

Alabama, Land of the Scared
October 5, 2011

This week Alabama passed immigration legislation that turns the police force, whose primary duty is to protect, into immigration officials with the power to question anyone, where there is “reasonable suspicion”, about their immigration status. Moreover, schools which are supposed to provide a nurturing and safe environment are now responsible for recording the undocumented status of their students. In case there was any doubt about the devastating implications of this law for the Hispanic community in Alabama, one only had to read this week’s headlines: “After Ruling, Hispanics Flee...” (New York Times), “Hispanic Students Vanish from Alabama Schools...” (Associated Press). The State of Alabama has confirmed that over 2,000 Hispanic children never showed up for school on Monday.

Perhaps the most horrifying aspect of both the adoption and subsequent upholding of this legislation is that Alabama has **sanctioned the ethnic cleansing** of the Hispanic community. Would you stay in a place where you felt constantly “suspect” based on your appearance, where a minor traffic violation could result in deportation, and where every contract you’ve signed could become null and void? When legislation is aimed at demonizing specific communities and ultimately gains judicial sanction, these targeted communities are then relegated to second class status.

It is important to note that this law has implications for all people of color in Alabama, not just Hispanics. Suddenly, communities that have lived under a "specter of suspicion" since 9/11 may also be asked for their papers. Ultimately, there is nothing to stop officials from targeting those they deem to be “foreign” (i.e. South Asians, Sikhs, Muslims, and Arabs) because of their skin color, language, or religious/ cultural dress. In the last decade, we as a country have unconscionably moved to treating an entire segment of our population, specifically those with brown skin, as “suspect”. Thus, these laws mete out collective punishment on a large segment of the U.S. population irrespective of whether they are here lawfully or unlawfully.

Foster Maer, Senior Council at LatinoJustice PRLDEF explains, “The venomous legislative and political attacks on undocumented immigrants that we see these days signals to the public that it is okay to demonize, and thus to hate, immigrants, which inevitably leads to violence against immigrants. The events in Patchogue and in Farmingville, New York, in Allentown, PA, and elsewhere have demonstrated this to be true.”

The disproportionate response to addressing a complex and multi-layered issue such as immigration is disgraceful because it forces families to uproot their lives and flee their homes, schools, and communities. Every single Alabaman, regardless of racial, ethnic, or religious affiliation, will be impacted by the creation of a defacto police state. All that is left to say is . . . welcome to the land of the scared.

By: Nomi Teutsch, UNITED SIKHS/ TBFF Faith Fellow TBFF and Hansdeep Singh, UNITED SIKHS Senior Staff Attorney