

## State Democracy thrives on busy political times

*Non-profit Web site links constituents with leaders*

By Martin Desmarais

MCLEAN, Va. – For most Indian Americans interested in politics the rallying cry is that not enough members of the community are politically involved and the main effort is to make this happen. However, Shukoor Ahmed and Frank Islam go one step further. They feel that not enough Americans are involved in the political process, specifically voting, and they are using StateDemocracy.org to try and change that.

The Web site connects citizens with their lawmakers and lawmakers-to-be, both at the state and federal levels – in all 50 states. The site's LobbyDelegates service provides a way for people to find out who their lawmakers are and quickly contact them by e-mail, fax or letter. On the voting site, the site packages all that is necessary to vote in any state: voter registration, absentee ballot applications, polling place locator, links to every state and local election board and election-day requirements, such as voting hours, identification requirements and write-in rules.

Following the increasing social networking phenomenon of the Web, StateDemocracy is on Facebook, myspace and LinkedIn and has created widgets that allow people to access its voter tools on many other Web sites. Facebook offers StateDemocracy's voter registration, absentee ballot and poll locator tools.

"What we are trying to do is get our voter engagement tools out to all the different Web sites where people are going," said Ken Laureys, executive director of the StateDemocracy Foundation, which is set up to run and finance StateDemocracy.org.

According to Laureys, the excitement and interest in the Presidential election, combined with the increasing role of the Internet, makes it a perfect time for StateDemocracy and what it offers.

"This year it is really unprecedented in the numbers of new voters that are coming into the system," he said. Still, he believes, there is a major problem of most citizens not knowing who their lawmakers are and how to continue a dialogue with them after elections, particularly on the state level. With the mass media firmly entrenched in covering national politics, Laureys said StateDemocracy can make headway on the local level.

"Here is where the Internet can do that segmentation and niche and have a role to play in informing people," he said. "Once people start [looking into politics on a local level] they find out there is a lot of important things. ... There are more things that are decided on the local level that affect you than on the national level.

"With technology you don't have to do Annapolis or, if you are in Western Mass., you don't have to go to Boston. You can virtually connect with your politicians," he added.

Originally started by Ahmed in 1999 as part of his campaign to run for Maryland House of Delegates, StateDemocracy evolved and in 2001 Ahmed started the StateDemocracy Foundation to oversee the Web site. Since 2001, approximately 500,000 people have visited the site, with 150,000 registered users. In the last month, the site's traffic has increased 400 percent, has seen 76 percent first-time users and had 120 widget packages downloaded to other sites. An average of 20 users are adding StateDemocracy's voter tools to their Facebook profiles on a daily basis.



**StateDemocracy.org, which was started in 2001, has brought on seasoned entrepreneur Frank Islam, above, as chairman and to lead expansion efforts. Photo courtesy of StateDemocracy**



**Ahmed**

The success is a dream envisioned for Ahmed and he has put his money behind the venture, pumping \$300,000 into StateDemocracy since 2001 through his V-Empower Inc. He started the Bowie, Md.-based Web-strategy firm in 1999. V-Empower provides services such as software development, application security consulting, Web development, e-commerce implementation and search engine optimization. The company also developed the Web-based tools that StateDemocracy uses. Customers include: Microsoft Corp., CA (formerly Computer Associates Inc.), Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission, Franklin McKinley Education Foundation and Prince George's County.

A native of Hyderabad, India, Ahmed came to the United States after completing a bachelor's degree in mathematics, physics and chemistry from Osmania University. He then attended American University's School of Public Affairs in Washington, D.C.

He took a job as a reservation agent with Olympic Airways in 1983 and worked his way up to director of business development by 1999, when he left the airline industry to start V-Empower.

StateDemocracy's Laureys is also vice president of client relations at V-Empower. Laureys and Ahmed met on the campaign trail in 1999 working for Presidential candidate Bill Bradley. Laureys said they both share a passion in politics fueled by schooling. Laurey has a bachelor's degree in political science and history from George Washington University and a master's degree in government and politics from the University of Maryland. He views StateDemocracy as the practical embodiment of this academic and theoretical political interest.

This year, Islam succeeded Ahmed as chairman of the StateDemocracy Foundation. According to Laurey, the goal was to put Islam's business acumen to work expanding the scope of StateDemocracy.

"He has been very successful in his business career," said Laureys. "He has a vision about where he wants StateDemocracy to go to using his experiences and talents and his connections from the business field."

Islam is the chief executive officer and chairman of FI Investment Group, a holding company that owns health-care and IT companies. Previously, he was the CEO of QSS Group, an IT company that generated revenue of \$300 million and earned recognition from the Inc 500 for six consecutive years, the Washington Technology Fast 50 for seven consecutive years and the Deloitte & Touche National Tech Fast 500 for eight consecutive years. He sold QSS to Perot Systems Corp.

Islam has been involved in the IT, aerospace engineering services and systems integration business for more than 25 years. In 1999, he was recognized by the Ernst and Young as Maryland Entrepreneur of the Year. The U.S. Small Business Administration selected him as the Minority Small Business Person of the Year of the Washington DC Metropolitan Area in 2001.

He has a bachelor's degree and master's degree in computer science from the University of Colorado.

According to Islam, his work with StateDemocracy is his way of giving back. "After I made my money I said it was time to give back to my community, my country, that I love so much and that is America," he said. "I was very passionate about business and growing my company. Now I am passionate about StateDemocracy."

Islam has very specific plans for StateDemocracy. These include: strengthening the reputation of the Web site as a brand, expanding the foundation's board membership, soliciting more grant funding and benefactors, expanding strategic partnerships with other citizen engagement groups, voter registration Web sites and grassroots advocacy groups and connecting with state election boards to provide them with StateDemocracy's voter tools and establishing a plan to more efficiently update data on poll locations, absentee ballot and voter registration forms.

Melding political passion into a clear plan for StateDemocracy's success is Islam's strategy now that he is at the helm. He believes that the same focus he used to generate his business success will spark similar growth with StateDemocracy.

"If you do not focus you lose power, you lose energy," he said. "If you focus you can even drill a whole in a diamond."