

Trump pardons former Arizona Sheriff: A green light for anti-immigrant violence and repression

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Late Friday night, the White House released a statement by President Trump announcing a presidential pardon for Joe Arpaio, the former sheriff of Arizona's Maricopa County, which includes Phoenix, the state capital and fifth most populous city in the US. Voted out of office last November, Arpaio built his reputation on police brutality and racism, particularly directed against immigrants.

He was facing a jail term on criminal contempt charges for defying a federal judge's 2011 order to stop racially profiling Latinos, detaining them on mere suspicion of being undocumented and turning them over to federal immigration agencies. Arpaio was an early supporter of Trump's presidential campaign and shared his racist and xenophobic views on immigration and "law and order."

Trump chose to announce the pardon on a Friday evening when public attention and media coverage were focused on the impact of Hurricane Harvey on Texas. He foreshadowed the decision in a right-wing speech last Tuesday at a rally in Phoenix, less than a week after his public defense of the neo-Nazi rampage in Charlottesville, Virginia, which left one antifascist protester dead.

Press reports based on White House sources reveal that Trump had sought to block the trial and conviction of Arpaio in the spring, when the former sheriff was facing contempt charges in federal district court. He discussed the case with White House counsel Donald F. McGahn and Attorney General Jeff Sessions, but was advised against attempting to shut down the case by executive order.

On July 31, Arpaio was convicted of misdemeanor contempt of court by the federal judge, with sentencing set for October. He faced up to six months in jail, but Trump had already decided on a pardon and waited barely three weeks before intervening. The White House ignored the usual pardon procedure, which requires a detailed study by the Justice Department unit that handles pardon petitions, the passage of five years from conviction and sentencing, and a statement of remorse.

The final trigger came with a two-page letter to McGahn from Arpaio's lawyer, sent Friday morning, pleading for presidential action before the sentencing to forestall the possibility that the former sheriff would be "sentenced, handcuffed, given a 'perp walk' and incarcerated." In other words, Arpaio had to be spared the treatment he had dealt out to thousands of innocent people, although with much greater brutality. Only hours later, the White House announced the full pardon.

At the rally in Phoenix, Trump declared that Sheriff Arpaio faced a prison term for "just doing his job," suggesting that a similar "get-out-of-jail-free" card will be awarded in the unlikely event that a police officer is convicted in any of the hundreds of cases of police murder that occur every year in the United States.

There were the usual protests from congressional Democrats, and even a few from Republicans such as Senator John McCain of Arizona and House Speaker Paul Ryan. But none of those objecting to the action—mainly on procedural grounds—pointed to its clear political significance, coming on the heels of Trump's positive comments about the Charlottesville neo-Nazis and white supremacists.

The criticism by the Democrats is particularly hypocritical since they universally supported the anti-immigrant actions of the Obama administration, which set a record by deporting 2.7 million people and authorized the construction of privately run prisons-for-profit to detain refugees fleeing violence and repression in Central America.

What the Democrats and Republicans really object to is the fact that Trump's open embrace of racists and bigots shatters the US government's claims to be defending "freedom and democracy" at home and abroad.

Arpaio's misdemeanor conviction originated from a judge's 2011 court order barring him from racially profiling Latinos during patrols and turning them over to immigration officials. He defied the order and kept jailing immigrants

until he was voted out of office in November of 2016.

As sheriff of Maricopa County, Arpaio established a tent city in 1993 to jail inmates in the triple-digit Arizona heat. In his own words, he described the tent city as a concentration camp. Despite condemnation from Amnesty International, the prison camp survived Arpaio's entire tenure and was only shut down by newly elected Sheriff Paul Penzone in April of this year.

Arpaio was also infamous for reintroducing chain gangs, a barbaric practice that was discontinued in the United States as far back as the 1950s and viewed as a relic of chattel slavery. Arpaio reintroduced the practice in 1995, imposing forced labor on men, women, and even children incarcerated in juvenile detention centers.

The former sheriff was also infamous for forcing inmates to wear pink underwear and refusing to investigate sex crimes, particularly when the victims were children of undocumented immigrants.

Arpaio took special delight in humiliating his prisoners, overwhelmingly poor and working-class Arizonans locked up for trivial drug offenses or crimes against private property. The sheriff's department website published images from the jail that housed pretrial detainees and featured a "mugshot of the day."

Critics of Arpaio were themselves harassed by the police. When Phoenix Mayor Phil Gordon called for a federal investigation into Arpaio's enforcement tactics, the sheriff demanded access to the mayor's emails and phone logs. He arrested reporters for the *New York Times* under false pretenses in 2007, for which he was ultimately ordered to pay \$3.75 million in legal fees.

Family members of inmates who died in Arpaio's custody filed lawsuits against him, resulting in a total of \$42 million in settlement claims during his tenure. From 2004 to 2008 alone, 64 inmates died in his custody, mostly from illnesses that would have been treatable in normal medical settings. Several inmates were found beaten to death by his guards.

After a three-year investigation by the Justice Department, a report was released stating that the Maricopa County sheriff's office had "a pervasive discriminatory bias against Latinos" that reached "the highest levels of the agency." The Justice Department declared that Arpaio was responsible for "unconstitutional policing" and the worst pattern of racial profiling in US history.

Trump's pardon of Arpaio is a warning to the working class and a signal that the state is preparing police-state forms of rule. The use of concentration camps, the inhumane treatment of prisoners and the open appeal to racism are seen as pluses and not minuses by the Trump administration and powerful sections of the ruling class for which it speaks.

The pardon also comes as Trump is preparing further

measures to attack the democratic rights of immigrants in addition to his notorious border wall. Last week, Trump threatened to trigger a shutdown of the federal government if Congress failed to authorize money to build the wall in budget legislation that must be passed before the end of the current fiscal year on September 30.

Numerous press reports suggest that Trump is planning to freeze future admissions to the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program or scrap the program altogether. Under DACA, nearly 800,000 undocumented immigrants brought to the United States as children are allowed to work or continue their education without fear of deportation.

Under the program, implemented by executive order during the Obama administration, enrollees are required to reveal their undocumented status to the government, setting them up, with a change in administration or government policy, for possible rounding up and deportation. The program exemplifies the two-faced character of the immigration "reforms" enacted by Obama and the Democrats, which completely accept and institutionalize the reactionary premise that undocumented workers are criminals.

With Trump's election, the potential within the program for mass detention and deportation is poised to become reality.

Attorney General Sessions discussed plans for DACA at the White House last Thursday. Ten state attorneys general have threatened to file a federal lawsuit against the program unless it is halted by September 5. The most likely outcome is a suspension of the program, which would block new enrollment and prevent those currently enrolled from reenrolling when their two-year exemption from deportation expires.

Whatever the precise form of the administration's attack, the eventual result will likely be the rounding up of young men and women, who in most cases have no memory of any country other than the United States, and their deportation to countries whose language they frequently cannot speak.



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