



Reports

Trump's Muslim Travel Ban triggers global solidarity

*Thembisa Fakude**



The Travel ban which targeted Muslims in the United States triggers solidarity protests across the country. [EPA]

Abstract

The recent executive order which has become known as the “Muslim Travel Ban” by the newly-installed president of the United States (US) Donald Trump has spawned two important political developments. Firstly, the order has led to the emergence of sustained solidarity protests around the US and in many parts of the world. The protests’ organisers claim that their actions are meant to push back what they view as threats to democracy and civil liberties. The US foreign policy, military interventions, Hollywood films, goods and services have served as the main representatives of the US abroad. The world knows America from the prism of these components. The protests have exposed a rare side of the US, that which has not been seen since the end of the Vietnam War. Secondly, the Muslim Travel Ban has also brought forth certain realities within the global Muslim civil societies. It has exposed a polarised Muslim civil society. Muslim societies have varying interests. Consequently, the ban has a different meaning to different Muslim societies. This is normal. It confirms two reasonable arguments: a/ straightjacket approaches in dealing with the Muslim world are inappropriate; and b/ so-called one size-fit-all socio-political solutions in addressing the challenges of the Muslim World require redress.

In most parts of the Muslim world including countries listed on the ban, there has been suspicious quiet. The protests have actually been more from the US than countries that are affected by the ban. Simply put, there is quasi ‘apathy’ from the Muslim countries in this regard. This paper will look at how the new politics of Trump’s administration have backfired particularly following the execution of the Muslim Travel Ban. The ban has resurrected civil activism within the American civil society. The paper will also highlight effects of the ban within the Muslim societies. It will argue that the Muslim travel ban has exposed the fractured nature of Muslim societies. This might in the long run affect solidarity efforts on behalf of the global Muslim community.

Introduction

Donald Trump was democratically elected according to the complicated US electoral system. He lost the popular vote and won an electoral college. Like the name suggests, popular means the majority of the US voters preferred his opponent Hillary Clinton. The majority does not necessarily rule in the US. The election of Donald Trump has once again raised serious questions regarding the country's electoral system, it has become a serious bone of contention in the country's body politic. Many voters feel "short changed" by the system especially the young voters. Donald Trump's divisive rhetoric during his presidential campaign and at his inauguration has angered many people in the US. There was hope before the inauguration that he was going to be more reconciliatory in speech and action when he assumed office. Many think the opposite has so far been the case. The Muslim travel ban has given rise to a growing social activism against Trump, a kind of activism never seen before against an elected president in the US. The supporters of Trump argue that protestors are unfairly treating the new president because their preferred candidate lost. They also accuse the mainstream media coverage of Trump as being unfair (1). Donald Trump surprised many when he won the elections. His supporters maintain that even if he extends reconciliatory gestures and try to be unifying in his actions and speech he will still be opposed and his work hindered by the supporters of Hillary Clinton and the Democrats. Furthermore, they argue that the rolling mass actions were already prepared, including an anti Trump movement before he came into office - they may have a point. Well-known liberal filmmaker, Michael Moore is on record detailing a five-step strategy for countering President-elect Donald Trump (2). Having said that, Trump's toxic electoral campaign statements were grave enough to trigger resistance.

Trump's calls for the creation of a movement during his presidential campaign have resulted in the emergence of an unexpected counter-movement. The slogan during Trump's campaign was to make "America great again". What has been seen is the opposite, it is been the ordinary protesting people in the street of US who may be seen as trying to make America great again. These are the people who have formed a movement against Donald Trump's alleged bigotry, racism and ultra conservatism. The dedication that has been demonstrated regarding the plight of those who were barred from entering the US and reach their families as a result of the ban for an example, has touched many across the globe. Their actions have 'alienated' Trump and may in the long run make him a 'pariah'. There has been an active resistance from most sectors of US against Trump's bigotry. The court rule against the ban was a huge backlash for his

new government. It has not been easy start for Donald Trump and the future does seem more complicated.

The making of the mass solidarity movement in the US

Most American artists refused to perform at the inauguration of president Trump. Furthermore, some Democrats boycotted the inauguration including the prominent civil rights activist John Lewis. "I do not feel that I can contribute to the normalisation of the president-elect's divisive rhetoric by participating in the inauguration". Lewis told the BBC (3). It was a shaky start for the man who promised to make America great again. The Women's March on the day after his inauguration was not only an embarrassment for Trump and his new government, but also the reality of incumbency catching up with him. The Muslim Travel Ban has led to spontaneous marches and led to many lawyers across the US offering their services pro bono to the victims of the ban, which is unprecedented. Businesses and politicians also volunteered assistance. Mayor of New York Bill de Blasio issued a warning to President-elect Donald Trump in an address given at Cooper Union that: if he goes forward with his plan to establish a Muslim registry, the city will take legal action to fight it (4). The acting Attorney General Sally Yates was forced to resign after "defying" Trump regarding the ban. The opposition to Trump's Muslim Travel Ban has increased to include a number of multi national companies in the US as well.

Trump politics have not only infuriated many Americans, many people around the world have voiced disdain and have started organising against Trump. There have already been protests against Trump in several cities around the world. The British parliament has also been outspoken of his planned visit to the United Kingdom (UK). Many have even suggested that Trump's visit to the UK should be cancelled in order to "spare the Queen the embarrassment" of meeting with Trump. The speaker of the House of Commons in the UK John Bercow has come out in opposition to Trump addressing the House of Commons

There is a number of interesting things that are coming out from the current politics in the US. First of all it is a reminder, particularly to the younger generations that civil rights are earned not given and they can be taken away if not guarded. Secondly, Trump's election has brought to the mainstream what has been hidden all along in the US and across Europe. It has helped to expose simmering bigotry, xenophobia, rightwing radicalisation and racism. The new movement against Trump whilst pushing back this phenomenon, it will also help educate against the dangers of these and other

forms of discrimination. There are now new rallying points for people across religious and cultural lines. The mainstreaming of these dangerous sociopolitical realities will create a new global social movement. There is most likely to be a multitude of issues concerning social and solidarity movements emerging henceforth. There have also been number of prominent Americans who have undertaken to register themselves as Muslims if Trump goes ahead with his plans targeting Muslims amongst them is the former Secretary of State Magdalene Albright. I was raised Catholic, became Episcopalian & found out later my family was Jewish. 'I stand ready to register as Muslim in #solidarity,'" she tweeted (5). Over the years there is has been a steady rise of reports of Islamophobia in Europe and US. Within Muslim countries there has been a simplistic interpretation, often lumping the entire US as Islamophobic. Muslims, particularly women, targeted on the streets and other public places for wearing a veil or looking Muslims. The anti Muslim Travel Ban protests around the US are steadily altering those interpretations and impressions. They are presenting Americans in a different light, for the first time there is a clear differentiation between the US's foreign policy and popular public opinion.

Fragmented global Muslim civil society

However, the reactions of the majority of Muslims and their governments to the ban have been lukewarm. The United Arab Emirate (UAE) Foreign Affairs Minister Sheik Abdallah bin Zayed al Nahyan angered and flabbergasted many Muslims when he refuted those arguing that Trump's order was a Muslim Travel Ban. The attitude in the region towards the ban and rhetoric seem to be in support of the ban. Very few, if at all, have come out in condemnation of the ban. Furthermore, there have not been any protests against the designation of Muslim countries to the banned list. The question is for how long will the majority Muslims remain quiet whilst the entire world is protesting on their behalf? This is an unprecedented opportunity for Muslims who have been victims of discrimination to join in the protest and global solidarity movement. There are a number of benefits that engagement can bring to Islam in general. Only Iran, for obvious reasons, has come out strongly and issued a firm worded statement against the ban. In a statement Iran said the order is 'gift to extremists' and insult to Islamic world (6). Muslims' position regarding the ban is fragmented and polarised for various reasons. Understandably, most Muslims abandoned the possibility of visiting the US after the events of 11 September 2001. There has been reports of harsh and humiliating treatment of Muslims in the US particularly at the points of entry to the US after the attacks in 2001, the recent ban came on that backdrop. Moreover poor Muslim majorities do not have the privilege or inclination to travel to the US. There are already

existing stringent visa regulations that discourage many from travelling to the US. These could be one of the reasons why there have not been protests against the ban. Secondly, there is fragmentation because most the countries targeted by the ban seem to be politically influenced by Shia Iran, but this is not the only explanation. Iran may be detested by many people and government in the Middle East and Muslim world. Finally, those that are already living in the US are often seen as “political outcasts” by governments in their home countries and propaganda is often used to cement those views. Going to the US has never been viewed in a positive light in many Muslim countries because of its alternative politics. Preventing people from travelling will lessen alternative political exposure. Therefore it is expected that certain leaders in the region will hail the ban and go as far as justifying its promulgation. There might be others in the Muslim world that might be encouraged by the protests currently taking place in the US and other places. They are most likely to resuscitate the social movements in the region. If that happens, it might be the beginning of the second revolution.

Conclusion

The ban has brought people across religious background against the emerging bigotry and ultra conservatism in the US. Will this eventually culminate into a global social movement? Only time will tell. However, Trump’s continued political mishaps could in the long run strengthen this new movement. The rise of ultra right wing politics in Europe and other parts of the world could also add momentum to the movement. The spontaneous protests as the result of the ban have exposed a different America. Muslims in the US and the West in general may be positioned to play an important role in representing the global Muslim aspiration in the movement in absence of voices and positions from the Muslim world. Furthermore their involvement will also help to educate and increase Islamic understanding, ultimately changing attitudes towards Islam in the US and many parts of the world. At the same time a sizeable number of Muslims from the Muslim world will continue to ignore global solidarity gestures. The majority of Muslim countries will not participate in the new movement. This will unfortunately expose the fragmented position of Muslims towards the ban, something that might discourage any solidarity efforts on behalf of the Muslims in future. Therefore in order to keep momentum, the protests should concentrate on principles of safe guarding democracy, preservation of civil liberties and less on solidarity.

(*)*Thembisa Fakude, Head of Research Relations at Al Jazeera Centre for Studies.*

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