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## A Political Leader On Both Sides Of The Globe

BY JAMES FANELLI

**G**iash Ahmed, a conservative muslim leader, straddles two political worlds: the increasingly polarized landscape of his former country, Bangladesh, and the local Republican and Democratic arena of his current home, New York City.

Capitalizing on his popularity among Bangladeshi immigrants living in the city and his notoriety as a successful mortgage broker in Astoria, Queens, Ahmed ran as a Republican candidate in New York's last two state elections. He chose the Republican party, he said, because its conservative values share similarities to the party he belonged to in his homeland, the Bangladesh National Party, which now leads a governing coalition.

Ahmed challenged state Sen. John Sabini in 2002 and state Assemblyman Jose Peralta in 2004. He lost both races. Ahmed garnered about 10 percent of the vote in the 2004 race, with most of his support, he said, coming from the Bangladesh community.

"Our history is not too long here," said Ahmed in his office recently. An immigrant to New York in 1985, Ahmed said Bangladeshis only started arriving in the United States 25 years ago. Many have stayed away from city politics, he said. But they continue to follow very closely their homeland's politics because many lived through its birth.

Most Bangladeshi immigrants are of a generation that fought for independence from Pakistan in 1971 and experienced the coups, assassinations and 15-year military dictatorship that followed. In 1991 the country's dictator, General Hussein Ershad, was arrested, and new elections were held. Since that time Bangladesh's two main parties, BNP and Awami League, have vied for control. Support for the two parties is relatively even among immigrants.

Ahmed has gained a prominent role in Bangladeshi politics because of his reputation as a former BNP student leader and his ties to Bangladeshi leaders. He is the president of the America-Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry. And he occa-

sionally speaks on the phone with Bangladesh's Prime Minister, Khaleda Zia.

"He is quite well-known now," said Mohammed Aminullah, a Bangladeshi immigrant who served as Ahmed's campaign manager. "We call him Senator Giash."

Ahmed asserted his views in his homeland's politics two weeks ago after immigrants who were members of Awami, Bangladesh's left-leaning opposition party, held meetings in Queens about a spate of violent attacks against their leaders in Bangladesh. At the meeting, Awami members denounced BNP for not thoroughly investigating assassinations.

In August last year a grenade attack at an Awami rally attended by Sheikh Hasina, the party's leader and the country's former prime minister, killed 19 peo-

ple and injured 150 more. Hasina escaped the attack with minor injuries. On Jan. 27 another grenade attack at an Awami rally killed a former finance minister and four others.

"You cannot simply remain silent when your homeland has been shattered," said Syed M. Ullah, a former editor of Probashi, a defunct New York City Bangladeshi newspaper.

"We want a real, secular democratic society." Opposition party supporters said the attacks were acts of terrorism. They said they are worried that Islamist fundamentalism has risen since BNP won power in the country's

2001 elections. Though BNP is not an Islamic party, Jamaat-e-Islami, its partner in a governing coalition, is. Opposition members said the attackers have not been protected because they are Muslims.

In response to the meetings, Abdul Shamrat, a former BNP political leader, organized a press conference in Astoria to denounce the accusations. He said he asked Ahmed to speak at the meeting because "he has tremendous credibility in the community."

Ahmed stressed that the BNP's investigation of the assassinations would be thorough and would include assistance from the FBI. "I condemned the killing," Ahmed said. "It doesn't mean that we can say the government did it."

*James Fanelli is a freelance writer.*

THE QUEENS COURIER/ Photo by James Fanelli  
**Giash Ahmed is a political leader in New York and Bangladesh.**



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***"We call him Senator Giash." — Mohammed Aminullah on Ahmed***