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## Tales of racial profiling heard at local forum

by Carlito Pablo on March 14th, 2007 at 3:49 PM



Mokia Gichuru attended a recent Vancouver forum on racial profiling and shared his experiences as a nonwhite man travelling overseas.

Vancouver lawyer Zool Suleman is gathering anecdotal evidence of racial profiling in Canada. During a short taxi ride to a forum about this subject on March 7, he picked up another story.

The cab driver, a Canadian citizen of South Asian descent, complained that he has been subjected by Canadian airport authorities to either further identity verification or questioning a number of times. He doesn't experience the same in other countries during his travels, the driver told Suleman. He also noted that it's usually him and "other brown guys" who get this treatment.

"Now imagine yourself as a male Muslim and you came from countries like Yemen, Pakistan, or Iran," Suleman told the Georgia Straight. "Chances are you'll get singled out. In the post-9/11 world in Canada, there's been a real security agenda that is wrongly profiling people."

An immigration expert and human-rights activist, Suleman said the problem with confronting this issue is that the government denies it exists. "If they're profiling, they should admit it," he said. "At present, there is no transparent mechanism to handle complaints."

This doesn't mean that the practice of profiling has no open endorsers.

Suleman cited a September 20, 2001, editorial by the National Post entitled "Profiles In Prudence", which responded to complaints from Arab-Canadians that they were being profiled by Air Canada employees. He quoted the editorial: "The 19 suicide terrorists who killed more than 5,000 people on September 11 were all—or mostly all—Arabs. There are credible reports that more hijackings are planned by the same terrorist cells. Given this, it would be criminally negligent if Air Canada did not engage in racial profiling."

Among those in the audience at the Vancouver forum was Mokia Gichuru. At first glance, the son of a Kenyan father and a Caucasian mother from Montreal could be mistaken for either an Arab or a Middle Eastern man. While travelling across Europe a few years ago, he found himself being the only nonwhite person in a train carriage. Two German policemen walked up to him to demand identification. They walked away upon seeing his Canadian passport.

"I felt targeted," Gichuru told the Straight. While he has not experienced the same treatment in Canada, the University of Victoria-educated lawyer said he is concerned that 9/11 has justified putting certain groups of people under increased scrutiny. A Christian, Gichuru said: "I sympathize with Muslim-Canadians."

Faith St. John is a spokesperson of the Pacific regional office of the Canada Border

Services Agency, the frontline organization dealing with the flow of people and goods to and from the country. "We have a very specific policy," St. John told the Straight. "We do not base our examination on ethnicity."

In 2005, the CBSA announced that it had launched a "fairness initiative" to ensure that Canadians and visitors to the country are treated with respect. However, Chris Williams, a spokesperson at the CBSA main office in Ottawa, told the Straight that the agency is still in the process of gathering feedback for such an initiative. "A national complaints mechanism isn't specifically part of the initiative," he said. "We're using that feedback through the initiative to help create the national complaints mechanism."

Proposed legislation filed in the last parliament by NDP MP Libby Davies (Vancouver East) defined racial profiling as "any action undertaken for reason of safety, security or public protection that relies on stereotypes about race, colour, ethnicity, ancestry, religion or place of origin, or a combination of these rather than on reasonable suspicion, to single out an individual for greater scrutiny or different treatment".

Suleman shared the stage at the March 7 forum with Jason Gratl, president of the B.C. Civil Liberties Association. The forum was billed as Racial Profiling Post 9-11: Seeking Security, Fragmenting Canadian Society?

In his talk, Gratl described the matter of racial profiling as a "known unknown" because "there's the denial from the highest level of institutions" that it is practised. He said: "Nobody wants to be accused of racism in this country."

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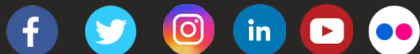
### Carlito Pablo

[@carlitopablo](#)

Staff writer Carlito Pablo lives in Vancouver. On sunny weekends, he and his family are usually found on beaches and in parks. A journalist who formerly worked in Manila, he's a proud new Canadian.

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