

USA & a bigger police state: Bigotry vs. Black Lives, Muslims, Immigrants

Friday 1 January 2016, by [MIAH Malik](#) (Date first published: 1 January 2016).

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HISTORICALLY, THE PRIMARY targets of bigotry and domestic terrorism in the United States have been Black people, who were considered less than human and definitely not as equals to whites. Native peoples were slaughtered by the settler colonists, removed from their tribal lands and put on “reservations.” Native Americans to this day suffer from the original genocidal crimes of the European colonists.

Today’s rightwing bigotry and quasi-populist appeals are based on an extension of the same ideology, targeting minorities who are seen by the white working and middle class as the source of their socio-economic decline and insecurities for their lives and futures.

Donald Trump and other Republican presidential candidates use hate and fear of these “others.” Could this strategy win the 2016 presidency? Possibly yes, because the Republican Party tactic is to limit the voting rights of minorities, given that if 65% of whites who vote go their way it doesn’t matter if 90% of Blacks, Latinos and Asians vote for the Democratic nominee.

So far this approach — with district gerrymandering and thinly disguised voter suppression laws — has helped Republicans win control of more than half the states.

Rooted in History

When the U.S. Declaration of Independence was written by slaveholder Thomas Jefferson, Blacks were excluded. After independence and in the new Constitution, Black “Americans” did not exist. Black slaves were considered part of the new country only as property, while those lucky enough to be “free” suffered legal discrimination and possible enslavement.

From British rule to U.S. independence Blacks fought to be recognized first as humans, second as citizens and lastly as equals (which is still to come). African Americans operate under the reality that “the struggles continue,” since they never end so long as institutional racism and structural inequality persists.

For every step forward in history (end of slavery, Radical Reconstruction, end to Jim Crow segregation) there has always been a vicious backlash. Since the 1970s, for example, school desegregation has been reversed in practice for the most part; affirmative action programs mostly ended; and wealth inequalities between Blacks and whites have widened.

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement stands on these 400 years of struggle in response to white power. It faces the same rightwing backlash, and even pushback from liberals and some leftists. The BLM leaders are often asked a question others are not. "Don't other lives matter too?"

But if whites faced the same police violence and society's assumption of guilt, there would not be a need for a BLM movement. Whites are rarely subject to random attacks and murders by cops (or by Blacks) or face discrimination for jobs or decent housing. What is called "white privilege" underpins white supremacy. Even when whites deny the reality, few if any would change places with Black people.

Many liberals and some leftists don't accept the term "white privilege" because it makes it more difficult to convince white workers to stand up for Black equality. But privilege is not simply subjective; it is rooted in a reality established by written laws, white vigilante violence and oppression.

Any objective study of the history of the country proves this. The only way to educate whites and everyone else is to speak the truth and demand radical institutional changes by the power of the state. Both the Civil War in the 1860s, and the use of federal troops in the South in the 1960s to enforce court-ordered desegregation, illustrates this point.

Criminalizing Muslims

A similar rightwing ideologically-driven attack is directed at Muslims (the most feared "other" today). Muslims are supposed to prove that they are loyal to "American values." Trump says what many believe: keep all Muslims out of the United States.

The shooting death of 14 people in San Bernardino, California illustrates the problem. At first, before the shooters were known, a discussion about guns and mental illness occurred in the media since many thought the shooters might be white. But once it became clear that the two shooters were husband and wife with Muslim names, the focus immediately turned.

The New York Post displayed the hypocrisy with brutal clarity, changing its front page headline from "Murder Mission" to "Muslim Killers" within hours of learning the identity of the shooters.

All Muslims (Shia, Sunni, nonbeliever, secularist or atheist) are challenged by the mainstream media to speak out. When a white Christian male murdered three people, targeting a Colorado Planned Parenthood clinic, the New York Post did not put "Christian killer" on its front page.

Muslims had already been targeted around the issue of admitting a small number of Syrian refugees. Now conservative and anti-Muslim demagogues are whipping up a "war on radical Islam" to justify targeting U.S-born Muslim citizens too. Any person with an Islamic name now faces possible physical attack.

The fact that millions of Muslims are culturally Muslim but secular and even atheist (like me) is irrelevant. It's like being Black: Cops or racists don't ask your ideology, wealth or education. They assume "reasonable suspicion" of possible criminality.

Even liberal Democrats like talk show host Bill Maher, who likes to ridicule religion in general, has been on a rant that only Islam teaches hatred and violence. The fact that a majority Christian country (Germany) carried out the Nazi genocide in the 20th century means little.

Fear-mongering and demonization has occurred many times in U.S. history, and not just by rightwing demagogues. The New Deal president Franklin D. Roosevelt refused to integrate the military and take on Jim Crow segregation.

Blacks had to organize a March on Washington Movement in 1941 for a share of jobs in the war industries. It was FDR who issued the Executive Order for the swift internment of Americans of Japanese ancestry (prison camps) with no due process or justification except that Japanese Americans looked like the people of Japan.

Immigrants Also “The Other”

The mainstream right also continues its racist and horrific scapegoating of immigrants from Mexico and Central America. In Trump’s view all 11 million undocumented immigrants and their legal American children must be deported.

The demand for a border wall, and especially internment of immigrants before deportation, has won popular support from a significant minority. It is a reminder of the anti-Jewish propaganda in early 1930s Germany, the most “enlightened” country in Europe at the time. Yet the demagogue Hitler and his Brown Shirts turned the tide, even against the ruling elites.

Can it happen here? White supremacists have served as the “fascist”-like thugs against Black people, especially in the Old South where laws and force were used by states to oppress African Americans.

Today’s new laws suppressing the right to vote in southern states like North Carolina shows how history can repeat itself. White power is getting stronger in the state as African Americans are politically isolated.

The immigration issue, combined with the anti-BLM backlash and scapegoating of Muslims, represent the potential breeding ground for a fascist movement to be spawned.

Trump is not a classical fascist — he doesn’t have an organization like the Brown Shirts to go after his opponents and enemies. But those attending many of his rallies have shown how demonizing the “other” can lead to violence, as happened to a BLM supporter at one of his events.

Trump is distinctive in that he is not religious. Declaring that he’s a man of the people, this billionaire’s appeal uses economic anxieties, much more than social issues like abortion or marriage.

He plays to working-class whites’ victimhood. He even denounces his own class including Big Business and Wall Street (not that he means it).

The Fightback

While the right appears strong — it controls the Republican Party and Congress and a majority of state houses — the broad population is divided.

The Black Lives Matter movement of the past two years, along with the immigrant Dreamers movement, has set the example of what to do. It starts with self-mobilization and without reliance on the two major parties or its politicians.

Its extension to college campuses, where Black students are leading the way against racism and

discriminatory practices, is a big advance. The victory at the University of Missouri, including the unprecedented stance of the football team, inspired students around the country.

The protests exposed the lie about “political correctness.” The term itself is derogatory, since the issue is racism and discrimination — are you for rooting it out or pretending it is okay because it happened in the past? (A similar debate occurred about removing the Confederate flag and monuments.)

At Princeton in New Jersey, Black students have pushed an issue that has hung over the school for decades — honoring a former president who was an arch-segregationist. Woodrow Wilson served as Princeton’s president from 1902-1910, New Jersey governor from 1911-13 and president of the United States from 1914-21.

Wilson used his cabinet to re-segregate federal government departments and forced civil servant applicants to include photographs, which were understood by African Americans at the time as a move to weed them out.

The Muslim community for the most part has not used social media or street mobilizations as the BLM, Black students and Dreamers have done. It is out of genuine fear. At some point, however, this must change to push back the anti-Muslim bigots.

Islam, like most religions, almost by definition, is hierarchical and about holy texts. It is not the texts, but the political ideology of religion that teaches its followers of their superiority and domination over other religions, that cause the problem.

ISIS wins followers precisely because it combines doctrines of religious superiority with a political ideology claiming to oppose Western and neo-colonial dominion.

Youths radicalized by Islamist appeals in the United States, as in Canada, France and other European countries, see the violence of Western militaries in the wars of occupation in the Arab countries and north Africa.

The ruling elites’ “solution” is a bigger police state where Muslims are targeted and lose their rights as France is doing. This will worsen the problems and reinforce the reactionary Islamists’ narrative.

The challenge is to build a social movement to fight Islamophobia and bigotry, and at the same time to oppose the reactionary ISIS ideology and terrorist methods without aligning with the same Western imperial countries that are carrying out the “war on Islam.”

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P.S.

* “Bigotry vs. Black Lives, Muslims, Immigrants”. From Against the Current n° 180, January-February 2016:

<http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/4543>