

Norwegian government targets immigrants and asylum seekers

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In a court ruling on November 8, Norway's previous coalition government made up of the Labour Party, Socialist Left (SV) and Centre Party was found to have broken the law in its deportation of a family of six in June this year.

The case concerned the Ibrahim family, who had lived in Norway for a decade. The parents are Palestinian refugees and some of their children were born in Norway. Their eldest daughter, Neda, was twelve years old when they were deported and had lived in Norway since she was two, attending school for six years. But their applications for asylum had been repeatedly refused, with authorities questioning the parents' background and claiming they were Jordanian nationals.

On June 9, the police launched a raid on the family home in the early hours of the morning and forced them to leave. The family were bundled on the next flight to Amman with only those belongings they could carry.

Although the court found this brutal treatment to be unlawful, it was on the basis of a technicality with the deportation documents rather than the procedure itself. The judge in the case was quick to point out that the ruling should in no way be interpreted as placing limits on the deportation of asylum seekers. "The court's conclusion does not grant the plaintiffs legal residence in Norway. Norwegian authorities have a legitimate need to be able to deport foreigners who don't have legal residence in Norway and who don't leave voluntarily," the judge wrote in the decision.

Government officials responded by declaring that the deportation order would simply be re-drafted to take account of the judgement. On no account would the Ibrahim family return to the country, it was made clear, unless the immigration authority changed its position on their request for asylum.

The plight of the Ibrahims has provoked anger in Norway. A public support group for the family has been set up to campaign on their behalf. Neda won broad sympathy when she told an interviewer on a documentary on the lives of asylum seekers on national broadcaster NRK, "I like being in Norway but Norway doesn't like me."

In testimony to the court via telephone, Said Ibrahim, the family father, explained that they were living near the Syrian border and the children were frightened by the sound of exploding bombs and were unwilling to go to school. Neda told the court that she had difficulty with the language, having grown up speaking mostly Norwegian. The family had made their home in Norway, she said: "There we had friends, a house, our own rooms and a bed. Here in Jordan it is difficult. We all sleep in the same room."

The fate of the Ibrahims is by no means unique. Recent estimates suggest that Norwegian authorities carry out the deportation of six families per week. This is part of a brutal immigration system which has become one of the strictest in Europe and has been embraced by the entire political establishment, from the supposedly left SV to the far-right Progress Party.

Despite public hand-wringing by government officials at the time of the raid, there were no moves to reverse the actions of the immigration authorities. SV leader Audun Lysbakken declared cynically only days after the deportation that SV was committed to granting residence rights to all child asylum seekers who had been in the country for three years. Lysbakken was minister for family affairs in the Labour-led government and would have been involved in the discussions on the deportation programme.

In a move which provoked widespread criticism, former foreign minister Espen Barth Eide of the Labour

Party travelled to Jordan shortly after the family's deportation to take part in an event organised by the United Nations on refugees from Syria. Eide claimed that it was necessary to provide more support for these refugees, standing in front of a banner which declared, "One family torn apart by war is too many."

The reality is that the Labour Party government of Jens Stoltenberg used its eight-year term in office to stoke up anti-immigrant prejudices and strengthen the regulations for asylum seekers. They adopted many initiatives which had been promoted by the Progress Party, including a sharp rise in the deportation of immigrants.

The inhumane treatment of asylum seekers and immigrants is becoming the norm across Europe. This is bound up with the sharp shift of official politics to the right and has provoked opposition among workers and young people, as shown by the recent protests in France against the deportation of a Roma schoolgirl and her family.

The deportation of the Ibrahim family was not the first time that such action received widespread attention in Norway. In 2011, Stoltenberg's administration pressed for the expulsion of Russian asylum seeker Maria Amelie, who had lived in Norway for many years, completed a Masters Degree and even written a book. This was fully accepted by SV, who dropped any opposition to Amelie's deportation when it became clear that Labour was determined to see it through.

The systematic promotion of such reactionary policies has facilitated the coming to power of the most right-wing government in Norwegian history.

The Conservative-Progress coalition, which took office last month, plans to create closed centres for asylum seekers where they will be held during their asylum application. The government is also pressing for a more streamlined deportation process and stricter regulations for allowing people to enter the country, including for family members.

Anders Anundsen, the minister responsible for immigrant affairs, is from Progress, a party with a long record of encouraging the most backward and chauvinist sentiments towards refugees and immigrants. Mass murderer Anders Behring Breivik was a member of the organisation from 1997 to 2007, a fact which the entire political establishment has sought to downplay since his terrorist attacks.

Anundsen seized on the latest tragedy involving an asylum seeker to call for more reforms.

On November 5, a Sudanese man due to be deported hijacked a bus in southern Norway and killed three people. Margaret Molland Sanden, aged 19, Brahim Khouya, aged 53, and Arve Kvernhaug, aged 55, all died of stab wounds. The man is being investigated for possible psychiatric problems and was described by witnesses as "desperate." His deportation had been scheduled for the following day, after his asylum request was rejected seven months earlier.

It appears the man was a victim of the Dublin II accord, struck between European countries to regulate asylum procedures, including the provision that an asylum application is valid only in the country where an individual enters Europe first. According to reports, the sole basis upon which his asylum application was turned down was that he had made a previous request in Spain. Although Norway is not a member state of the European Union, it nonetheless adheres to the regulation.

Anundsen stated that there were 5,000 people who were in Norway illegally and awaiting deportation. He called for more resources to police, a message that was backed by Conservative Prime Minister Erna Solberg. Anundsen is also considering tighter health checks for refugees.



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