently say he was open to being persuaded that the criteria should change.

However, **both potential candidates** said they supported the current arrangement where AFIC had the power to **approve or disapprove members of state councils**. **Shujat Mantoo** however, said he would like to “liberalise” the criteria for approval, without specifying precisely what that would mean. **Ikebal Patel** felt the current arrangement was necessary to avoid elements within the national structure undermining one another. However, after discussion with an ICV executive committee member, he indicated he might change his position on this point.

**Ikebal Patel** made it a central part of his vision to improve **AFIC's financial transparency**. He said it was his intention to make AFIC's financial statements public. He particularly noted that AFIC had often not been independently audited (by an auditor not related to, or associated with, AFIC staff or executive committee members) in the past. He said he was determined to ensure AFIC was independently audited every year, and noted that this happened in 2005 while he was AFIC Treasurer.

In his opening address, **Ikebal** specifically mentioned that he felt AFIC had failed in connecting with **women and youth**, whom he estimated amount to 60% of the Australian Muslim population. Ikebal saw this as a major deficiency and stated his intention to set up sub-committees and programs dedicated to women and youth engagement.

On the issue of **consultation with the state councils**, **Ikebal** acknowledged that consultation to date had been poor. He expressed a desire to increase consultation, particularly with the ICV, which he thought was the most sophisticated state council. He also outlined a structural vision for AFIC, which he acknowledged was based on recent reforms made by the ICV.

**Shujat Mantoo** felt that through him, AFIC had been actively consulting with the ICV for years, and did not express the view that this needed to be increased.

**Both potential candidates** said they were committed to AFIC establishing a school in Victoria and that the ICV would play a role in this.

The potential candidates were asked if they could guarantee the ICV a ten-year lease of the **premises at Jeffcott Street** to ensure the ICV's long term security. **Neither potential candidate** was prepared to commit to this, but both said they do not, and never did, have any intention to expel the ICV from the premises.

### *Community feedback*

The ICV received feedback on the night of the public forum, and the next day by email, phone and in person.

A large majority of community responses supported the nomination of **Ikebal Patel**. This was largely on the basis that he addressed the community's major concerns more satisfactorily.

A minority were undecided, while a larger minority recommended the nomination of **Shujat Mantoo**. This was generally on two bases. The first was that it would be best for the ICV to nominate persons from Victoria to represent Victoria's interests. The second was that Ikebal was rumoured to be related to the AFIC CEO, Amjad Mehboob, and that he would therefore relinquish control of AFIC to the CEO.

The ICV also received feedback that even if neither potential candidate was ideal, it would be a mistake for the ICV to nominate no one, and that it was preferable for the ICV to nominate a candidate.

#### *The ICV's position*

The ICV made a public commitment to consult with the community and take the community feedback into consideration in making a decision. Accordingly, the ICV executive committee considers itself bound to follow the will of the community, as expressed in the feedback received, unless there were very compelling reasons not to do so.

In this case, the ICV believes it is appropriate to follow the advice of the community.

The executive committee believes that Ikebal Patel is most closely in tune with prevailing community attitudes towards AFIC. Ikebal accepted that many Muslims see AFIC as irrelevant, closed and potentially corrupt. Rather than dismiss these perceptions, or try to defend the past, Ikebal was openly critical of much of AFIC's past conduct. The ICV considers this of great importance: there is no chance of reform if one does not first accept the fact that there are areas of failure. Ikebal was the potential candidate most capable of constructive self-criticism in this regard.

The AFIC nomination criteria are a cause of major concern for the ICV. The criteria make it impossible for AFIC to become open and democratic. By limiting nominations to those who have already served within the AFIC structure, AFIC will inevitably become what Ikebal called an "old boys' club", and increasingly become irrelevant. The ICV executive committee felt it was very significant that Ikebal listed reform of these criteria as the first plank in his policy. The ICV accepts that such change might be difficult, but considers that it is far more likely with a President who is strongly supportive of change.

The ICV also considers it significant that Ikebal's opening statement had a focus on engagement of youth and women. These are two areas of significant failure in AFIC's representation, and while the ICV believes changes will need to be made particularly to the youth program put forth by Ikebal, it notes that

Ikebal was calling for community input, and believes it is important that at least he had identified these areas as causes of concern.

Finally, while both potential candidates stated that the ICV was the most active and sophisticated state council, the ICV executive committee felt that Ikebal had expressed a stronger desire to increase consultation with the ICV in the next term.

Nevertheless, the ICV still has significant concerns:

- Neither candidate was prepared to guarantee the ICV's ongoing tenancy at Jeffcott Street. This is a cause for major concern. The ICV needs this security to grow and better represent Victorian Muslims.
- Neither potential candidate was able to provide a satisfactory response to questioning about how they would improve AFIC's media performance. In a climate of increasing public scrutiny, this is a major concern for the ICV.
- Neither candidate seemed supportive of relinquishing AFIC's control of the approval of the state councils' membership. This is a major concern for the ICV because current AFIC requirements are a significant barrier to gaining a membership that is reflective of the ICV's community support. The ICV knows of at least two major cases where organisations that would like to become members are deterred by the complicated process of AFIC approval. The ICV notes however, that Shujat Mantoo did wish to liberalise AFIC membership requirements without providing details on what this meant.

The ICV executive committee did take very seriously the minority of community feedback in support of Shujat Mantoo's nomination. Such feedback was highly valued, and occupied much time in the executive committee's deliberations.

It is true that Ikebal is not from Victoria. The ICV has noted community feedback that a Victorian candidate should be nominated to represent Victorian interests. However, the ICV feels that there was no guarantee that Victorian interests would necessarily be better served by a Victorian President. Ikebal expressed a greater admiration for the ICV's work and a stronger desire to increase consultation. He said he would seek the ICV's advice specifically in remodelling AFIC for the future because of the ICV's recent reforms. Obviously it is not a requirement that a potential candidate admires the ICV, but the executive committee considered that this indicated a willingness to create a closer, more consultative relationship between the ICV and AFIC.

It is true that Ikebal did not guarantee a longer lease for the ICV, but neither potential candidate did.

The ICV is not of the view that more Islamic schools in Victoria should be a priority over other social services, such as employment programs. However, the ICV is sensitive to the fact that some within the community consider schools a major priority. In any event, if it is in Victoria's interests to have another Islamic school, the ICV notes that both potential candidates supported the establishment of an AFIC school in Victoria. There was no difference between the Victorian and non-Victorian potential candidate on this point. In short, the ICV executive committee could not see how Ikebal's nomination would harm Victoria's interests any more than Shujat's.

Moreover, the ICV notes that the four elected AFIC executive committee members may make four further appointments to the committee. Ikebal has indicated that he would ask the ICV to nominate someone for him to appoint. Victorian representation on AFIC's executive committee could occur via this process.

The ICV, like much of the community, also has concerns over the performance of AFIC's CEO. Therefore, the ICV also took seriously feedback that Ikebal would not be prepared to rectify this because of his reported relation to Amjad Mehboob.

Since the ICV has received that feedback, it has also received communication from Ikebal categorically denying that there is any relation between him and Amjad Mehboob. They are not related by blood or through marriage. In any event, the ICV notes that of the two potential candidates, Ikebal was clearly the more critical of the CEO's performance, particularly in relation to financial transparency. This alone is not the most significant factor in the ICV's consideration, but it does demonstrate that Ikebal had no intention of protecting the CEO from scrutiny.

The ICV executive committee also considered whether or not it should choose not to nominate any candidate for the AFIC Presidency. On this issue, the ICV accepted the community feedback that this would not be wise. Feedback suggested it was better for the ICV to nominate a candidate so that the ICV could hold the nominee to account. The ICV agrees with this suggestion from the community.

## **Conclusion**

For the reasons given above, in light of the community feedback, and after much careful deliberation and consideration, the ICV executive committee feels the best course of action is to nominate **Ikebal Patel** for the position of AFIC President.

The ICV wishes to thank both potential candidates for their efforts in addressing the community. This was not an easy task for either of them.

The ICV also wishes to thank those members of the community who attended the public forum and those who gave their feedback. It tremendously assisted the ICV executive committee in reaching its decision.

The ICV also received feedback on the process used for the public forum. This feedback has been considered and in future, such evenings will reflect the constructive criticism given.

Wa `alaikum assalam,

ICV executive committee:

Malcolm Thomas (President)  
Ramzi Elsayed (Vice President)  
Nail Aykan (Secretary)  
Asad Ansari (Treasurer)  
Sherene Hassan (Executive committee member)  
Waleed Aly (Executive committee member)