The leadership of Ilhan Omar- Representing voices of refugees

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Introduction

A week after his presidency began in 2017, Donald Trump passed an Executive Order travel ban which became more widely known as the *Muslim Ban[1].* The Travel Ban is an executive order that prohibits seven Muslim-majority countries from entering into the United States. The Executive order was a policy delivered on the back of Trump's Campaign trail rhetoric, being based on religious biasness, and racial and discriminatory migration policies that targeted refugees and immigrants. Three of the Muslim states listed in the ban are in Africa: Somalia, Libya and Sudan. The ban had immense impacts on Muslim communities by separating families and refugees depicted as a security threat.[2] As a result of this policy and accompanied negative political rhetoric, refugees have been left feeling marginalised and discriminated against.

In the midst of the rulings a leader emerged. Ilhan Omar was the first ever Muslim refugee woman elected to Congress. She became a prominent voice of the Muslin refugee community. In essence, process-based leadership is "a process (act) of influencing the activities of an organized group in its efforts toward goal setting and goal achievement".[3] Notably, leadership encompasses a process of influences in which the leader has the ability to shape the behaviours of others. Omar's leadership counters the rhetoric Trump used to dehumanize refugees and Muslims. Her quest is to advocate progressive values and diversity by challenging discriminative polices, delivering a society that is more inclusive.

This case study analyses the emergence of Ilhan Omar as a key figure in representing the grievances of refugees and migrant communities by using a process-based approach to leadership. The case study identifies the needs of the targeted group, focussing on how Ilhan responds to these needs and

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[1] Ayoub, A. and Beydoun, K. (2016), 'Executive disorder: The Muslim Ban, emergency advocacy, and the fires next time,' *Michigan Journal of Race and Law*, 22, p.215
[2] *Ibid*
[3] Stogdill, R. M. (1950), 'Leadership, Membership and Organization'. *Psychological bulletin*, 47 (1), p. 3

the interaction/relationship with her followers. It assesses the outcome of the situation by examining the effectiveness of Ilhan Omar's leadership.

Impact of 'discriminatory' immigration policies

The Muslim Ban targeting these countries is based on a rhetoric of Islam being associated with terrorism and violent extremism, ignoring the high number of Muslim refugees who bear the brunt of Jihadi-terrorism. Beside the travel ban, so-called "alt right" (alternative right) articles have justified the move as an essential means for ensuring national security and preserving national identity.[4] While the ban was legally challenged, the Supreme Court upheld the policy with a few adjustments to take full indefinite effect. The latest version of the ban continues to uphold discriminatory policies advanced in dealing with the War on Terror, presenting Muslims as potential terrorists. The impact of the ban has aggravated negative stereotypes, fear and a system of prejudice that targets Muslims no matter their race and country of origin. The narratives and perceptions have sustained the supposed idea of there being an inherent incompatibility between core American values to that of Islam. [5]

Although the Muslim Ban was passed, it had different impacts on different segments of the targeted societies. The ban had an immense impact on racially and socio-economic marginalized communities. The policies would inevitably impact the Somalis, one of the largest African refugee communities in the United States. During Trump's Presidential campaign, he visited Minneapolis - a greatly segregated city - to appeal to the community by singling out Somalis several times, accusing them of coming from dangerous territories. He deplored the faulty vetting which enabled refugees to settle without the knowledge of the community.[6] His campaign rhetoric exacerbated anti-immigration sentiments and galvanized support.

The Somali refugee community has been at the centre of discussion on refugee settlement and national security. The community has been under scrutiny by security agents over youth radicalization that led the FBI to employ a spying program that has been heavily criticised.[7] Essentially, the Executive Order had placed a four months refugee resettlement restriction

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[4] Lajevardi, N. and Oskooii, K.A. (2018), 'Old-fashioned racism, contemporary islamophobia, and the isolation of Muslim Americans in the age of Trump,' *Journal of Race, Ethnicity and Politics*, 3(1), pp. 112-152

[5] *Ibid*

[6] Dahi, Abdi Latif (2018), 'America is Home: How trump's immigration policies are upending Somali lives in the US,' Quartz Africa, 15 January 2018. Available at https://qz.com/africa/1179796/trump-immigration-somalis-in-us-face-increasing-deportation/ (Accessed 20 May 2018)

[7] *Ibid*

on all refugees, especially targeting the largest influx of Syrians. The ban, before the adjustments in the court, not only included refugees but also those who shared dual citizenship with the banned countries. The resultant effect of this was to limit and separate families from Somalia and Kenya's refugee camp waiting to join families in the US. After the ban, deportation of Somalis increased from 198 in 2016 to 521 in 2017, which subsequently generated confusion and fear.[8]

Following the ban, the targeted societies understood the depth of the challenge and immediately sought to fight against the travel ban. In Minneapolis, more than 200 demonstrators rallied in front of the Federal Courthouse to protest, chanting 'Muslims are under attack'; 'stand up and fight'. Even before then, there had been a rising sense of urgency within this community. This was evident in the civil activism and new coalitions seeking to respond to the challenge.[9]

The Muslim refugees in different states coordinated legal advice programs to help the communities affected understand the complexities and legality of the travel ban through educational efforts. Advocates and others emerged into leadership. Community leaders and lawyers became critical to addressing the immediate fears faced by Muslim immigrants and highlighted how the ban exacerbated the marginalization of refugees. The community in Michigan, for example, collaborated with *Take on Hate,* an institution that addresses policy issues. The event was organized by a Somali American and a community leader, Aisha Noor, to answer the questions together with lawyers and advocates from the concerned citizens and ease their concerns. The event drew over 2000 community members to assess the way forward.[10]

Emergence of Ilhan Omar's leadership

Legitimate representation of the communities affected by the travel ban became a necessity in order to address the biased immigration law and structural racial discrimination resulting from policies of the new Trump administration. This ban needed a type of action and solution where a leader would be an instrumental and influential factor through which the

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[8] 'Somali migrants are 'disaster' for Minnesota, says Donald Trump', *The Guardian*, 7 November 2016

[9] Democrat Ilhan Omar becomes one of the first Muslim women elected to Congress, Vox News, 7 November 2018. Available https://www.vox.com/2018/11/6/18048786/minnesota-election-results-house-ilhan-omar-historic (Accessed 22 January 2019)

[10] Ayoub and Beydoun (2017)

situation is brought to a solution.[11] The individual that emerges in this context would need to possess legitimate power.[12] A legitimate power base in this case seems crucial in order to be more effective in addressing the situation. While leadership has been broadly shown to be essential in influencing the activities of an organized group in its efforts towards goal setting and goal attainment, emergent leadership ensues when others recognize an individual as most influential. The leader obtains this role because followers support their influence and behaviour.[13] In this context, Ilhan Omar emerged a significant leader at a time that Donald trump won the elections. Omar 's first win was in the 2016 election year, when she became the first Muslim Somali-American Minneapolis legislator in United States history. In the mid-term elections in 2018, Ilhan Omar had an opportunity to contend for a vacant seat in Congress.

It is important to assess whether Ilhan won the election because of her identity. She was born in Somalia and moved to the United States with her family when she was 12. She fled Somalia's conflict and was in a refugee camp in Kenya for four years. When she settled in the US, she became conscious of her visible identity, due to stigma. She became politically active and participated in state legislative campaigns. Prior to her role as House representative, she worked as an assistant minority leader in the chamber.[14]

Hersey and Blanchard explain that in a situational approach leadership focuses on three-way process: leaders, followers and the situation.[15] The situation element in this context requires different leadership based on the need of the followers. Ilhan Omar is from Minneapolis, a refugee and Somali: these identities played an important role in her triumph while she was able to match her situation to that of the needs of her followers. Her key motivation in her campaign was to address the 'politics of fear' used by the Trump administration. This appealed to the voters of Minneapolis. During her campaign, Omar sought to bring a unique insight into the life of refugees and their struggles. She revealed that this was shaped by her

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[11] Murphy, Albert J. (1941), 'A Study of the Leadership Process', American Sociological Review, 6(5), pp. 674-687

[12] Norton, William, Murfield, Monique and Baucus, Melissa (2014), 'Leader emergence: the development of a theoretical framework;'.Leadership & Organization Development Journal, 35(6), pp. 513-529

[13] Northouse, P. G. (2010), Leadership: Theory and Practice (5th edition) (California: Sage Publications)

[14] Ali, Rozina, (2016), 'A Muslim Woman got Elected Last Week,' The New Yorker, 17 November 2016

[15] Blanchard, Ken (2008), 'Situational leadership,' Leadership Excellence, 25(5), p. 19

experience upon arrival in the US and the realisation that the promises of the country are not extended to everyone.[16]

Ilhan's political aspirations also facilitated her emergence. Her strong ambitions to change issues around her communities led her to aspire to elected office. She is an advocate for just migration polices and criminal justice reform. In her interview statement, she stated that immigration policy under the Trump administration jeopardizes American immigrant families seeking to build their own American dreams.[17] Ilhan Omar, together with other local leaders, had continually challenged the US immigration policy while as a legislator by organizing a rally of over two thousand people residing in Minneapolis to oppose and protest the ban.

To be clear, Ilhan's ascendancy and her position is not only about Trump's policies. She is a visionary leader that promotes progressive policies ranging from advocating crime sector reform, Medicare and debt-free college funding. She allocated funds for the promotion of Somali arts and culture by expanding and renovating the Somali museum.[18] However, attention must be paid to her leadership behaviours that are called for by the situation at hand and associated responses.

Transformational leadership

Transformational leadership is seen as the leader and follower empowering one another to high levels of motivation and morality towards achieving a common goal.[19] Omar was able to earn the trust of her community because she understood the realities of the situation well. She appealed to different communities and has the ability to bring people together and collaborate. She built her campaign on hope and promoting American values that uphold diversity and inclusivity. Omar was quoted in interview as stating that she looked forward to being the voice of reason and that people need a congressional leader with 'moral clarity and courage' to oppose the Trump administration but also to cooperate and influence Congress. She was clear that people were looking for someone to address issues that mattered to them and a leader that they can trust to fight for them in Congress.

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[16] 'Is Ilhan Omar Donald Trump's Worst Nightmare?' *The Intercept*, 20 September 2018. Available at https://theintercept.com/2018/09/20/is-ilhan-omar-donald-trumps-worst-nightmare/ (Accessed 13 November 2018

[17] Ali (2016)

[18] *Ibid*

[19] Ayalew, Helinna (2010), 'Political Leadership in the Transformation of Societies: F.W. de Klerk and Pim Fortuyn in the Multicultural Project,' *Macalester International*, 25(6)

Transformational leadership is considered a higher leadership performance whereby leaders inspire followers and stimulate their level of interests and generate responsiveness for purposes of the group.[20] This requires valuing common interests for the good of the society. As a transformational leader Omar motivated other emerging leaders who, like her, had won seats in the mid-term election and had an interest in challenging the anti-immigration polices. Across Minnesota, for instance, a number of Somalis were elected to the state legislature and City Council.[21]

Ilhan Omar's charismatic leadership qualities were an advantage. Charismatic leaders essentially are competent communicators and able to communicate and connect with their followers at a deep emotional level.[22] This form of leadership is about articulation and implementation of goals by identifying the cause. Ilhan Omar was up against highly experienced and influential candidates – a former house speaker and a state legislator as well as a male Somali American. She was able to persuade her community to vote for her by effectively communicating her vision to her voters. Omar is a powerful speaker and she continuously engaged white-dominated areas with the highest voter turnouts which were vital for her win.[23]

Charisma in this context exhibits the relationship between the leader - who exudes charismatic leadership qualities and behaviours - and the followers who show loyalty, support and cooperation with the leader, as a situational determinant of effectiveness.[24] Ilhan Omar had two distinct relationships with her followers. In the constituency with predominantly white voters, she was in a socialized relationship whereby followers derived from her a sense of self and a clear set of values. Her charismatic leadership also provided them with a means for expressing important values within the framework of collective action. Aside from being vocal about the travel ban, Ilhan Omar appealed to the wider Democrat community in the area by addressing key issues that the majority of voters wanted to hear, such as the Medicare and college funding reforms, mentioned above, that are endorsed by the Democrats.[25]

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[20] *Ibid*

[21] Ali (2016)

[22] Jackson, Brad and Parry, Ken (2011), A V*ery Short Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book About Studying Leadership*, (London: SAGE Publications)

[23] Major victory for Somalis as Ilhan and four others elected, Goobjoog News, 7 November 2018. Available at https://goobjoog.com/english/major-victory-for-somalis-as-ilhan-and-three-others-elected (Accessed 02 January 2019)

[24] Shamir, Boas, House, Robert & Arthur, Michael (1993), 'The motivational effects of charismatic leadership: A self-concept based theory,' *Organization science*, 4(4), pp. 577-594

[25] 'Is Ilhan Omar Donald Trump's Worst Nightmare?' The Intercept, 20 September 2018

On the other hand, she appeals to societies of immigrants, Muslims and blacks because of the followers personal identification with the leader. Ilhan provides hope by giving them a clear sense of self and greater self-confidence.[26] She recognizes that being an immigrant, a refugee and Muslim, all these identities collectively represent an otherness that does not easily align with the social fabric of the United States. Reflecting her experiences, she stated that she had to figure out being a bridge builder and how to forge a relationship that never existed. And this became her backstory of how she won the trust of her voters.[27]

Transformational leaders display inspirational influence that is exerted when they present themselves as role models. Ilhan Omar has earned the respect and trust of not only her community but of people across the State. She is articulate and has presented her vision of inclusivity, with optimism thus appealing to a larger community of followers. She also exerts intellectual simulation in which she inspires others to challenge assumptions, find ways to address challenges and to take risks. The Hijab has become a contentious issue in Congress because all headwear was previously banned. Ilhan Omar found this rule impractical and influenced other members of Congress to challenge the rule to promote diversity regardless of race and religion.

Leadership effectiveness

Leadership effectiveness is considered an outcome when the leaders can positively impact change.[28] One of the most important features of leadership effectiveness is resilience. Leaders are often confronted by let downs, setbacks and roadblocks. Ilhan Omar was confronted by recurrent controversies and Islamophobic attacks, led by far-right movements rhetoric and encouraged by entities such as the conservative media. Dealing with the onslaught of Islamophobia and racism, Omar chose not to rely on controversial interactions, but to focus on the goals that are timely and productive. She was subjected to controversies that threatened her legitimacy to run for elections. Her strong ethical values helped win the hearts and minds of her followers. Omar listens to and supports the concerns of her followers while focusing on accomplishing these goals.

While it is too soon to analyse the outcomes of the leadership of Ilhan Omar, she has risen as a political figure grappling with a role that will likely

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[26] Shamir, House and Arthur (1993)
[27] Democrat Ilhan Omar becomes one of the first Muslim women elected to Congress, Vox News, 7 November 2018
[28] Jackson and Parry (2011)

represent more than the needs of her constituencies. She stands to represent voices and interests of her diverse community of followers by continuing to make significant reforms as a legislator.

Conclusion

In a globalized society, leadership has become increasingly significant in understanding situations and events. Transformational leadership has become an important element in leadership that needs to adapt to new challenges and opportunities. While Ilhan has exuded influence and inspirational motivation, the prospects in her leadership in offering a shared vision and empowering society, clearly shows that she's a transformational leader. It cannot be overlooked that her charismatic leadership and ability to recognize the needs of her diverse followers assisted her emergence over other contenders. Ilhan's emergence is significant in responding to the new immigration law in the US. The event gave her the opportunity to represent the interests of refugees and become their voice. She built her appeal to her target society on hope and the promotion of American values that uphold diversity and inclusivity. She offers a legitimate power base in the US Congress that represents hope for refugees globally.

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