

US House passes Democrat-crafted “homegrown terrorism prevention” legislation

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Global Research, December 02, 2007
www.wsws.org 2 December 2007

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

A month ago, the US House of Representatives overwhelmingly approved passage of legislation that would set up a commission targeting domestic “radicalization” as a threat to so-called homeland security. Although it has received little media attention, civil liberties groups have expressed concerns for the future of public protest and other forms of constitutionally protected speech.

The bill, H.R. 1955, “The Violent Radicalization Homegrown Terrorism Act of 2007,” was crafted and sponsored by Democrat Jane Harman of California and approved by the House by a margin of 404-6. A mere three Democrats and three Republicans voted against the bill.

Twenty-three congress members abstained, including House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and House Judiciary Committee Chairman John Conyers. The bill is currently pending approval in the Senate and is widely anticipated to pass by a similar proportion before the end of the session.

Introduced in April as an amendment to the 2002 Homeland Security Act, the legislation adds provisions for the establishment of a 10-member commission to collect data on radicalization. Evoking the memory of the anticommunist House Committee on Un-American Activities headed by Joseph McCarthy, the anti-radicalization commission would be granted authority to “hold hearings and sit and act at such times and places, take such testimony, receive such evidence, and administer such oaths as the Commission considers advisable to carry out its duties.”

As Equal Justice Alliance director Odette Wilkens pointed out, the commission would be empowered to subpoena and investigate anyone, and would “create a public perception that whoever is being investigated by the Commission must be involved in subversive or illegal activities.” Wilkens noted to Truthout.org reporter Matt Renner, in an article published November 29, “It would give the appearance that whoever they are investigating is potentially a traitor or disloyal or a terrorist, even if all they were doing was advocating lawful views.”

The commission would be composed of appointees, one chosen each respectively by Bush, Homeland Security secretary Michael Chertoff, the Senate and House majority and minority leaders, and by the ranking majority and minority members of the two congressional homeland security committees. Such a selection process would certainly result in an extremely right-wing panel.

The language of the bill is very broad and includes in its designations of terrorist activity a

category of intent. For example, “ideologically based violence” is defined as “the use, planned use, or threatened use of force or violence by a group or individual to promote the group or individual’s political, religious, or social beliefs.” No force or violence need have occurred; the government commission needs only charge, without the burden of evidence, that an individual or group thought about violence.

Similarly, the term “violent radicalization” is defined as “the process of adopting or promoting an extremist belief system for the purpose of facilitating ideologically based violence to advance political, religious, or social change.” The definition of “an extremist belief system” is not specified, leaving interpretation to the discretion of the commission.

“Homegrown terrorism” is defined by the bill as “the use, planned use, or threatened use, of force or violence by a group or individual born, raised, or based and operating primarily within the United States or any possession of the United States to intimidate or coerce the United States government, the civilian population of the United States, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives.”

The implications of this definition of terrorism are far-reaching. Participants in protests against US policy, for instance, could be designated as terrorists if the conduct—of intent—of any individual were alleged by police to be violent.

Under the legislation, after 18 months the anti-radicalization commission would report to Congress on its findings, then establish a university-based organization, the “Center of Excellence for the Study of Violent Radicalization and Homegrown Terrorism in the United States.”

The Center’s mission would not be limited to research, but also would include a mandate to “contribute to the establishment of training, written materials, information, analytical assistance and professional resources to aid in combating violent radicalism and homegrown terrorism” in coordination with federal, state and local homeland security officials. This could have a definite chilling effect on the political activity and exercise of free speech on campuses because of the virtual enlistment of students and academics into the campaigns of the government’s intelligence apparatus.

The legislation specifically singles out the Internet as a “weapon” for domestic radicalization. In remarks introducing the legislation November 6 to the Senate Committee on Homeland Security, Congresswoman Harman said, “There can be no doubt: the Internet is increasingly being used as a tool to reach and radicalize Americans and legal residents.” The web, Harman said, allowed Americans “to become indoctrinated by extremists and to learn how to kill their neighbors ... from the comfort of their own living rooms.”

In the same speech, Harman portrayed American youth in a thoroughly contemptuous manner. “Combine ... personal adolescent upheaval with the explosion of information technologies and communications tools,” she said, “tools which American kids are using to broadcast messages from Al Qaeda—and there is a road map to terror, a ‘retail outlet’ for anger and warped aspirations. Link that intent with a trained terrorist operative who has actual capability, and a ‘Made in the USA’ suicide bomber is born.”

Even more absurdly, she added, “How we address violent radicalization—while respecting the Constitution in the process—is not easy. There is no magic pill or rulebook or law that will fix this.”

It is already clear that not the slightest attempt will be made, by legislators or by the empanelled commission, to actually explain the social origins of unrest, let alone the political aggravators of extremism.

Both the bill's content and its landslide congressional support underscore the fact that the entire "war on terror" is geared toward quashing political opposition and dissent and dismantling constitutional protections, not fighting a supposed terrorist threat. While targeting the civil liberties of the population as a whole, it poses a particular threat to workers' and students' organizations as well as left-wing and socialist parties.

As with the bill's predecessors since 2001—including the Patriot Act, the Homeland Security Act, and the Military Commissions Act—the Democrats are working to actively undermine free speech and protections against government surveillance in their role as the nominal opposition in Congress.

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