Trump's support for immigration overhaul raises concern among Americans

August 3, 2017

U.S. President Donald Trump-backed overhaul of the country's legal immigration system is likely to face an uphill climb through Congress, while its possible impacts on economy and society have drawn concern among American people.

Trump said he would support the Reforming American Immigration for Strong Employment (RAISE) Act at a White House event on Wednesday, which is developed by Republican Senator Tom Cotton of Arkansas and David Perdue of Georgia.

Introducing what he called the most significant overhaul of immigration in half a century, Trump said the current system "has not been fair" to U.S. workers as it allows entries of low-skill immigrants hired at a lower salary.

Initially introduced in February, the Cotton-Perdue bill had proposed a 50-percent cut in annual immigration over the next 10 years, designed to allot green cards for about 540,000 immigrants in 2027, about only half the number issued in 2015.

The bill, which stalled in the Senate for months, was reintroduced with certain changes, including a call for elimination of a diversity visa granted for those who come from countries with a low U.S. immigration rate and a 50,000 annual cap on refugee admissions.

The proposed bill would cut back family-based immigration to stipulate that only spouses and minor children of U.S. citizens and permanent residents would be eligible for green cards.

Preferences for extended and adult family members would also be eliminated.

Furthermore, the act puts forward a merit-based system that grades possible immigrants for earning a green card, a major attempt to completely overhaul the family-based approach.

When evaluating applicants under the RAISE Act, factors that would be taken into account include English language skills, education, job offers, records of achievements, entrepreneurial initiative and age.

Shortly after the bill was unveiled, both Democrats and Republicans have adopted a skeptical attitude. Republican Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, though a supporter of merit-based immigration, expressed concerns that it would be devastating to the agriculture-and tourism-driven South Carolina, "which relies on this immigrant workforce."

Tom Perez, the chairman of the Democratic National Committee, called the bill not just an affront to the U.S. values, but also a threat to the U.S. economy in a statement Wednesday.

The National Immigration Forum, an advocacy group, estimated that there would be a work force gap of 7.5 million jobs in the country by 2020.

"The bottom line is to cut immigration by half a million people, legal immigration, doesn't make much sense," said Chuck Schumer, Senate Democratic leader.

Out of Capitol Hill, the bill's possible social and economic impacts have also drawn concern from pundits as well as ordinary American people.

"The United States is an immigration country. Contributions made by immigrations from all over the world has been widely recognized and highly praised in the country," Peter J. Li, associate professor of East Asian politics and international relations at the University of Houston, told Xinhua Thursday.

Li believed that the new proposal will do harm to the American economy as decreasing number of immigrants will deal a heavy blow to labor intensive industries such as service and agriculture.

"Trump's proposal to reduce the number of immigrants, once passed, will create a social and political atmosphere that demeans the immigrants, leading foreign high-tech talents to other countries and regions where technology and new industries are booming," he said.

In addition, the proposal will make the anti-immigrant sentiment of American society further ferment, said Li. Such sentiment has already brought a variety of allegations against immigrants, such as burdening the U.S. taxpayers and increasing public security risks.

Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst at Washington-based Liberian think tank Cato Institute, argued that the Cotton-Perdue bill won't help boost skilled immigration.

The immigration effort "will only increase the proportion of employment-based green cards by cutting other green cards," Nowrasteh wrote in a blog. "Saying otherwise is grossly deceptive marketing."

Other analysts said the Cotton-Perdue bill is unlikely to get passed any time soon, as Congress is facing a number of proposals, including tax reform, a budget and lifting the debt ceiling.

"The new bill to cut back on legal immigration is almost impossible to be passed, because it is not consistent with the social and economic conditions of U.S.," Wang Zhidong, who has been a U.S. lawyer for more than 20 years, told Xinhua on Thursday.

"Unlike Canada and Australia, U.S. is born to be a country of immigrants, and if the new bill is passed, it will be a disaster for American people," Wang added.

Wang said, as a U.S immigrant for more than 30 years, he witnessed many bills or acts on immigration proposed but few passed. "The new bill is so extreme and there is nearly no room for the two parties to make compromise."