

NCAPA: Asian American Leaders Stand Against Anti-Muslim Hate press conference

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Good afternoon, I am Lakshmi Sridaran with South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT). At SAALT our goal is to represent the breadth of ethnic and religious identities of folks who identify as South Asian on issues of immigration, racial profiling, and hate violence, which we increasingly see as inextricably linked, especially today.

Thank you all for being here today to stand together as an Asian American community against anti-Muslim hate and xenophobia. While we are seeing a resurgence of rhetoric and violence directed at our Muslim community members and those perceived to be Muslim, we must remember that anti-Muslim sentiment has always been codified into our policies as a nation, and especially after September 11, 2001. This began with the NSEERS program in 2002 when all males over the age of 16 on specific visa types from 25 so-called Muslim countries had to register with the federal government. Over 80,000 men ended up registering and over 13,000 were placed into deportation proceedings, and not one act of terrorism was uncovered. That same year, the NYPD established an entire Demographics Unit to map and surveil the Muslim community, a program they only terminated last year. Policies like this have consequences. They continue to build the apparatus of profiling and surveillance in this country that was first perfected on the backs of the Black community through COINTELPRO in the 1960's.

Today, we see the establishment of the Countering Violent Extremism or CVE program that disproportionately focuses on the Muslim community as a way to combat violent extremism with little to no focus on domestic terrorism or white supremacy; we see our politicians clamoring to reject Syrian refugees who are fleeing an actual terrorist regime; and we see anti-Sharia laws burgeoning in states across the country. In the last few months, DRUM has been supporting hundreds of South Asian detainees across the country who are by and large asylum seekers from Bangladesh fleeing political persecution. They are mostly Muslim and the political party they are affiliated with has been incorrectly classified as a Tier 3 terrorist organization by Department of Homeland Security. They have gone on hunger strike to bring attention to their cases since many of them have been held in indefinite detention for more than a year and many of them faced retaliation from ICE for doing so. Just today, one of them was deported back to Bangladesh into dangerous conditions and many others are facing deportation. Policies and conditions like this justify and rationalize the rhetoric that we see from candidates, elected officials, and the general public. And, we cannot pretend that there is no relationship between this and the violence that our communities face. It is painful to recount incident after incident that has been targeted toward our communities this year alone. Just this weekend, an Indian Sikh store owner in Grand Rapids, MI was shot in the face by an armed robber who said he used to kill people like him in Iraq after calling him a terrorist and member of ISIS.

What can we do?

Yes, it is important that we call out candidates and elected officials on their rhetoric and even more important that we challenge the policies around us. But, we all know that transformative change has both an external and internal component. So I challenge us all to:

1. Confront anti-Muslim sentiment and xenophobia within our own families, communities, and institutions.
2. Shift the frame – what brings us all together here today is the common threat of white supremacy. That is the reason we are labeled as terrorists, profiled, tracked, surveilled, interned, deported, and imprisoned. And, that is puts us in relationship with other communities of color.
3. Continue to document hate crimes committed against us and push to ensure they are labeled as such. Just last month, the FBI released its hate crimes statistics for 2014 and they themselves felt the numbers were low due to underreporting so it is more important than ever that we report. At SAALT, as a continuation of our 2014 report “Under Suspicion, Under Attack,” where we document over 150 incidents of hate violence and rhetoric that were overwhelmingly anti-Muslim, we have started an online database after Paris to document incidents and rhetoric with a feature that allows anyone to come onto our website and add entries. I encourage you all to inform your networks about this and contribute to the database.
4. Support, uplift, and center the voices and work of local organizations that are on the frontlines directly facing this violence, working with survivors, and the families of victims. They are building youth and women’s leadership to challenge these issues everyday.

I leave you here today with these challenges that I know together as an Asian American community we can meet.