

Trump administration moves to force green card applicants out of the US

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The Trump administration has announced a sweeping new attack on immigrants legally living in the United States, directing many green card applicants to leave the country and apply through US consular offices abroad, a process that could separate families, destroy livelihoods and effectively deport large numbers of people who have already built their lives in the US.

The May 21 policy memorandum from US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) declares that adjustment of status, the process by which eligible immigrants already in the US obtain lawful permanent residence without leaving the country, is not a right but an “extraordinary” form of discretionary relief granted as a matter of “administrative grace.” USCIS announced the policy May 22, stating that the government would grant adjustment of status only in “extraordinary circumstances.”

For decades, adjustment of status has allowed workers, students, refugees, asylum seekers and spouses of US citizens to receive green cards while remaining in the country. The new policy threatens to force applicants to return to countries they may not have lived in for years, or where they may face poverty, repression, war or political persecution, in order to attend interviews at US consulates.

The consequences could be catastrophic. Applicants who depart the US after overstaying a visa can trigger either a three-year or a 10-year ban on reentry. Others may be unable to obtain an appointment at all because US consular services are suspended, limited or overwhelmed in their country. In some cases, immigrants could be forced to leave spouses, children, jobs and schools in the US for months or years, with no guarantee of return.

The policy also intersects with the administration’s expanding travel bans and visa restrictions. As of January 1, 2026, the US was fully or partially suspending entry and visa issuance for nationals of 39 countries, while the State Department separately paused immigrant visa issuance for nationals of 75 countries designated as at “high risk” of public benefits reliance. The State Department list includes Afghanistan, Iran, Russia, Haiti, Somalia, Sudan, Syria,

Yemen, Nigeria, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Cuba, Lebanon, Liberia and dozens of other countries across Africa, Asia, the Middle East, the Caribbean and Latin America.

Doug Rand, a former senior USCIS official under the Biden administration, told CBS News that the changes could affect hundreds of thousands of cases, since roughly half a million people get green cards each year through adjustment of status. He warned that immigrant spouses of US citizens who are in the country on student and other temporary visas would likely be among those most affected. “The primary impact of this appears to be to make it difficult or impossible for very large numbers of US citizens to get on with their lives with the people they’ve chosen to marry who came here legally,” Rand said. He added that many could be stranded abroad, citing Iran, Russia and “114 different countries” where, if applicants return to seek permanent residency, “the Trump administration will not let you in.”

The administration’s claim that immigrants must return to their “home countries” is therefore a trap. For many, the country they are being told to return to is one from which they fled, where the US provides limited or no visa services, or whose nationals are now barred or restricted from entering the United States.

Currently, roughly half a million immigrants a year receive lawful permanent residence through adjustment of status from within the United States. The US issued 1.36 million green cards in fiscal year 2024, according to USAFacts, while DHS data from 2023 show that adjustment of status accounted for a major share of permanent immigration, including the overwhelming majority of employment-based green cards.

The attack is aimed not only at immigrants but at their families, including US citizen spouses and children. Spouses of US citizens could be ordered to leave the country for consular processing and then be trapped abroad by delays, travel bans, visa freezes or reentry bars. Workers who entered legally and followed the rules could be forced to abandon their jobs. Students could be driven out of universities. Refugees, trafficking survivors and abused

children could be compelled to return to countries where they face danger.

This is not a policy directed at “public safety.” It is a direct assault on the right of workers to live, work, study and form families across borders. The administration is seeking to transform every immigration benefit into a revocable privilege, granted or withheld at the discretion of the executive branch.

The new policy follows two major court developments exposing the vindictive and lawless character of the Trump administration’s immigration crackdown: The dismissal of the criminal case against Kilmar Abrego Garcia and the latest ruling paving the way for the deportation of Mahmoud Khalil.

On Friday, US District Judge Waverly Crenshaw Jr. dismissed the Trump Justice Department’s human smuggling case against Abrego Garcia, ruling that the prosecution was vindictive. Abrego Garcia, a longtime Maryland resident, union worker and father, was illegally deported to El Salvador last year and imprisoned in the CECOT mega-prison despite a prior court order barring his removal there. After the Supreme Court ordered the administration to facilitate his return, the government revived a previously closed investigation and brought criminal charges against him.

Crenshaw opened his ruling by quoting then-Attorney General Robert H. Jackson’s 1940 warning about “the most dangerous power of the prosecutor,” the power to pick the person first and then search for a crime. “That is the situation here,” Crenshaw wrote.

The ruling found that the government had reopened the criminal investigation because the courts required the executive branch to return Abrego Garcia from El Salvador. One version of the order quotes Crenshaw’s finding that Todd Blanche’s public statements “directly confirm” that the executive branch reopened the criminal investigation because the judicial branch required it to facilitate Abrego’s return.

The Justice Department denounced the ruling and vowed to appeal. Justice Department spokeswoman Natalie Baldassarre condemned the ruling stating, “Another activist judge has placed politics above public safety,” adding that it was “wrong and dangerous.”

The same pattern is evident in the case of Mahmoud Khalil, a lawful permanent resident, Columbia University graduate and pro-Palestinian activist married to a US citizen. Khalil was kidnapped by immigration Gestapo in New York last year and detained for months in Louisiana, missing the birth of his first child. His deportation has been pursued under a rarely used provision invoked by Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who asserted that Khalil’s presence in the US

threatened foreign policy interests because of his role in protests against the Gaza genocide.

On Friday, the Third Circuit Court of Appeals denied Khalil’s request for rehearing in a split 6-5 decision, clearing the way for his legal team to seek Supreme Court review. The ACLU and the Center for Constitutional Rights said they will seek an immediate stay to protect Khalil from detention as the appeal proceeds.

Khalil’s case is a frontal attack on free speech. He is being targeted not for any crime, but because he helped mediate anti-genocide protests at Columbia University. He worked with Jewish students and others during the campus protests. The government’s effort to deport him is part of a broader campaign to criminalize opposition to US-backed Israeli crimes and to equate anti-Zionist and antiwar views with support for terrorism.

The contrast could not be clearer. Trump has pardoned January 6 fascists and militia members, while his administration prepares taxpayer-funded payouts to those who attempted to overturn an election and install Trump as the American Fuhrer. But immigrants, workers and students, some of whom have done nothing but exercise their First Amendment rights are kidnapped, deported, prosecuted or threatened with permanent exile.

The democratic rights of immigrants are inseparable from the democratic rights of the working class as a whole. A government that can force a worker’s spouse to leave the country, deport a student for opposing genocide, or prosecute a man for successfully challenging his illegal removal will use the same methods against every section of the working class that comes into struggle.

These policies must be opposed by workers everywhere. The right to live, labor, study and love across borders is a basic democratic and social right. Its defense requires the independent mobilization of the working class against the capitalist nation-state system, which divides workers by citizenship, nationality and immigration status while granting capital unrestricted freedom to exploit labor across the globe.



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