

## **Abdelrazik case violates principle of equal citizenship**

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Abousfian Abdelrazik is the Canadian citizen who is being denied the right to return to his home in Montreal from Sudan by the federal government's incomprehensible refusal to issue him an emergency travel document. His predicament raises a profound question that is of importance to every Canadian.

What does citizenship mean in Canada?

When Canadian citizenship was created in 1947, it was presented as a whole in itself, with no hierarchies in which one type of Canadian ranks above another.

In fact, the introduction to the Citizenship Act explicitly states that all citizens are equal before the law and provides "that a naturalized citizen is entitled to all the rights, powers and privileges, and is subject to all the obligations, duties and liabilities, of a citizen who was born in Canada ... that a ... citizen by naturalization has the same status as a Canadian citizen by birth ... (has) the right to enter, remain in and leave Canada ... and the right to apply for a Canadian passport."

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which specifically notes the right of every citizen to enter Canada, forbids discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour or religion, and guarantees everyone the right to life, liberty and security of the person.

Thus the government's refusal to allow Abdelrazik to come home is not only unjust and unjustifiable, it is downright illegal.

And while the government seeks to legitimize its refusal by referring to the UN list of suspected terrorists, the document concedes that a person on the list cannot be deprived of the right to go home. In this, it bows to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, both of which uphold the right to return.

This is not the first time that actions have been taken by the Canadian government to deny specific citizens or groups of citizens their rights and, on similar principles, to exclude other groups entirely. The case of the Japanese Canadians rounded up during World War II, expelled from their homes and interned is of particular significance to me – my family's citizenship rights were trampled into the dust.

Federal Liberal cabinet minister Ian McKenzie famously declared at the time: "It is the government's plan to get these people out of B.C. as fast as possible. It is my personal intention, as long as I remain in public life, to see they never come back here. Let our slogan be for British Columbia: 'No Japs from the Rockies to the seas.'"

That is certainly the most familiar case to me, but similar actions were taken against Ukrainian Canadians during World War I, Italian Canadians during World War II and the discrimination practised against Chinese, Indians and other Asians to prevent them from entering Canada in the first place has been well documented.

Volumes could be written about how citizenship itself has been used to dispossess and assimilate indigenous peoples. The bitterness, hurt and outrage felt by those who suffered these histories cannot be compressed into a few lines.

In 1967, regulations were introduced that seemed to open Canada up on an equal basis to immigrants from anywhere in the world.

As our historians tell it, the changes in 1967 marked the end of immigration selection based on culture and nationality (explicitly "racial" selection had been earlier removed) and promoted the vision of non-discrimination and universality of treatment from selection through to citizenship. The government's actions in Abdelrazik's case may have provoked such strong public outrage because they so blatantly give the lie to the hope and pride of 1967.

In fact, in Abdelrazik's case, the government has acted like a deer caught in the headlights of a car, unable – because of its built-in prejudices? – to move with credibility in any direction.

First, it promised him a travel document if he could find an airline to fly him home. When he did that, it refused to issue the document. Then, the government said he needed a fully paid-up ticket, a difficulty for a man it recognized to be destitute.

When supporters from across Canada bought him a ticket and delivered it to him, with a booked seat on April 3, the government again reneged on its promise, citing that bugbear "national security" – the very term used to displace and intern my family and me.

Surely it is time for someone in the government to take charge and do the only decent thing: allow this man, who has never been charged with anything and who has, on the contrary, been the victim of the most brutal treatment, to return to this country where his children and future await him.

It's time to turn the page on Ian McKenzie.

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