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Hawaii's upcoming Islam Day hopes to foster mutual respect

By Michael Tsai
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Both supporters and critics of Thursday's Islam Day say they're trying to encourage open dialogue, mutual respect and understanding, yet they remain distinctly at odds in how they view the state-designated day of recognition.

The Muslim Association of Hawai'i will host an Islam Day celebration Thursday at McCoy Pavilion as a benefit for the Hawaii Foodbank.

The event will feature food, games, music from hip-hop/R&B artists Native Deen, and comedy by Azhar Usman, best known for his skit "Allah Made Me Funny." Also included will be an interfaith panel discussion, "Coexistence in a Pluralistic Society."

"This never was and never will be about talking about our religion," said association President Hakim Ouansafi. "It's a chance to put the nonsense behind, get together, talk story and help restock the food bank, which helps to feed everyone in need in our community."

Detractors, however, say that observing Islam Day so soon after 9/11 observances is insensitive because it trivializes the loss of life suffered at the hands of radical Muslim terrorists.

In May, the state House and Senate passed a concurrent resolution declaring Sept. 24, 2009, as Islam Day in Hawai'i in recognition of the contributions of the Islamic world. The action received international attention and sparked immediate debate, particularly in the conservative media.

Sen. Sam Slom, one of three legislators who voted against the resolution, expressed frustration that he and others who oppose the celebration have been unfairly characterized as ignorant racists. He said that while he isn't necessarily opposed to having an Islam Day, scheduling the day in the same month as 9/11 commemorations was "extremely inappropriate."

In a more general sense, Slom said, he is discouraged by the seeming privilege afforded designations like Islam Day over other efforts to celebrate or recognize events important to those who hold more conservative American values.

He cited lackluster observances of 9/11 (including President Obama's designation of the 9/11 anniversary as a "day of service") and the state's cautious approach to marking the 50th anniversary of Hawai'i statehood.

"We can 'celebrate' the contributions of Islamic culture, but we have to 'commemorate' not 'celebrate' statehood?" he said. "I went to the statehood conference at the Convention Center and it was blah. Everybody from the state and city was on tippy-toes not to offend anybody. Yet we can celebrate Islam Day? It just rubs more salt in the wound."

'common good'

Ouansafi said his organization has received "tremendous feedback and support" for the Islam Day event. He said he hopes that those who have misgivings about the day will still come to the event to support the food bank and, perhaps, find some unexpected common ground with those of Muslim faith.

"Our emphasis is on our commonalities, not the few differences we may have," Ouansafi said. "We can disagree without being disagreeable. This is a chance to put aside whatever prejudices may exist and work for the common good."

The resolution was introduced by state Reps. Lyla Berg, Faye Hanohano and Della Belatti at the request of the Muslim Association of Hawai'i. The resolution was modeled after a similar concurrent resolution adopted by the U.S. House and Senate in 1979. The resolution was specific to Sept. 24, 2009, but could be reintroduced in subsequent years, as is the case with many such designations.

As a resolution and not a formal bill, the action did not require the approval of Gov. Linda Lingle, who previously stated on the "Mike Buck Radio Show" that the designation was "just unnecessary" and was attracting the wrong kind of attention to the state.

While the designation of a special day to celebrate "the rich religious, scientific, cultural and artistic contributions of the Islamic world" was praised in many quarters as an important step toward better understanding and appreciating the world's second-largest religion, it also sparked outrage by those who felt it inappropriate to honor a faith in whose name extremists carried out the 9/11 attacks and other recent acts of terrorism.

Ouansafi said he understands the fear and misunderstanding people may have about Islam, given the high profile of radical extremists who identify themselves as Muslims. He said he also hopes that people will allow themselves the opportunity to put those fears into context.

"We are a faith of 1.5 billion people, and like every religion there will be a few idiots," he said. "There are those who do bad things in the name of Islam, and we have always condemned them to the fullest extent because their actions are in opposition to our beliefs. It's important to remember that these people target and kill other Muslims more than anybody else."

4,500 Muslims here

There are an estimated 4,500 people of Muslim faith in Hawai'i.

The American Civil Liberties Union and others have also criticized the state's designation of Islam Day as a violation of the separation of church and state. However, Berg said no such violation occurred because the resolution is not an official statute, no state funds were designated for any event related to the day, and "there is no intervention on behalf of Islam in any capacity."

The state also recognizes Buddha Day, Bodhi Day, Baha'i New Year's Day, and Makahiki Commemoration Day, as well as Christian holidays such as Christmas, Easter and Good Friday.

Berg said the state's recognition of the Islamic world's myriad contributions is consistent with Hawai'i's standing as a place that values inclusiveness and understanding.

"This was meant as a very natural and very innocent gesture of recognition," she said. "The more we know and understand, the less our differences come between us. We won't be so quick to look for differences if we can look for and appreciate our commonalities."