

# PRIVILEGED PATRIOTS OR DESPERATE REFUGEES: CLASS BACKGROUND & PATRIOT ACT

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PATRIOT. PATRIOT II. CAPPS. Galileo. Cendant. The names keep coming -- acronyms we get used to and decode.

To take just one example, what is Galileo? Although no one has heard of it, it is part of an ambitious new system used to assign security ratings to airline passengers. This summer, a Palestinian youth dance troupe was performing in New York. One of the members, Rashed Abu, showed me his United Airlines Boarding Card. On the bottom of each seat was stamped the letters, "AAAA." We could only guess what it meant! Rashed joked that it stood for, "Arab! Arab! Arab! Arab!" Actually, it was probably the highest security-risk rating he could get under programs like CAPPS. At every stop on their national tour, based on this "AAAA" stamp, the Palestinian teens were taken aside and searched. The word "Orwellian," has been used so often to describe these situations, it has lost its sting.

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The rallies and protests against other Homeland Security initiatives seem endless. Every week, activists receive e-mails from AALDEF (Asian American Legal Defense Fund), Blue Triangle Network, or other organizations working to protect the rights of groups targeted for potential terrorist activity. The INS building at Manhattan's Federal Plaza has become activists' second home. But mobilizing immigrants lined up for Special Registration proved to be tricky. At one rally, organizers passed out flyers to immigrants who were in line at the INS. Soon reports came back that anyone who took flyers was being sent to the back of the line by officials. Already afraid of deportation, these reports sent chills through those waiting to be registered. No one wants to cause trouble: get along, go along, and do anything to avoid being deported. These men just want to live here and make an honest dollar; they do not have the circumstances by which to become activists for immigrant rights. Not

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yet anyway.

Yet, as Special Registration and other laws targeting immigrants take hold, not everyone is waiting around. Many have left for Canada, hoping to start a new life. Although Canada is traditionally more welcoming to immigrants (and has a labor shortage), the US has signed the “Safe Third Country” Agreement, curbing the ability of immigrants to apply for asylum in Canada. The new law states that if immigrants pass through a “friendly third country” (the US!), they cannot apply for asylum in Canada. Still, people keep leaving for Canada, Europe, and anywhere they can manage. In parts of Queens and Brooklyn, entire communities of Pakistani immigrants have left, hoping to escape possible INS detention. An American journalist remarked that it reminded her of the Jewish Holocaust: “One day people woke up and their neighbors had disappeared. This is no different.”

I spoke to one Bangladeshi man, a Lexington Avenue fruit-seller with a wife and son.

“Why are you leaving?” I asked. “You’re not illegal! Just go and register.”

“Bhai, you think anyone cares if I’m legal? If they can find some excuse to throw me out, I guarantee you, they will.”

“Why not go and see what happens?”

“Because I don’t want to get thrown into jail and separated from my family.”

Family separation is a real fear with respect to Special Registration. In immigrant families where the man is the breadwinner, that fear is enough to cause whole families to leave the country. But not everyone is leaving under dire circumstances. Class background is a crucial factor in deciding who is targeted and who feels more vulnerable. Many of the immigrants who are fleeing are the working class backbone of New York-- taxi drivers, fruit sellers, newspaper vendors, and waiters.

One of my classmates from college also left the US recently. Unlike the fruit vendor on Lexington Avenue, however, he left not out of fear, but “in protest.” His return to Bangladesh was also far smoother than that experienced by many of his compatriots. Saif Ahmed is from a middle-class background. We were classmates at Oberlin College and graduated during the boom years of the 1990s. Saif ended up in the high-tech sector and became a sought-after commodity at the height of the Internet boom. His reaction to America’s crackdown on terrorism was more relaxed and reflective. Not for him a furtive late night train across the border. Instead, Saif traveled on a comfortable flight back to Dhaka and had time to reflect on an unexpected side-effect of the crackdown.

“The PATRIOT act has made a patriot out of me,” said Saif. “I had never considered myself as belong-

ing to any country. The closest thing to home for me was the US. I've lived here longer than any other country." Even though Saif's adopted country was America, he rebelled at the Special Registration's focus on men from Muslim nations. "When the choice was offered to fingerprint myself and put myself in a criminal database or go back to my "home country", I had to go back to the place my parents were born."

Frustration with religious profiling was not the only factor in Saif's self-imposed exile. The Internet boom years had turned into a bust recession, and the entire high-tech sector was in ruins. New York in particular was hard hit. The only growth sector was outsourcing, as firms exported call centers overseas to cut costs. Saif was still on a work visa, which meant that future employers would have to sponsor him. Given the amount of scrutiny Muslim men were facing, Saif surmised that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to get sponsorship.

The experiences of Shudi, a Wharton graduate of Indian background, may shed some light on the plight of South Asians in search of a job. Recently, Shudi, who had been actively searching for a job, noted his experiences during an interview with an investment bank. At the end of the interview, the interviewer looked up at him and said, "Look, you have great qualifications. I just want to know if I'm hiring somebody who's going to get arrested by the FBI one day!" A principled progressive, Shudi did not point out that he was Hindu, but, instead,

politely declined the job offer when it came his way. If this was the treatment being given to someone who was not even Muslim, imagine what Muslims were facing?

For decades, North America was a destination for immigrants, both skilled and working class. Indeed, some skilled migrants founded Silicon Valley darlings, and the working class toiled incessantly hoping that they could guarantee a solid future for their children. Now, in the wake of 9/11, both groups have become disenfranchised in America. In light of such stories, it might well be said that Muslims are the new Blacks of America-- unemployable and victims of racial profiling.

Weighing the risks of staying in America, Saif made a decision that was both patriotic and practical. As he explained later, "Being treated like a criminal in my adoptive home of thirteen years, I suddenly felt an affinity for Bangladesh-- the nation that can't throw me out."

This is the point where Saif's story diverged from others who have fled the country. Whereas Saif has been privileged in his choices, most working class immigrants cannot even afford the fare back to their home country. They end up in Europe or elsewhere, hostile rest stops on the quest for a friendly landing place. Many end up with jobs in the invisible economy, living a hand-to-mouth existence, but at least not fearing that "midnight knock" from INS officials. For Saif, a very different avenue opened up.

Even before he boarded the British Airways flight back to Dhaka, job offers were pouring in. Over the last twenty years, there has been a continuous brain drain from Bangladesh. Skilled professionals with graduate degrees, especially in Engineering, had left for America, Canada, or Australia. In a situation mired in severe skill shortages, someone with Saif's technical background and American work experience was highly sought after.

Arriving back in Bangladesh, Saif was able to pick and choose from competing job offers and, in the end, joined a small animation company as its CEO. It was his opportunity to be a "patriot," to develop an industry that was brand new in Bangladesh. Reflecting on the change in his fortune, Saif sounded sanguine: "I've had many opportunities to evaluate the positives and negatives of my return. What I left behind was a lot of friends and family, the opportunity to make more money, a very relaxed and carefree life-style. What I got in return was the opportunity to create opportunities. It was a fair trade."

Saif's story appears to have closure. Although he was forced to leave America, he found a place in his native Bangladesh. In talking about Saif, I am talking about others as well. Graduating from elite colleges, many other immigrants obtained green cards through corporate jobs. As a result, they were never personally subject to the post 9/11 crackdown. It is a crucial factor in understanding a more privileged (and therefore largely silent) posi-

tion.

But what of the thousands of Bangladeshis who were not as privileged, who were forced to flee America under the cover of night? Where will they end up? Where will they find a home? Will they be stuck in a permanent cycle of poverty as they run from one migrant destination to the next?

All of these stories should remind you to think about YOUR security. The original rationale behind Special Registration was to prevent terrorism. But, since its initiation, no actual terrorists have shown up for fingerprinting. No plots were discovered, and no box cutters have been found. After spending millions of dollars of taxpayers' money and disrupting the lives of Muslim immigrants, the Special Registration program has now been discontinued! So, what was the purpose of it? No one has the answer.

Meanwhile, the technocrats have already moved on to Patriot II and CAPPS. Under CAPPS, JetBlue handed over customer information in violation of privacy laws. When the airline was caught, passengers screamed bloody murder and threatened class action lawsuits. At the end of the day, none of this will make anyone safer. After being caught asleep at the wheel during 9/11, the US intelligence organizations are functioning in overdrive to compensate for past failures. Yet, their tactics are based on screening for terrorist strategies of the past, while agile terrorists are surely coming up with new tactics (does any-

one really believe that hijackers will use shoe bombs again?).

In a misguided hunt for terrorists, the INS continues to target all Muslim immigrants-- antagonizing millions around the world and creating new recruits for fanatical organizations. In the end, this crackdown will only force thousands of law-abiding, working-class families out of the country, spreading more ill-will towards America.

Benjamin Franklin said it best 200 years ago: "They that can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety." Will America remember those words in time?

