

Colour barrier is shameful

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I watched the unfolding sagas of Canadians Abousfian Abdelrazik and Brenda Martin this month, and I am ashamed to say my government's actions made me feel relieved that my last name is Kotarski, that I don't worship in a mosque and that my skin colour is a shade lighter than a chocolate milkshake.

Two recent cases involving Canadians stranded abroad made me feel rather uncertain about CSIS, Foreign Affairs, and whether all Canadians can count on our government to help us when we travel abroad.

On one hand, we have Brenda Martin, a middle-aged Caucasian woman with an easily pronounceable name. Martin's case became a cause celebre for Canadian MPs when it was learned she faced a lengthy prison term in Mexico after a fraud conviction.

In Martin's case, Ottawa closely monitored her trial, lent her the money to pay a fine and arranged for a prison transfer so she may serve her time in Canada, where she will be eligible for early parole.

During her ordeal, Nova Scotia MP Bill Casey called for a boycott of Mexico and MP Jason Kenney flew to Guadalajara to meet with Martin and arrange for her transfer to Canada. Guilty or not, this is type of treatment that should make us all proud of the maple leaf in our passports, and should make us feel confident when we travel abroad.

On the other hand, there is Abousfian Abdelrazik, a Canadian who did not acquire his citizenship by birth, who worships in a mosque and who was left in limbo by our own government for five years.

Abdelrazik was visiting his mother in Sudan in 2003 when CSIS officials asked Sudanese authorities to detain him on terrorism suspicions. Abdelrazik is alleged to have had some unseemly connections to terrorism suspects in Montreal, but although the Sudanese have since released him and no charges have been filed in Sudan or in Canada, Canadian officials have not provided Abdelrazik with documents to return to Canada to reunite with his five-year-old son, and have not made any efforts to repatriate him as he is listed on an international no-fly list. While the allegations against Abdelrazik are quite serious, the Maher Arar case has conditioned Canadians to expect the worst from our government in cases of suspected terrorism.

In this instance, it is difficult not to suspect darker motives. Why CSIS would tip off Sudanese authorities and ask them to detain Abdelrazik there, instead of holding and charging him in Canada to begin with?

It is also difficult to trust, at face value, the vague, inconsistent leaks and statements from Foreign Affairs, which continue to brand Abdelrazik as a threat. After the Arar case, Canadians (especially those of non-European descent) have a right to feel nervous about leaving Canada on business, holidays or to visit family. Why should we trust vague pronouncements from CSIS and Foreign Affairs after those same people proved so spectacularly wrong in Arar's case?

Abdelrazik may indeed be a dangerous man, or this could turn out to be Maher Arar part deux.

In either case, the Canadian government has a massive problem on its hands, since the optics are absolutely terrible.

There has never been a better moment to heed the calls for greater transparency in Canada's anti-terror laws and procedures. The government needs to show Canadians the standard here is not a double one based on race, colour or creed, and that terrorism suspects can expect the same basic due process afforded other Canadians.

What is the biggest difference between Brenda Martin and Abousfian Abdelrazik? A government spokesman will likely tell you the first is a case of fraud where a Canadian citizen may have gotten a raw deal, while the other is a case of suspected terrorism where the suspect may still be dangerous.

Though this may well be the case, there are other, far more obvious differences between the two individuals and, whatever the reasoning, the Canadian government cannot appear to treat certain ethnic and religious minorities as second-class citizens.

The shadow of Maher Arar gets longer and longer, and the differing government actions in this case raise uncomfortable questions that absolutely need to be addressed.

A leaked document quotes a Canadian official stating, "Should this case break wide open in the media, we may have a lot of explaining to do."

How very true.

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