How the civil rights movement affected US immigration



[**Sound Vision Staff Writer**](https://www.soundvision.com/authors/sound-vision-staff-writer)

*"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore, send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me: I lift my lamp beside the golden door.*"

Until the 1960s, this famous inscription which is found on the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor, the site where many immigrants arrived in America in the early 20th century, applied only to whites. But thanks to the country's Civil Rights Movement, among other factors, immigrants of all colors were welcomed into the country.

"It was nothing less than the final movement in the establishment of human rights around the world," notes Frederick Thaufeer al-Deen, who was involved in the civil rights struggle as a college student, withstanding police brutality and racism at that time along with other African-Americans and their supporters. Today, he is the secretary of the Islamic Association of Oak Park in River Forest, Illinois.

This emphasis on human rights gained world attention and also brought into focus America's racist exclusion of non-white immigrants. Buoyed by the success of the civil rights movement, activists sought to change the discriminatory laws restricting the influx of darker-skinned peoples into the United. States.

This culminated in the Immigration Act of 1965 which lifted many of the race-based immigration restrictions. The new law allowed Asians, Latin Americans, and Africans to come to the United States. Among them were a heavy influx of Muslim immigrants who have remained to this day. Their children are now third- and fourth-generation American Muslims. A number of these immigrants and their children also make up the leadership of today's American Muslim community.

What was the Civil Rights Movement?

The Civil Rights Movement was essentially a struggle for the establishment of basic human rights for African-Americans in the United States. These were the people whose blood, sweat and tears helped build the country since their arrival in the 17th century as slaves, who had been kidnapped by white Europeans from their homes in Africa and brought to the country against their will to work as slave labor.

Although slavery was officially outlawed in the United States in 1865, African-Americans remained a disenfranchised and oppressed minority. Poverty and discrimination were just some of the difficulties they faced. They were barred from voting legally in some states and physically stopped by intimidation from doing so in others; they had to sit in the backs of buses, while whites sat in front; they attended schools separate from whites. These examples of humiliation were just the tip of the iceberg though. African-Americans were routinely beaten, harassed and murdered by the white majority, particularly in the southern United States. A number of those who spoke out against the mistreatment were usually killed. Prominent examples include Martin Luther King Jr. and Medgar Evans.

The oppression culminated in the Civil Rights Movement. While in the 18th and 19th centuries, there were many efforts made to secure rights for African-Americans, it was in the 20th century that they came to head in a concerted movement which won a number of civil rights victories on the legal front.

In 1954, the US Supreme Court declared school segregation unconstitutional in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka ruling. The following year, an elderly African-American woman, Rosa Parks, refused to vacate her seat for a white person in a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, which was a city law. This was followed by boycott and the bus segregation ordinance was declared unconstitutional. In addition, the Federal Interstate Commerce Commission banned segregation on interstate trains and buses the same year.

School segregation was also banned a few years later. And in 1965, a new voting rights act was signed.

These victories of course, came at a price. African-Americans and their supporters were viciously gunned down, hosed and beaten during riots by police and racists. The fight for rights was deadly and violent, but it resulted in concrete gains that pushed through laws banning racial discrimination in almost all walks of life.

Racism in US immigration laws

Until the 1960s, US immigration law reflected the racism of the country's laws and culture.

For instance, there was the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 which was not repealed until 1943. This regulation barred Chinese people from becoming US citizens and did not allow Chinese laborers to immigrate for the next ten years. In the early 20th century, a similar "Gentleman's Agreement" with Japan stopped most Japanese immigration to the U.S.

Before the 1920s, there were no numerical restrictions on immigration in America. Instead, other "qualitative" criteria set admission standards, such as literacy tests. But from that period through World War II, the ugly "science" of eugenics was employed to bar certain immigrants from the United States.

The House Judiciary Committee hired eugenics consultant, Dr. Harry N. Laughlin, who claimed that certain races were simply inferior. He argued, "We in this country have been so imbued with the idea of democracy, or the equality of all men, that we have left out of consideration the matter of blood or natural born hereditary mental and moral differences."

This attitude was reflected in subsequent immigration laws that were passed, such as the Immigration Act of 1924 and the Temporary Quota Act of 1921. These were aimed at limiting immigration based on "national origin", especially of Southern European immigrants like Italians.

The 1924 Act took effect in 1929 by setting yearly quotas on immigrants as the "number which bears the same ratio to 150,000 as the number of inhabitants in the U.S. in 1920 having that national origin bears to the number of white inhabitants of the U.S. in 1920, with a minimum quota of 100 for each nationality." Asians were virtually barred from immigration under this law with few exceptions.

This was followed by the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act, which restricted immigration of communists, anarchists and of anyone who subscribed to an ideology that was considered subversive. This Act kept the national origin quota system for the Eastern Hemisphere. On the other hand, immigration from the Western Hemisphere continued to operate without a quota and relied on other factors to limit immigration.

Finally, the 1965 Immigration Act tried to correct the ethnic and racially-based immigration system that had been established in the 1920s. It set a 20,000 per country limit and a yearly ceiling of 170,000 for admissions for the Eastern Hemisphere. It removed the barriers to Asian immigration, which eventually led to more immigrants arriving from Asia than from Europe. The Western Hemisphere was designated a ceiling of 120,000 immigrants but without a preference system or per country limits. Modifications made in 1978 ultimately combined the Western and Eastern Hemispheres into one preference system and one ceiling of 290,000.

Immigration and civil rights: what's the connection?

The civil rights struggle in the US gained attention worldwide and became "a stencil" for human rights revolution world wide, argues Thaufer al Deen. He says that when the movement gained momentum in the mid-20th century, there were two groups which were still lacking basic human rights: African-Americans and black South Africans.

"The Civil Rights Movement became the stencil by which the freedoms and the human rights of South Africans was achieved," he explains. "The stencil of Civil Rights Movement is to boycott economically. Through it, the tactic of economic sanctioning to force governments to recognize human rights began. Economic sanctions were used to enable others to achieve human rights."

"This concept of heightened awareness in the world to the Civil Rights Movement brought attention to what was happening to immigrants in US. People came from different parts of the world and settled here representing different cultures, beliefs and identities," he says.

"It caused an informal lobbying on the morality of federal legislators that this is an area that has to be looked at. Americans of different backgrounds, as well as those who were sympathetic or reacting politically because of the lobbying of their constituent groups fought so that the quota system was enlarged and different people were allowed come in."

Today, America's Muslims are enjoying the fruits of the civil rights struggle and its impact on the country's immigration laws.Were it not for the sacrifices of African-Americans and their supporters, it is highly unlikely that discrimination based on color and ethnicity would have changed in America. Many of the Muslims who came to study, work and later establish their families in this country could simply not have done so had US immigration laws retained their discriminatory nature.