

President Obama postures as prison reformer

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20 July 2015

US President Barack Obama visited Federal Correctional Institution El Reno, a medium-security prison in Oklahoma on Thursday, as part of a series of public events aimed at presenting Obama as an opponent of mass incarceration.

The tour of El Reno was the first time a sitting president had ever visited a federal penitentiary. Obama visited an emptied cell block, where he spoke with six nonviolent drug offenders for a VICE documentary to be shown on HBO this fall.

The visit to El Reno came after Obama commuted the sentences of 46 nonviolent drug offenders on Monday and gave a speech on the American criminal justice system at the NAACP's 106th national convention in Philadelphia on Tuesday.

In both his speeches, Obama called for reducing incarceration rates in the US and specifically overcrowding in prisons. He argued that this should be accomplished by reforming laws pertaining to nonviolent drug offenses.

The Associated Press described Obama's visit as follows: "After his meeting with inmates, Obama walked past rows of empty cells secured by large grey doors. Prison officials opened cell no. 123 for the president, who gazed at its sparse trappings: a bunk bed and third bed along the wall, a toilet and sink, along with a small bookcase and three lockers."

Obama claimed to be shocked at the conditions: "Three full-grown men in a 9-by-10 cell," he mused.

As with every social issue, Obama acts as though the disastrous conditions facing millions of people locked up in US prisons has nothing to do with his own actions.

For nearly seven years, Obama has presided over the largest apparatus of mass incarceration in human history. In 2013, the US incarceration rate was 716 per 100,000, by far the highest in the world. Despite Obama appearing to have just noticed this fact in the

waning years of his presidency, the American gulag system has actually expanded under his watch.

Today, roughly a quarter of all prisoners worldwide are held in American prisons, despite the fact that the US represents just 5 percent of the world's population. By 2013, the federal prison population had swelled by 15,930 people over the course of Obama's presidency to 205,700 people. He has granted clemency to just 89 prisoners during his time in office, 46 of whom were freed last week.

The wretched conditions facing prisoners in the US go far beyond the talking points raised by Obama. Mentally ill prisoners suffer constant abuse and often torture in American prisons.

In federal prisons, 61 percent of women and 55 percent of men suffer from at least one mental health problem, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS). These rates are even higher in state and local prisons, so that an estimated one in five prisoners in the US has a serious mental illness, such as schizophrenia or major depression.

Obama made passing references to solitary confinement, with empty advice for Attorney General Loretta Lynch to consider reforms for this brutal method of imprisonment. Under Obama's watch, over 80,000 people have continued to languish in solitary confinement across the country. These prisoners are forced to live in a tiny cell for 22 hours a day, with almost no direct human contact, sometimes for decades at a time.

Over the course of his presidency Obama has continually supported the death penalty, a practice banned by most industrialized countries. Even following the gruesome botched execution of Clayton Lockett last year, Obama reiterated his support for capital punishment, declaring: "There are certain circumstances in which a crime is so terrible that the application of the death penalty may be appropriate."

Despite his supposed sudden concern for nonviolent drug offenders, Obama maintained a hard line stance toward those convicted of violent crimes, declaring, “There are people who need to be in prison, and I don’t have tolerance for violent criminals. Many of them may have made mistakes, but we need to keep our communities safe.”

These words come from a man who, on a weekly basis, approves the murder of innocent civilians in countries around the world via drone strikes and other forms of military intervention.

During Tuesday’s speech, Obama bemoaned the fact that the Justice Department spends roughly a third of its total budget on incarceration, saying, “Every dollar they have to spend keeping nonviolent drug offenders in prison is a dollar they can’t spend going after drug kingpins, or tracking down terrorists, or hiring more police and giving them the resources that would allow them to do a more effective job community policing.”

In other words, Obama’s entire supposed argument against mass incarceration is from the standpoint of increasing the efficiency of the repressive apparatus of the state.

In the context of the Administration’s record, these statements have ominous implications. Local protests against police violence over the past year, from Ferguson, to New York, to Baltimore and across the US, were brutally suppressed and accompanied by mass arrests.

During the protests against the police murder of Freddie Gray in Baltimore, local and federal police detained roughly 250 people on April 27 alone, as part of a sweeping assault on democratic rights that also involved the imposition of a curfew and a media blackout. Those arrested faced deplorable conditions and strained the resources of the prisons at which they were held, with individual holding cells often stuffed with 10 or more protesters.

All of this has been done with the full complicity and support of the Obama Administration, which, since taking office, has presided over a continuous and sweeping series of attacks on democratic rights.



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