

New political group seeks to build Bangladeshi American voting bloc

By Danielle Muoio

11/13/2019 05:02 AM EST

When public defender Tiffany Cabán ran an insurgent campaign to become Queens district attorney, a grassroots group formed by Bangladeshi Americans rallied around her campaign.

The momentum captured by the group has led to the formation of Bangladeshi Americans for Political Progress — a left-leaning political organization looking to bolster voter turnout in future races around issues facing the Bangladeshi community.

During the Queens DA primary, leaders of the group Bangladeshis for Cabán say their efforts helped propel Cabán to striking distance of beating Queens Borough President Melinda Katz. Heavy turnout in western Queens neighborhoods like Astoria, Jackson Heights and Woodside was attributed to rapid gentrification, but those areas are also enclaves to a growing Bangladeshi American population that organizers on the ground say came out en masse for Cabán.

For Shahana Hanif, a Bangladeshi American political organizer who works in Council Member Brad Lander's office, the Cabán campaign showcased the power of turning out Bangladeshi American voters.

"We are left-aligned and progressive aligned and trying to build a grassroots movement to create a Bangladeshi American voting bloc," said Hanif, who is also running for City Council. "It was Tiffany's race that really shined a much clearer light of the necessity of all of us coming together and advocating to elect candidates that protect and advance the well-being of working-class, low-income communities overall."

The group, which will officially launch at an event in Jackson Heights on Wednesday, plans to endorse candidates that will advocate for working-class New Yorkers by evaluating their platforms on issues like immigration rights, housing, transit access and health care. Similar to other left-leaning groups, BAPP will look for candidates drawing in small donor contributions rather than big money from real estate, Hanif said.

BAPP also plans to play a critical role in building a Bangladeshi American voting bloc by increasing voter participation, educating Bangladeshi Americans on the political process and forming alliances with other progressive organizations. The group also plans to host town halls and candidate forums.

The city's Bangladeshi population is among the fastest growing Asian ethnic groups in New York City, increasing by 42 percent between 2008 and 2011, according to the [Asian American Federation](#). Much of the Bangladeshi population is concentrated in Queens, with 60 percent of the total population living in the borough. But there are also pockets throughout the five boroughs with heavy concentrations of Bangladeshi Americans, including Hanif's home neighborhood of Kensington, Brooklyn.

Hanif said there has been an active base of older generation Bangladeshi American voters, which has traditionally sided with candidates favored by the political establishment. Many supported Katz in the DA race and the reelection campaign of Joe Crowley, who was ultimately unseated by Rep. [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](#) in a shocking upset.

“Establishment politics looks the same across every community — and aligning with power versus progress isn’t any different for our community either,” she said.

Raihan Farouqi, a BAPP founding member who has worked as a campaign strategist, said the group represents “a new movement in a space that is traditionally dominated by older folks who tend to be more in line with the establishment.”

“We don’t disavow those people but we are just trying to say we are the new wave, we are the next generation of new people who are coming into power,” he said.

The group plans to play a role in rallying more Bangladeshi Americans who haven’t been active voters around non-establishment candidates like Cabán. That effort can include drawing in older generation voters who may have skewed more moderate in the past, but have opened up to left-leaning representatives like Ocasio-Cortez, Hanif said.

The group hasn’t yet endorsed any candidates, but is looking at seats that appear vulnerable in western and Southeast Queens. Two of BAPP’s members — Mary Jobaida and Joy Chowdhury — are challenging Assembly Members Cathy Nolan and Michael DenDekker, respectively. And Shaniyat Chowdhury is challenging Rep. [Gregory Meeks](#). (Hanif cautioned membership is not an endorsement and that the group will evaluate candidates on ideology, not identity politics.)

With local elections heating up, BAPP members see vast potential in the group having the same influencing power as other, similarly aligned, left-leaning organizations like Democratic Socialists of America — but one that can better reflect the communities progressive candidates seek to represent.

“Frankly, a lot of these groups are led by white people and are not working class,” Farouqi said. “We are really trying to own our own communities’ powers — not have anyone else speak for us and then realizing we are already very involved and are leading many parts of the progressive left.”

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