

# First black Miss Colombia elected

BOGOTA, Colombia- Vanessa Alexandra Mendoza has broken a color barrier in Colombia, becoming the first black woman to win the Miss Colombia title during one of the country's most watched spectacles.

Four in 10 Colombians are either black or of mixed race. Yet they are underrepresented in politics and discriminated against socially and economically.

The only black member of the national congress said Mendoza's selection suggests attitudes may be changing.

"Above and beyond the frivolity that a beauty pageant represents, this plays an important symbolic role," said Senator Piedad Cordoba. "Blacks have been recognized, through her, as being part of the country."

Mendoza represented Choco, an impoverished, neglected region near Panama that is home to many of Colombia's blacks.

Residents in the provincial capital, Quibdo, couldn't see her crowned late Sunday because of a power blackout minutes earlier.

She is the first black woman to be Miss Colombia in the national beauty pageant's 67-year history.

Previously, the winners have mostly been women with light-colored skin. Mendoza has a light brown complexion.

In a country obsessed with the national beauty pageant - two-thirds of Colombians usually follow the spectacle - Mendoza's selection by an international panel of judges was big news.

"First black queen," El Tiempo, Colombia's biggest daily, declared in its main headline Monday, elbowing aside coverage of President Andres Pastrana's meeting with President Bush the previous day.

Luis Castro, leader of a black heritage organization in Medellin, Colombia's second largest city, said he hoped Mendoza's victory would help black children, especially young girls, realize that the color of their skin doesn't determine whether they are beautiful or not.

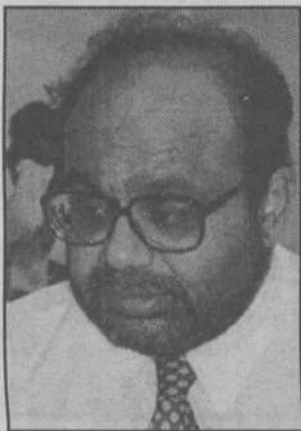
"It's very hard for children, when they are excluded by other children, simply because they are black. It causes huge self-esteem problems," he said.

A black woman eliminated early on in the competition - held in Cartagena, on the Caribbean coast - claimed racism was the reason. Officials said her papers weren't in order.

## Ramadan

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the third, charitable giving, "purifies" wealth by setting aside a portion for those in need. The fourth calls for fasting- another method of self-purification- and abstinence, and in that context, every year during Ramadan, muslims fast from first light until sunset. The fifth Pillar compels the muslim, if able, to make a pilgrimage to Islam's holy city at least once during his or her lifetime.



ASLAM ABDULLAH

For many, Ramadan will be different this year, a reality assured by the events of Sept. 11 and their association, rightly or wrongly, with muslims.

"During Ramadan, all these things are on your mind- what's happening now, what's going to happen next, but it's a feeling that whatever happens is God's Will," said Yunus. "With this Ramadan there's a special consciousness. There's great distress among muslims around the world, also there's the danger of backlash. Things take on a different dimension with all these things going on."

Aslam Abdullah, originally from India, is a college sociology instructor who has lived in the U.S. for nearly 15 years. A resident of Los Angeles, Abdullah was visiting Las Vegas to deliver an address to worshippers at the Islamic Society of Nevada's mosque during its regular Friday afternoon prayer service last weekend.

"I think this particular month comes at a time when we are witnessing a great catastrophic situation in parts of the muslim world," said Abdullah. "This Ramadan acquires a special significance for all of us because a large number of people here

as well as elsewhere are affected by what is happening, so it would have greater significance for us for prayers because of those people who are in need."

Abdul Aliyy, a California native and now Las Vegas resident for just over a year, is a retail jewelry merchant who calls himself a latino convert to Islam although he describes his acceptance of the faith more as homecoming than conversion. Concerning Ramadan this year, he said, "Of course there's going to be a difference, but in a way there's a big similarity."

Said Aliyy, "For Americans and the westernized muslim, it will be different because this is strange to them, this is new," however, he added, "muslims have always been under oppression by other nations who don't agree with Islam, so, really, this is nothing new."

Many muslims have expressed grave misgivings about the U.S. decision to continue its ongoing bombing of Afghanistan during Ramadan.

"I understand, from their perspective, that it is not practical to stop the war," said Yunus. "I believe if they had the inclination to begin this campaign, they're probably

inclined to continue it during Ramadan." As a result, he says, "Those groups that already perceive the west as anti-Islamic or anti-muslim are going to continue to feel that way. Bombing through Ramadan will only deepen that feeling."

Abdullah believes the U.S. "rushed into this war," and should have gathered more intelligence before it did. While he agrees that events have certainly raised Americans' consciousness concerning Islam, and Ramadan, he's dismayed by their behavior.

"Unfortunately, what has happened in the last five, six weeks, (is) Islam has become the subject of intense research and intense discussions and debate- and intense hate as well," he said. "People have been making fun of this faith. People have been making fun of God, making fun of all that is associated with Islam, even though the president, himself, is saying that Islam is a faith of peace."

"It seems the media is more interested in promoting stereotypical images of muslims rather than the realities that exist," Abdullah continued. "We are trying our best to go to our neighbors and tell them who we are and what we stand for, but we are so few in this huge continent- and, perhaps, we should be doing more to tell others who we are."

"Yes, of course, people know about Ramadan more than they knew last year," he said, but, partly because of that, Abdullah finds current discussions at the Pentagon to be rather odd. "It's ironic," he said, "that the leaders are discussing whether we should or should not have war during this month."

"It's awful," said Aliyy.

"Whatever Allah has ordained to happen will happen, but, of course, it will be awful." He says the United States is "invoking the curse of Allah upon itself," and warned, "By bombing during this holy, sacred month, the wrath of Allah will be increased even more."

One wonders, then, whether muslims perceive the campaign as a war against terrorism, as promoted by America, or against Islam, as increasingly charged by muslims both here and abroad.

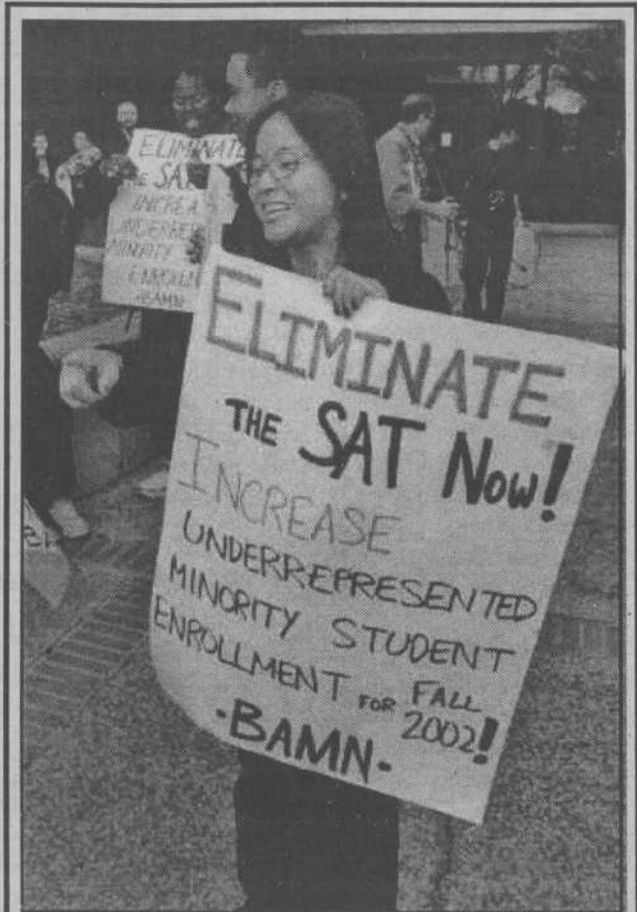
What Abdullah sees is a war waged against Afghanistan, "a country being bombed whose people have never fired a single shot against the United States," he said. "The people of Afghanistan had nothing to do with what happened."

"I think the message is mixed," said Abdullah. "For many, muslims are the cause of this problem, so they should be dealt with harshly in whatever fashion- for others, it's a war against terrorism. For muslims, it's a war against terrorism."

That, however, does not include Aliyy, who doesn't believe "any of this was caused by a muslim," and says, furthermore, that prosecution of the war by the U.S. and its allies is being disguised "by saying that it's against terrorism."

"Yes, I believe it is an attack on Islam, directly," he said.

Aliyy went on to accuse the U.S. of trying to influence world opinion by characterizing muslim fundamentalism as "terrorism." He called that a misrepresentation, being propagated, he said, because "America wants to westernize Islam."



Ynette Felarca, an Oakland teacher, gestures during a demonstration outside of a meeting of University of California regents in San Francisco, Wednesday. A regents' committee voted to adopt a new admissions policy that would take into account any personal hardships a prospective student had to overcome. Felarca was part of civil rights affirmative action organization.

## Action

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and we won't bring Einstein or Edison forward," she said. All those people, she said, "came from dysfunctional families or had serious learning disabilities."

Critics said the plan could make the admissions process a little less fair.

"We're rushing this through in order to have it in place by next year and I think that is ill-advised," said Regent Ward Connerly, who led the fight against affirmative action but ultimately voted for Wednesday's plan. "I think it's going to subject this university to an untold amount of disrespect, litigation and questions about the credibility of the process."

After race-blind admissions went into effect, enrollment of blacks and Hispanics tumbled. The figures have rebounded since then, but there has been a reshuffling, with more blacks and Hispanics going to lesser-known campuses such as UC-Riverside and fewer going to Berkeley and UCLA.

UC officials said the new policy is not back-door affirmative action, in part because race is taken off applications before they are reviewed. They said they do not expect the ethnic composition of freshmen classes at any of the campuses to change substantially.

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