
Interview: Salim Khalfani

Parole abolition would return Virginia to the days of slavery

Salim Khalfani is the statewide coordinator of branch and field activities for the Virginia National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He was appointed in 1992 by former Gov. Douglas Wilder to the Legislative Assembly Commission on Sentencing and Parole Reform. At hearings of this commission on July 21, Khalfani blasted the so-called Proposal X of Gov. George Allen's Commission on Parole Abolition and Sentencing Reform, which seeks to abolish parole and impose tougher sentences on violent offenders. He confronted Richard Cullen, co-chair of Governor Allen's parole abolition commission, who testified in support of Proposal X. The Virginia legislature will debate parole abolition and sentencing reform at a special session which will convene on Sept. 19. This interview was conducted by Marianna Wertz on July 26.

EIR: Governor Allen has proposed adoption of what's called Proposal X, which would eliminate parole in Virginia. Can you tell us what you think about this proposal and why?

Khalfani: There aren't very many things that are set in concrete yet, but we are opposed to this question of abolition of parole because we think it's a vast misappropriation of people's resources and something that will not stop violent crime.

We support intervention, prevention, adequate housing, adequate health care, including good prenatal care and proper education, which would eliminate the need for building more prisons.

One of the reasons I made the comments I made [at the legislative commission hearing], was because the head of Governor Allen's commission, Richard Cullen, had the nerve to ask for our support in convincing Virginia citizens that it's in their best interests to build more prison beds. I think that's ludicrous. If we really want to be serious about dealing with crime, we look at the major reasons, and not just these little symptoms that are politically expedient for elected officials to spout off about.

I'm not in favor of this workcamp proposal. We see nothing more than chain gangs and slavery again. They're using white fear to drive this so-called steamroller, charging that there's such a revolving door in Virginia's prisons that violent felons are running amok and running out of prisons and are on their way into the white community.

But they're not telling where they're going to get this money from. It's ludicrous to think we'd throw many more billions of dollars into building more prison beds than we would in investing in the infrastructure that would prevent people from going to prison in the beginning.

EIR: I don't know if you attended any of the public sessions of the Commission to Abolish Parole, which were chaired by Governor Allen, Richard Cullen, and William Barr, who is the other co-chair. I attended one, and it was like a Nazi rally.

Khalfani: We did get one person on [to testify] in Portsmouth, but Richmond was stacked. They basically stacked the deck against any opposition and had almost a rah-rah session. I also expressed that to Cullen. Cullen said that there is so much political support around this state and these town hall meetings were so great. I told him I traveled the state and, in my meetings with people, they are not in favor of this once they've gotten proper information.

I think once again you have a populace which has not been well educated on what this really entails and what the real issues are. Once again we've got these elected officials who are misrepresenting truth.

EIR: Let me ask you about William Barr, Governor Allen's key adviser on this. While Barr was attorney general under George Bush, he outlined a plan to introduce the no-parole policy throughout the nation and said he planned to hold public meetings to rally people against what he called the "predators preying" on other people. He represents the worst of what George Bush did as President. Would you agree with that?

Khalfani: I don't have that kind of information. But as far as this no-parole issue, one of the key elements is that there is no opportunity in their proposal for post-sentencing assessment of an individual. If an individual goes into prison, and 15 years later or 5 years later, there's no opportunity to look at this person again, look at what they've done while they're in prison, they're saying that rehabilitation is not possible and that people can't learn from their mistakes. That's one of the most critical elements, that you're just doomed to go through this sentence, with no opportunity for anybody to review your activities, your educational background, and to see if there has been some rehabilitation. We know that there

are many people who use this as a learning experience and grow and develop as human beings from it. I think that's one of the greatest dangers of this concept of no-parole.

Look at North Carolina and Florida [where parole has been eliminated]. They still ended up making up a new post-sentencing body that had to review these things, because they need review.

They haven't learned from all of this evidence. Representatives of these states came and talked to our commission and told them the same thing.

EIR: I believe they reported that the no-parole policy made it impossible to keep people in prison, because of federal regulations preventing gross overcrowding.

Khalfani: Exactly. And they ended up having to let out some of the most violent offenders, because the so-called war on drugs is really putting most of the people in prison. You have people who've been in there for long periods of time who have to be released.

George Allen will be long gone by the time this stuff really hits the fan, but he'll get all this fanfare for being tough on crime. And really, the sad thing about this, in looking at the study, [is that] Virginia's system really was working effectively. Virginia had one of the lowest parole rates in the country. People aren't just getting out. People are getting turned down.

In my job here, I get all these letters, and the major complaint from inmates is the one thing they can't change about trying to get parole is the serious nature of the offense. People are getting turned down 8, 9, 10, 12 times. How much can somebody take?

EIR: Do you deal with death row prisoners?

Khalfani: Yes.

EIR: Can you comment on the federal crime bill as it pertains to death penalty cases and the Racial Justice Act, which would allow death-row inmates to appeal their convictions based on racially biased juries?

Khalfani: We're supporting the Racial Justice Act. George Allen and [Virginia Attorney General] James Gilmore went to D.C. to testify that if the Racial Justice Act is implemented, it will mean the end of the death penalty as we know it. Well, so be it! If we can't have that in there, there's no need for having an omnibus crime bill. We ardently support the Racial Justice Act, and in the recent NAACP National Convention, resolutions were passed to make sure that all of our branches around the country let folks know.

EIR: At the recent African-American leaders' summit, NAACP National President Ben Chavis invited Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan to participate. I don't know if you're familiar with the recent attack against Minister Farrakhan and Lyndon LaRouche by the Anti-Defamation League

as "extremists." Do you have any comment on that?

Khalfani: I'm very concerned about the Anti-Defamation League and what it's been involved in, and with certain forces in determining who the NAACP can speak to and who it can't speak to. Just this information that came out about their spying and giving information on organizations that were not to their liking: We're deeply concerned about that. We've taken a position that the ADL never dictate to our people, and shouldn't be able to dictate to anybody, whom they have the right to meet with, sit down at a table and talk to.

EIR: At the end of last year, a major study was released, introducing eugenics into the crime debate. It said that children who are murderers have a different genetic makeup because of the nature of their upbringing, which is exactly what the Nazis said. Are you familiar with this? Has the NAACP taken a position on this?

Khalfani: I can't say our board has taken a position on it, but it's completely bogus in my opinion. It's another attempt to categorize African people as being more prone to violence, and then linking it with genetics. I know they've talked about parts of the brain and possible lobotomies. People might be disorganized and confused, but they're not going to be confused enough to let that happen. We will be fighting any efforts on their part to link genetics and crime disposition together.

People can be socialized into certain behaviors, and that's what we see in American society, where there's more concern for profit and property than for human investment. We are reaping what we've sown. As long as this current system of exploitation is allowed to exist and run rampant, we're going to have these kinds of social ills. We aren't fooled by that rhetoric, and we won't be sitting idly by while this discussion takes place.

EIR: What should people in Virginia do about the no-parole plan?

Khalfani: We should let our legislators, who will be making this decision, know that we support some intervention. Most people who end up in prison had difficult births, had red flags going up most of their young lives. If intervention had been offered, we could have probably arrested some of this potential for criminal behavior. And we support preventive measures. If people had good health care, proper prenatal care, affordable and decent housing and living conditions, and proper education, then we'd see less and less criminal behavior and breaking of laws.

There are some successful intervention and prevention programs that will reduce the recidivism rate and have been proven to work. We want to see our money invested in things that we call human investment, and not in building more prisons, which will be necessary when you talk about ending parole and creating minimum mandatory sentences.