

Targeting Muslims, Prison Conditions

Muslim Alliance of North America
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I'd like to share a little of my own history. My early observations of oppression in this country began in the 1950's when I was 12 or 13 watching television news and seeing children of African decent my own age in the South being hosed by police for trying to go to school.

I spent my 20's working in Tennessee in the civil rights movement, ending up at Highlander Center, which was the training school for organizers in the South. Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Kwame Toure (known as Stokely Carmichael), Imam Jamil Al-Amin (known as Rap Brown) and hundreds of others were trained there, until the State of Tennessee investigated Highlander staff for sedition (treason against the State) and we were under court injunction forbidding us to continue training organizers.

Since 1975, I've served as a human rights advocate on behalf of people in prison throughout the country, coordinating the Prison Watch Project for the American Friends Service Committee in Newark. Many of the men, women and children that I take testimony from call their imprisonment "the war at home" and neo-slavery.

In the mid 80's I received a letter from Ojore Lutalo who had just been placed in the Management Control Unit at Trenton State Prison. He asked what a control unit was, why he was in there and how long he would have to stay. We knew little of control units, except for the 1983 lockdown of the Marion Federal prison, and what we learned from the many prisoners who reached out to the AFSC to mentor those of us trying to give voice to what was and is happening.

We began hearing from people throughout the country saying that they were prisoners being held in extended isolation for political reasons. We heard from jailhouse lawyers, Muslims and prisoner activists – many of whom found themselves targeted and locked down in 24/7 solitary confinement. The AFSC began contacting people inside and outside the prisons to collect testimonies of what was going on in those isolation units. We had no idea how many people were experiencing this form of torture, the conditions in those units and how many control units there were.

I want to share with you some voices that I hear during my day. The first two from children:

“I went in when I was 14. They have what they call the “hole.” Kids that fight go in there. If you refuse they come and get you. You get a shower once a week and they bring the food to you. I was so cold. “

“If you do something wrong, they put you in lock down. I could hear people scream, yell and holler. I saw boys get strung out on meds. They make you take sleeping stuff in needles. They used pepper spray on this girl who was fighting. They sprayed her directly in her mouth and she couldn’t breathe. We told them that she had asthma, but they wouldn’t listen”.

In Elizabeth, NJ, Eddie Sinclair, Jr. hung himself in the Union County Youth detention facility; Eddie was 17 and had stolen a bicycle. He had missed a court appointment, was picked up and locked in isolation. It is not irrelevant that Eddie’s father is African and his mother is Puerto Rican.

From the adult prisons we hear:

“John was directed to leave the strip cell and a urine soaked pillow case was placed over his head like a hood. He was walked, shackled and hooded to a different cell where he was placed in a device called “the chair” where he was kept for over 30 hours resulting in extreme physical and emotional suffering.”

Another describes being knocked to the ground, kicked and maced in his eyes. He then gives a detailed description of the beating with shields and batons the guards refer to as “nigger beaters”.

A woman wrote saying, “I was locked in isolation, sitting there week after week, month after month. Not once was I ever taken out of my cell which had a window that was four inches wide. I started to rub my nails against the rubber seal around the window. It was a thick, hard rubber which I rubbed for months with bleeding nails. It took 8 months to get a tiny opening to feel fresh air.

Another wrote “the guard sprayed me with pepper spray because I wouldn’t take my clothes off in front of five male guards. They carried me to my isolation cell, laid me down on a steel bed and took my clothes off, leaving me with that pepper spray burning face.

Some of the saddest letters are from prisoners writing on behalf of the mentally ill – like the man who spread feces over his body. The guards’ response to this was to put him in a bath so hot it boiled 30% of the skin off him.

“How do you describe desperation to someone who is not desperate”? began a letter to me from Ojore Lutalo who went on to depict everyone in the Control Unit being awakened by guards dressed in riot gear holding barking, salivating dogs at 1 a.m. every other morning. Once awakened, the prisoners were forced to

strip, gather their belongings while feeling the dogs straining at their leashes snapping at their private parts as they are trained to do. He described being terrorized, intimidated, and the humiliation of being naked and not knowing whether the masked guards were male or female. These went on for an entire summer, until activists inside and out were able to stop this senseless torture. If we think back to slavery and to images of the civil rights movement we understand that dogs have been used as a device of torture for hundreds of years in the US.

The thread that binds all of the above testimonies is that they are from men, women and children who are being held in isolation and who are experiencing the use of devices of torture in human cages where there are few witnesses.

Picture yourself in an 8 by 10 cage in a human warehouse. There may be a dozen cages on either side, and you may be in the middle tier of tiers above and below. Picture yourself in this eerie silence for 23 to 24 hours a day for the next 15 years. There is a steel door between you and the rest of the world. One a prisoner reported that on the first window visit with his lawyer, he was rectally searched three times going to the visit and three times when being returned despite the fact that he hadn't been in the same room with another human being for 6 months. I have received thousands of descriptions and drawings of four and five point restraints, restraint hoods, restraint belts, restraint beds, stun grenades, stun guns, stun belts, spit hoods, chain gangs, black boxes, tethers, waist and leg chains.

The history of control units began with the movements of the 60's and 70's. My generation genuinely believed that each of us was free to dissent politically. In those years, people acted out this belief in a number of ways. Native peoples contributed to the formation of the American Indian Movement dedicated to self determination; Puerto Ricans joined the movement to free the island from US colonialism; Whites formed the Students for a Democratic Society and anti-imperialist groups, while others worked in the southern Civil Rights movements. This was also a time that the New Afrikan Independence Movement reasserted itself; the Black Panther Party for Self Defense was formed, as well as a time where there was a distinct rise in the prisoner rights movement. It was time when television news had graphic pictures of State Troopers, Police, the FBI, and the National Guard killing our peers. It was a time when I saw on the evening news the bullet holes fired by police into Panther Fred Hampton's sleeping body, a time when young people protesting the Viet Nam War died on the Jackson and Kent State campuses killed by the National Guard, a time when civil rights workers were killed with impunity, and a time when we felt as if there was no opportunity to stop mourning because each day another activist was dead. These killings and other acts of oppression led to underground formations such as the Black Liberation Army and the Weather Underground.

The government, in response to this massive outcry against social inequities and for national liberation, utilized Counter Intelligence Programs called COINTELPRO conducted by a dozen federal agencies, which had as an objective the crippling of the Black Panther Party and other radical forces. Over the years that these directives were carried out, many of those young people who weren't murdered were put in prisons across the country. Some, now in their 60's and 70's are still there.

While the US denied that there were people being held for political reasons, there was no way to work with prisoners without hearing repeatedly of the existence of such people, and the particular treatment they endured once in prison. As early as 1978, Andrew Young, US Ambassador to the United Nations, was widely quoted saying "there were hundreds, perhaps thousands of people I would describe as political prisoners" in US prisons.

Across the nation, we saw an enhanced use of sensory deprivation/isolation units for such people in an attempt to instill behavior modification. It was this growing "special treatment" which we began monitoring. At the time, Ralph Arons, a former warden at Marion, was quoted at a congressional hearing as saying, "The purpose of the Marion Control Unit is to control revolutionary attitudes in the prison system and in society at large".

For those of us who have been in the struggle for decades, the deliberate use of long term sensory deprivation is haunting. People that we've known, worked with and loved have been, and are, being held in this manner. The names – Ojore Lutalo; Sundiata Acoli, Assata Shakur, Marshall Eddie Conway, Albert Nuh Washington; Geronimo Pratt; Herman Bell, the Angola 3, Dhoruba Bin Wahad, Dr. Mutulu Shakur, Mumia Abu Jamal; Leonard Peltier, Jalil Muntaquim, Sekou Odinga, Ray Luc Levasseur, Kazi Toure; Leonard Peltier, Oscar Lopez Rivera, Alejandrina Torres, Dylcia Pagan, Bashir Hameed, Standing Deer, Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin; Richard Williams, Tom Manning, Merle and all of the Africas, Susan Rosenberg, Kwame Izequire, Laura Whitehorn, Russell Maroon Shoats, Linda Evans, Marilyn Buck, Imam Jamil Al-Amin - these prisoners, many of whom are Islamic, and hundreds of others – haunt the spaces of every control unit, supermax prison, ad seg unit and special housing unit in the country. No matter what name they are given, their purpose is the same as in Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo – the breaking of minds.

For people of my generation, our work is done with a lifetime passion and an understanding that the work is not risk free. We've made a promise to those dead and alive to abolish these torture chambers. People throughout the world are beginning to understand what the prisoners have been saying to us for decades about the oppressive, war-like tactics of the US government toward criticism or resistance. People in prison have warned us that what happens inside finds its way out here. In a May 5th 2009 article in The Trentonian, Afsheen Shamsi of the Council on American-Islamic Relations says that their coalition "is upset over

what it says is increasing surveillance in mosques". She said the group "reflects the concerns of Muslims who have grown tired of being stopped at airports, constant questioning and relentless security years after the attacks of 9/11". She's goes on to say that "If it's not a war on Islam, then these practices must be stopped".

The department of corrections is more than a set of institutions; it is a state of mind. It is that state of mind which expanded the use of isolation, the use of devices of torture, the Counter Intelligence Programs, and the Department of Homeland Security, against activists, both inside and outside the walls. Ojore, the man who first contacted us in 1986, was released from the control unit via litigation in 2002 after 16 years in isolation. In 2004, he was placed back into isolation with no explanation. When I called the Department of Corrections, I was told that this was upon the request of Homeland Security. In a 2008 Classification decision, this was confirmed in writing which said the Department "continues to show concern regarding your admitted affiliation with the Black Liberation Army. Your radical views and ability to influence others poses a threat to the orderly operation of this Institution". Ojore examples the history of control units. After 22 years of living in isolation, he was released from prison in August of 2009 via court order. He also examples the perceived threat of Islam. On January 26th, he was kidnapped from an Amtrak train, accused of "endangering public transportation" and arrested in La Junta, Colorado. Because of his unusual name, newspaper articles had him being Muslim and talking about Al Qaeda. A judge dismissed all charges one week later, enabling him to be here today.

The latest progression of control units are called "security threat group management units". This is particularly egregious because it is the government which gets to define what a "security threat group" is. According to a national survey done by the Department of Justice in 1997, the Departments of Corrections of Minnesota and Oregon named all Asians as gangs, which Minnesota further compounds by adding all Native Americans. New Jersey, Oklahoma, and Pennsylvania go on to list various Islamic groups as gangs. Because of my own background,

In 2004, four Islamic prisoners in California were indicted on charges which included conspiracy to levy war against the US government. One result of this was a 2006 report called "Out of The Shadows: Getting Ahead of Prisoner Radicalization" by George Washington University's Homeland Security Policy Institute. The report states that the "potential for radicalization of prison inmates poses a threat of unknown magnitude to the national security of the United States", noting that "every radicalized prisoner becomes a potential terrorist threat." The report states that it focuses, "in particular on religious radicalization in conjunction with the practice of Islam". On November 7th in that same year, USA Today reported that the FBI and Homeland Security were "urging prison administrators to set up more intelligence units in state prisons, with an emphasis on background checks to ensure that extremist Muslim clerics don't have access

with prisoners". In a January 20, 2010 article, US law enforcement authorities are quoted as believing that "as many as three dozen Americans who converted to Islam in prison have traveled to Yemen, possibly to train with Al Qaeda." The article says that "the radicalization of the individuals has alarmed US officials even though no evidence has tied them to terrorist activities".

For those of us monitoring US prisons over decades, the targeting of radicalization, the targeting of specific groups, the surveillance and infiltration of those groups feels very familiar. There is no doubt in the minds of many of us that Islam is being targeted. I believe what is happening to Imam Jamil Al-Amin is a vivid example of profiling because of his political history and his religion. The US government which has moved from the 1970's illegal Counter Intelligence Programs to the currently legalized Office of Homeland Security, continues to lock down people for their beliefs, and is still seeking to identify those who have the potential to politically radicalize others. After each Homeland Security Code change, Prison Watch is flooded with calls from people reporting Islamic loved ones being removed from general population and placed in isolation. I also have no doubt that Islam itself is suspect to the US government, and that any Muslim, no matter how law abiding, is suspect. Because of my own experience in being surveilled due to my work with people in prison, I have no doubt that this gathering itself is being monitored.

Our work today needs to be embedded in struggle against this system and its continued use of isolation and torture as a tool of behavior modification and political repression. I would also ask the Alliance to consider some programmatic embracing of Islamic prisoners who are coming home and need Muslim community service providers.

Oppression is a condition common to all of us who are without the power to make the decisions that govern the political, economic and social life of this country. We are victims of an ideology of inhumanity on which this country was built. If we dig deeper into US practices, the political function that they serve is inescapable. Police, the courts, the prison system and the death penalty all serve as social control mechanisms. The economic function they serve is equally chilling. Just as in the era of chattel slavery, there is a class of people dependent on the poor, and on bodies of color as a source for income; and a government which uses incapacitation as a form of social control. How US prisons function violates the United Nations Convention Against Torture, and a host of other international treaties. Prison practices also fit the United Nations definition of genocide which includes: the killing of members of a racial or religious group; the causing of serious bodily harm to members of a particular group; deliberately inflicting on a group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction; imposing measures intended to prevent births within that group and; forcibly transferring children of that group to another group.

The AFSC recognizes the existence and continued expansion of the penal system as profound spiritual crises. It is a crisis that allows children to be demonized. It is a crisis which legitimizes torture, isolation and the abuse of power. It is a crisis which extends beyond prisons into school and judicial systems. I know each time we send a child to bed hungry that is violence. That wealth concentrated in the hands of a few at the expense of many is violence, that the denial of dignity based on race, class or religion is violence. And that poverty and prisons are a form of state-manifested violence.

I've been part of the struggle for civil and human rights in this country for over 45 years. We need to alter the very core of every system that slavery, white supremacy and poverty has given birth to, particularly the criminal justice system. The United States must stop violating the human rights of men, women and children. We need to decriminalize poverty and mental illness. We must eliminate solitary confinement, torture and the use of devices of torture. We need heed El-Hajj Malik Shabazz who, in his last speech, directed us to fight for human rights through the enhanced use of international law. Sensory deprivation, brutality and of devices or torture have nothing to do with safe and orderly operation of prisons and everything to do with the spread of a culture of retribution, dehumanization and sadism. The restriction of civil rights is something we can and should debate regularly as a society. The violation of human rights, and fundamental human decency, simply is not negotiable.

Thank you.