

NAACP Delegation Asks U. N. to Investigate “Rogue” Voting Laws

Written by Hazel Trice Edney
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NAACP President/CEO Benjamin Todd Jealous and an NAACP delegation are in Geneva this week. They are reporting to the United Nations Civil Rights Council on the “rogue and malicious manner” by which some states in the U. S. are establishing new voting rights laws that disparately affect racial minorities.

“This will be the first time in decades that we as an organization are before the Council with a specific complaint about actions that are being taken here in the U.S.,” Jealous said in a recorded telephone press conference last week. “The first time was in 1947 when WEB DuBois did a speech appealing to the world [through] the U.N. Now, like then, the principle concern is voting rights.”

It has been rapid fire for civil rights leaders over the past year as they have attempted to shoot down new voting rights bills. The bills are particularly calling for strict voter identifications; registration identifications and felony disenfranchisement, all of which rights leaders say disparately affect Black and Latino people. The new laws were also the focus of a protest march from Selma to Montgomery, Ala. led by the Revs. Al Sharpton, Jesse Jackson and U. S. Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.) last week.

“In the past year, more states in this country have passed more laws, pushing more voters out of the ballot box than at any point since the rise of Jim Crow,” Jealous said.

Both Jealous and Sharpton contend that at least five million voters could be blocked due to the restrictive new laws in states including South Carolina, Texas, Mississippi, and Wisconsin.

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Republicans, the primary proponent of the bills, say they are intended to prevent voter fraud. However, there is little documentation of voter fraud in U. S. elections. Jealous retorts that the new laws are clearly intended to affect the next Presidential election in which President Obama, the nation’s first Black President, will be up for re-election.

He said the NAACP delegation is going to request two actions of the U. N.:

- To investigate the multiple infringements upon voting rights by states within the U. S.
- To make sure the world community is informed about the impact of the new laws so they won’t be replicated throughout the globe and repeated by other nations under the pretense of doing good.

The ultimate hope is that the U. N. will send a committee to study the new laws, the racial impact and the impact on the democratic process.

“We believe it is important for them to weigh in on what is happening in our democracy because it is the gold standard for democracies throughout the world,” Jealous said.

He stressed that the delegation is not going to complain about “actions taken by the US federal government or any action taken by them,” but rather to “call attention to states that have acted in a rogue and malicious manner toward the rights of the minority population in the US.”

Included in the delegation are Jealous; Hilary Shelton, director of the NAACP Washington Bureau and senior vice president for advocacy and policy; Roslyn Brock, NAACP chair; and Ryan Haygood, director of the Political Participation Group of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund and co-author of a study, “Defending Democracy, Confronting Barriers to Voting in America.”

Native Virginian Kemba Smith, who was pardoned from a 24-year mandatory prison sentence by President Clinton in 2000, will also be a part of the delegation. She is one of the representatives who will discuss the impact of felony disenfranchisement laws. Jealous said such laws are derived from historic racist policies designed to prevent Black influence in electoral politics.

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The U.N. has no jurisdiction over state governments in the U.S. But, Jealous said he is hoping that the Council will use its power to pressure the federal government to pressure the states to do what is right. He said that power “is to shame them” by pressuring the U. S. to bring them in “line with principles of democracy.”

He added, “These states seek investment overseas and they actually care what other countries think about them.”

Haygood, also on the press call, said the new voting laws are in sync with a pattern of racial advancements and setbacks over centuries. He described it as “periods of expansion and then periods of restriction.” For example, the election of the first Black President, largely by the hands of Black voters, is now following by an onslaught of voting laws that could disenfranchise African-Americans and cause an opposite democratic affect.

The delegation aims to turn this affect around, Jealous says:

“It’s just not good for business to be seen as an active abuser of minority populations; especially when you’re doing it in the context of a democracy,” he said. “The battle here is to preserve and expand U. S. Democracy.”

by Helen Trice Edney{jcomments on}