

To All Leaders of Faith and Goodwill:

The Sacred Texts of the World's great religions as well as an array of humanistic philosophies, all emphasize humanity's obligation to respect one another. These venerated texts teach us to stand up for the oppressed, the disenfranchised, and the marginalized. Such writings highlight our collective responsibility to ensure justice and equity for all.

When society in general has refused to stand up for "the least of these" - to borrow a description used by Jesus - and when local, state and federal governments have persistently failed to establish and safeguard equality and fairness, it becomes incumbent on individuals and organizations of faith and goodwill to employ the grassroots power of the people to protest against such actions and inactions.

Throughout history, prophets, sages, philosophers, and poets have unflinchingly decried injustice and called for a truly moral order. "Do not pervert justice," states Moses in the Torah. "Let justice roll down like a river," writes the Hebrew prophet Amos. And his prophetic successor Micah calls for us to "act justly and to love mercy."

Muslims are admonished to "stand firm for justice even against your own selves." In Hindu commentaries, justice is described as "a means of protecting the weak from the strong." The Baha'i faith places such a premium on justice that their international governing council is called The Universal House of Justice. Jesus taught that we should treat others as we would want to be treated. And we could cite numerous other faith and non-faith declarations.

Throughout America's history, activists - faith leaders, community leaders, union organizers and innumerable ordinary citizens without title or rank - have used voice, pen and amassed presence (i.e. protest) to remind those in power of our nation's promise to provide "liberty and justice for all."

When in the name of Law and Order, a government threatens - backed by the power of the State - to criminalize all who are guilty of nothing more than being bystanders when some protesters became unruly or violent, it has a truly chilling effect on our constitutionally guaranteed right to assemble peacefully in protest. Indeed, that's the not-so-hidden motivation behind a proposed new law here in Florida.

Our nation was formed by protest. And it has only been through protest that government leaders' feet have been held to the fire sufficiently to bring about transformations toward a better and more just society. Those transformations, though greatly valued, are far from complete. Yet further progress is now being seriously threatened.

Although protests throughout our nation's history have generally been peaceful, we recognize that at times some people - usually a small percentage - have not remained peaceful. But when protesters engage in vandalism or violence, there are already existing laws to address such behaviors. What is currently being proposed raises a whole new specter of intimidation and retaliation.

The Florida Poor Peoples Campaign is asking faith leaders and leaders from all organizations that prize and promote justice and equality for everyone to sign the following declaration to say emphatically and unequivocally to Florida Governor Ron DeSantis that our respective value systems force us to stand up against the proposed "Combating Violence, Disorder and Looting and Law Enforcement Protection Act." The Act reads as follows:

New Criminal Offenses to Combat Rioting, Looting and Violence

1. **Prohibition on Violent or Disorderly Assemblies**: 3rd degree felony when 7 or more persons are involved in an assembly and cause damage to property or injury to other persons.
2. **Prohibition on Obstructing Roadways**: 3rd degree felony to obstruct traffic during an unpermitted protest, demonstration or violent or disorderly assembly; driver is *NOT* liable for injury or death caused if fleeing for safety from a mob.
3. **Prohibition on Destroying or Toppling Monuments**: 2nd degree felony to destroy public property during a violent or disorderly assembly.
4. **Prohibition on Harassment in Public Accommodations**: 1st degree misdemeanor for a participant in a violent or disorderly assembly to harass or intimidate a person at a public accommodation, such as a restaurant.
5. **RICO Liability**: RICO liability attaches to anyone who organizes or funds a violent or disorderly assembly.

Increased Penalties

1. **Mandatory Minimum Jail Sentence**: Striking a law enforcement officer (including with a projectile) during a violent or disorderly assembly = 6 months mandatory minimum jail sentence.
2. **Offense Enhancements**: Offense and/or sentence enhancements for: (1) throwing an object during a violent or disorderly assembly that strikes a civilian or law enforcement officer; (2) assault/battery of a law enforcement officer during a violent or disorderly assembly; and (3) participation in a violent or disorderly assembly by an individual from another state.

Citizen and Taxpayer Protection Measures

1. **No "Defund the Police" Permitted**: Prohibits state grants or aid to any local government that slashes the budget for law enforcement services.
2. **Victim Compensation**: Waives sovereign immunity to allow a victim of a crime related to a violent or disorderly assembly to sue local government for damages where the local government is grossly negligent in protecting persons and property.
3. **Government Employment/Benefits**: Terminates state benefits and makes anyone ineligible for employment by state/local government if convicted of participating in a violent or disorderly assembly.
4. **Bail**: No bond or bail until first appearance in court if charged with a crime related to participating in a violent or disorderly assembly; rebuttable presumption against bond or bail after first appearance.

Clearly, the foregoing would greatly affect communities of color and other marginalized communities as they seek to make their voices heard concerning the injustices created or tolerated by a government that does not always work on behalf of its people.

If peacefully protesting brothers and sisters of color end up as felons just by virtue of their proximity to the random vandalism or violence of a few, If peaceful protesters from out of state are punished more severely simply because they are from elsewhere, and if funders for what was never intended to be anything but a peaceful protest are charged with racketeering just because a handful of participants go rogue at some point in the event, the level of government intimidation will effectively eviscerate one of our crucial First Amendment rights.

As faith leaders and as leaders of an array of other organizations that stand for justice, equality and the freedoms promised in our Bill of Rights, we feel compelled to be moral voices speaking on behalf of the least of these.”

Please stand with The Florida Poor Peoples Campaign by signing this declaration, which seeks to ensure that our civil liberties, given under the Constitution of the United States of America, will remain inviolate so we the people will continue to have a voice. And so “government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.”

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