

FRONTLINE

Going after the Dreamers

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PRESIDENT Donald Trump decided, despite promises made here and there, that he would renounce former President Barack Obama's policy towards children who had come to the United States without papers. These children, now close to a million, had entered the country with their parents. Obama's executive action, named Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), allowed these young people to apply for a work permit and claim some important benefits of United States residency. To take advantage of DACA, these young people had to come out of the shadows and register voluntarily with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. The U.S. government, in other words, was able to get information on almost a million people who did not have papers. This act of good faith, to register with the government, will now make it easier for the government to find, arrest and deport them.

These young people, the Dreamers, will be arrested merely for having registered with the government and will be sent to countries where they have never lived and whose languages—in many cases—they do not speak. Since their parents did not register, and still mostly live in the shadows, these Dreamers will be separated from their families and sent off on their own. Little wonder then that there is widespread anger at this action by Trump, not least because he had promised often not to take this action.

Data on the Dreamers are quite astonishing. Over 90 per cent of them have jobs and pay taxes (almost \$2 billion, according to one study earlier this year). The Dreamers that one encounters are often supremely grateful for Obama's policy since it allowed them to take advantage of state-subsidised college tuition even though later in life they have not been afforded social protections (such as food stamps and government medical insurance schemes). These young people, then, pay into the U.S. exchequer without being able to take advantage of whatever social security net remains for the U.S. population.

Trump and his Attorney General, Jeff Sessions, make the claim that DACA is illegal. It circumvents U.S. immigration law and gives immigrants without documentation the hope that they, too, can take advantage, at some later date, of such a scheme. To prevent producing an impression that the U.S. government encourages undocumented immigration, the Trump administration wishes to crack down on DACA. It will take at least six months for the government to unravel the DACA programme, but even then there are going to be important, and rarely discussed, practical problems before the administration. One study finds that it will take a minimum of \$12,500 to arrest and deport each of the Dreamers.

Since there are effectively a million Dreamers, the total bill for the repeal of DACA will be \$12.5 billion, more than twice the total annual budget of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency. How Trump's administration proposes to raise this kind of money to

conduct these deportations has not been made clear. A conservative Cato Institute study found that the total cost to the U.S. economy for the DACA repeal would be \$200 billion. It found that the average Dreamer is 22 years old, either employed or studying. Since leaving school might result in deportation, a very large number (17 per cent) of the Dreamers finish college and pursue advanced degrees. “It is important to note that these estimates are conservative,” wrote the authors of the report.

Negative impact

In fact, the negative impact on the U.S. economy might be much greater than the \$200 billion that they estimate. California will be the hardest hit. The departure of the Dreamers will cause a loss of nearly \$85 billion to the State.

Obama’s executive action was meant as a stop-gap measure. Obama had, at the time, asked the U.S. Congress to pass the DREAM Act, which was first introduced in Congress in 2001 and then each year afterwards. It proposes to deal with the significant problem of undocumented people who live in the U.S. The total number of undocumented or unauthorised immigrants in the country is just over 11 million. There has been a slow decline in the entry of undocumented migrants since the U.S. economy slowed down in the wake of the 2007-08 credit crisis.

Whereas previously the largest number of undocumented migrants came from Mexico, the numbers from Central America and Asia have now begun to outnumber them. A Pew Research Center study from 2016 found that Indians constitute the largest growing category of undocumented migrants to the U.S. at this time, though in numbers they are behind immigrants from Mexico, El Salvador and Guatemala). There are now half a million undocumented Indians in the U.S., an increase of 43 per cent since 2009.

Across the U.S., desperate protests are taking place against Trump’s actions. In New York City, hundreds of people gathered outside Trump Tower to make the case for the migrants, while small towns saw smaller vigils. The protesters are worried not only for the Dreamers but also for the future of their country. Bilingual signs, mostly in Spanish and English, proclaiming that the Dreamers must stay are raised as Dreamers bravely come to the microphones and tell their stories of desperate anxiety. Activist groups such as United We Dream and groups of lawyers and social workers have reached out to Dreamers, informing them of legal options and drawing up petitions to make sure the resistance against Trump’s repeal grows. The options are limited. Trump has the right to repeal DACA. Only popular pressure can stop him.

Despite the noises from the Democratic Party promising to resist Trump’s inhumane agenda, major Democratic legislative leaders cut a deal with him just a few days after he announced his DACA repeal. Senator Chuck Schumer and Representative Nancy Pelosi met Trump and cut a deal on the legislative agenda. Trump, Schumer and Nancy Pelosi all made unclear noises about passage of the DREAM Act in the future. Kamal Essaheb (National Immigration Law Center), Greisa Martinez (United We Dream) and Angel Padilla (Indivisible Project) urged these Democrats not to tell the Dreamers to “wait”. Time is of the essence. Firm commitment to genuine immigration policy is imperative, they suggest.

Five former U.S. Secretaries of Education, those who ran the Department of Education in the administrations of Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama, wrote an open letter to Congress urging passage of a comprehensive immigration law that would provide shelter not only to the Dreamers but also to their parents and others who had no documentation.

Protests on the streets have not adopted a narrow perspective, to ask for an extension of DACA or for the protection only of the Dreamers. The slogans are a variant of “Protection for All”, which means that there is momentum from the streets for reforms in U.S. immigration law to protect everyone without documentation. The phrase for this is “comprehensive immigration reform”, a term that has come to be emptied of any meaning. Over the past 30 years, politicians have promised to crack down on immigration and to ensure that those who are within the U.S. as undocumented immigrants will get some kind of protection. The legislative leaders seem to have worked out some kind of deal with Trump to protect some undocumented immigrants if he gets some motion on his campaign promise for a strengthened border. This is all merely illusionary. The 11 million undocumented migrants will see no comfort in these deals.

Meanwhile, the President’s former adviser, Steve Bannon, reflects the opinions of Trump’s base. “There’s no path to citizenship, no path to a green card, no amnesty. Amnesty is non-negotiable,” he told Charlie Rose. This is the firm attitude of Trump’s base. They want arrests and deportations, they want a wall, they want to see more and more punishments meted out to migrants. Their vehemence will drive Trump’s obstinacy. This is what makes the fate of the Dreamers so perilous.