

**Remarks of Ali Noorani on May 26, 2009 in Washington, DC at the conference
*Beyond the Fence: Research Lessons on How Immigration and Remittances Shape Global
Development***

Great. Thank you, Ricardo. And I want to thank the Foundation for Open America, the Center for International Development, and the Center for Global Development. And I also have to thank the founder of the forum Rick Swartz, for starting the organization so that I am duly employed.

I want to spend a little bit of time talking about the political – the politics of immigration. Why are we at this moment where immigration reform is on the horizon, and on the horizon in a way that we actually have a reasonable if not more than reasonable chance for seeing the immigration reform that we all seek?

And part and parcel of that is because the nation is saying enough is enough; we have to fix this problem. We cannot have an immigration system that keeps people in the shadows. We cannot have an immigration system that keeps families separated for 10, if not, more decades. We cannot – we can no longer maintain a separate judicial system for immigrants as opposed to native-born or U.S. citizens, and we can no longer have a work visa program that is driven by politics and not by our actual economy. Enough is enough; we have to fix this problem.

So that's a fine thing for me to say, but what do real people say? Fair? We're finding in recent polling that more than eight and 10 of likely voters – likely voters assert that illegal immigration is a serious problem. With the recession, a housing crisis, healthcare costs, and wars, immigration reform and illegal immigration continues to be seen as a problem. In fact, 56 percent of respondents said it is a very serious issue that needs to be addressed.

So people care about it, but when do they want to see a solution. You have this major bandwidth issue that people talk about. You know, how much can you take care of in any one segment at a time? Well, most voters are saying that they would like to see immigration reform to take place this year. Seventy-two percent of voters say Congress is – say that Congress should tackle immigration reform this year. Not only do they want a solution, but they want a solution now.

So with that said, the demand has been set, right. We want – there are people outside of this room who are living life on a day-to-day basis – see this as problem and see this as a problem that needs to be solved.

Now, let's look at what the Obama administration is doing. Let's just look at kind of the tenor of their approach. In my opinion, they are returning us to the days of law and order, days of fairness, the days of people being treated fairly for what they are doing under a system of laws. To fix our economy means regulating our financial system. To end the war means holding our allies to greater accountability. To fix our healthcare system means making sure all

taxpayers have access to health insurance. So it is very much an approach of this is what people need to do; this is a shared responsibility, both on the basis of government but on the basis of employers and on the basis of people in essence on the streets.

Our challenge, as folks who care about immigration reform, is to reform our immigration system in the interest of individuals, of workers, of families, of our nation's security, of our economy, and finally, to reform our immigration system in the interest of our country. We need an immigration system that keeps our nation safe, that levels the playing field in the workforce, and makes sure that everyone is paying the taxes that they're supposed to pay. Level the playing field – wage and tax fairness. That is the type of reform that we need to be pushing towards.

And increasingly, I believe that this is a goal that we can reach. Now, I'll lay out the policy reason, but the punch line here, to kind of give you a glimpse of the punch line, is that this is not a goal that we can reach because we have the policy; it's because the politics are changing in our direction. More and more, in terms of policy, we're realizing what immigration does not or should not look like.

What shouldn't it be? Immigration reform does not mean that we offer a path to citizenship. It does not mean that we allow people to learn English; it does not mean that we pour billions of dollars into an enforcement system that is impossible to enforce. Reforming immigration for America, reforming immigration in our interests means requiring undocumented immigrants to register legal status and to meet a series of requirements learning English, paying a fine, paying taxes, before they get on a path to citizenship. But it's requiring their registration before meeting requirements to get them down to a path of citizenship.

This eliminates the ability of crooked employers – not all employers; the crooked employers – to undermine their competition by exploiting undocumented workers. The way we put it is that there's a floor in terms of our economy. In that floor, there's a trapdoor. That trapdoor is there solely because we have undocumented immigrants and we have an immigration system that is sorely in need of repair.

Through that trapdoor falls first the undocumented immigrant. They are – they in essence will be paid a lesser wage and have fewer workplace rights than anybody else in the workforce. They fall through first. Then comes the African-American worker. They fall through that trapdoor. Their wages will fall. Their rights and their opportunities in the workplace will fall. Then comes the native-born worker, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

So we can have a floor in terms of the workforce, but as long as we have a broken immigration system, that trapdoor is going to claim more and more people. And the crooked employer operates solely underneath that floor and takes advantage of that trapdoor.

So we have a system that's broken, but we also have an elephant in the room that everybody in this room knows more about than I do: the economic situation. What does the economic situation mean to the prospects of immigration reform? Our assumption is, is that economy bad, chances for reform even worse. Fair? That is fair. But it's not actually that simple.

What we're seeing is that the economy being where it is is actually putting people in a place, in a place of mind where they want to see solutions. We are seeing that individuals, native-born Americans are realizing that the undocumented immigrant community is here, that they're already working, and that removing them to the millions and millions of people and billions and billions of dollars does nothing to fix our economy, much less our immigration system.

So once you have that conversation with people so that they realize – they come to their realization that immigrants are here, they're working, and that they're contributing, the question then becomes how do we level the playing field so that everybody is competing for the same job at the same wage and that everybody is paying taxes that they feel that they should be.

So recent focus groups conducted by America's voice, which is a partner organization focusing on communications and messaging, is finding that the best word to describe the country's sentiment at this moment is "anxious." It is the fact that the economic climate is taking a toll and that people are feeling less and less secure, that people are worried about losing their job, paying their mortgage, and much less meeting general expenses. People are angry at Wall Street and they're angry at bailout. And increasingly, while there's hope and support for the president, there's a realization that at some point we're going to have to pay the piper and we're wondering when that's going to be and how much it's going to cost. The tea-baggers, for example, they were tapped into a very, very real sentiment that people see money going out to Wall Street and the question becoming how are we going to pay for it.

But focus group participants are not blaming illegal immigrants for this economic malaise. They are, like I said, putting voters – this economic situation is putting voters into a solution-oriented frame of mind, and they're beginning to understand, okay, this is a system that can be fixed, that needs to be fixed, and that a solution does not include pouring billions of dollars and to removing millions of people.

But, you know, it is a challenge and I do not want to diminish that challenge, but I also do not want to leave you with a sense that that challenge is insurmountable. This is a surmountable challenge and relies on our ability to talk about immigrants as being here and needing to be part of a system and not having to go around a system. One issue that we'll talk about is the issue of, okay, what does immigration tomorrow look like. What does the future flow of immigration look like so that people and workers, families and workers can continue to enter and exit the country in a legal and safe manner?

But we're finding that by melding this registration requirement, this requirement of undocumented immigrants to register for legal status and then get on a path to citizenship is allowing a conversation that says, okay, we can then have an improved enforcement system – not necessarily a bigger enforcement system, but an improved enforcement system – and that we can then have issues of due process, family reunification, and future flow discussed through a legislative process in a way that brings the parties together.

That's the policy. And we're realizing that the policy is there and that people are coming to the policy. But we've always had good immigration policy. We've always had the right policy ideas. The difference is, is that we're realizing this is a political fight. This is a political fight overshadowing a policy fight. And we need to understand that the politics are better than they have ever been, but we have a lot of work to do.

We're about to launch a campaign, a campaign to reform immigration for America. That campaign's goal is to reach 279 votes: 218 votes in the House of Representatives, 60 votes in the Senate, and one president. That's the game. That's the goal. That's what we have to do. Those three bodies, House, Senate, the White House, are in a better place than they've ever been in pushing for a comprehensive immigration reform. And while leadership needs to start from the top, leadership needs to start from the White House, it is really going to be up to the House and Senate to navigate their own treacherous waters, to be able to craft a bill and to move a bill forward.

Pelosi, Speaker Pelosi, while she's saying the right things publicly, she needs to begin to organize her leadership within the House to move a bill that meets the needs of workers, families, and the economy. The House needs to move first for three reasons. The House is in a position to align with the anxiety of the nation by offering stronger protection for American workers before considering additional immigration – or work-related programs. And I'll explain what I mean by that.

Second, the House is in a place to move within a quicker process that's more closely controlled, just because of the rules within the House. And then third, and probably most importantly, is that moving a House bill before the midterm elections energizes an electorate that wants a solution. And that electorate is not only Hispanic, it's not only Asian, but increasingly it is an electorate writ large that wants to see a solution to this very urgent problem.

But in the winds there's a false threshold, if you will, being put forward. There's an expectation that in the House of Representatives that 20 Republicans will come onto a bill, an immigration bill. No other priority issue from the White House is asking for 20 Republicans – health care, energy, the economy not asking for 20 Republicans. We bring 20 Republicans onto a House bill – we can get five to 10 Republicans because there are five to 10 true believers in fixing the immigration system in the interests of the country. But expanding that number, then in my opinion, brings on very harsh enforcement measures and diminishes the power and the control of the White House and the Democratic Party to move a good bill.

So Obama and Pelosi have the opportunity and the power to organize the Democratic caucus in the House. They can bring along the supportive Republicans and they can do it in a way that marginalizes the restrictionist Republicans who don't want to see a solution but would rather just rant and rave about it. And if the House does not go first, we lead to a – it would lead to an even more fractured Senate debate, or we start with a more fractured Senate debate. And what do I mean by that?

That the Senate – to get to 60 votes in the Senate will continue to be a very heavy lift. The last two iterations of this debate we were not able to reach 60 – or we did once; we didn't do it the second time. How are we going to reach 60 votes at this point? We're, what, 59.5 Democrats in the Senate now. There's an assumption we're going to lose a few Democrats right out of the door.

So we're never – you know, just based on the Democratic Party, we're not going to get to 60. In order to get to 60 in the Senate we are going to – and I believe correctly – we are going to need to find the balance between the needs of labor and the needs of the economy. This is not an impossible balance to find. In fact, I would argue that this is one of the few issues where we are going to see business and labor, Democrat and Republican in one place pushing for a common solution. There's an incredible amount of work to get to that point, but in order to reach an immigration solution that addresses the future needs of the country is a point we're going to have to reach.

The top three Democrats in the Senate, Reid, Schumer – what is the third – and Durbin, I should say, are all in a very good place on this. Reid in fact I think would want to see a Senate bill moving yesterday and would like to have it done in the next two weeks. Senator Durbin has always been a proponent if not a champion of immigration reform, and Senator Schumer has stepped into his new role as immigration – chair of the Immigration Subcommittee with incredible energy and strength, convening two very, very successful hearings and also beginning to organize the issues across the board.

But at the end of the day, regardless of what the House does, regardless of what the Senate does, their actions are inconsequential without the leadership of the White House. Let's just take a really quick second to understand what the White House has done, or what, I should say, Obama has done. Obama as a Senator, in my opinion, you know, he took a very nuanced position around immigration reform. He supported CIR. He filed a bill to make the naturalization process easier or more streamlined for immigration. But then he also voted for the Fence Act. Obama has a record of playing every side of the coin to try to find immigration solution.

Now that the ball is squarely in his court, what has he done? Over the course of transition, out of the seven policy teams he pulled together, one of those was immigration. By appointing Napolitano to run DHS, he's brought in a border governor that understand

immigration policy but also understand immigration enforcement, and she's done a very impressive job of navigating a very, very difficult path in terms of balancing those two issues.

Back in February, Obama said, you know, I want to start talking about this in the fall. This is what he said. But his political people quickly got ahead of what he had said to his policy people. Two weeks later he was saying on Spanish language radio stations in Chicago and Los Angeles that he wants to move immigration reform this year. Two to three weeks later, he was having a meeting with the Congressional Hispanic Caucus saying I want to move immigration reform this year.

On June 8th, as everybody knows, he's pulling together a meeting of key members on House and Senate and across both parties to talk about immigration reform. Why is he moving ahead of the policy question? Because there's a realization that the politics of immigration are completely different and the politics of immigration demand a prompt answer. Forty-four electoral votes, 20 of 25 House races, and five key Senate races all went to the candidate whose party advocated for a comprehensive reform position. So the White House realizes that there's an incredible opportunity that lies in the politics of immigration, and it behooves them to move immigration reform quickly and forcefully.

Recent polling strengthens this case. Bendixen and Associates, again for America's Voice, interviewed 800 Hispanic voters in Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Nevada, New York, New Mexico, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Texas, Indiana and Virginia, all states that have key races in 2010. And they asked the question in essence, do you as a Hispanic voter care about immigration and immigration reform. The issue of illegal immigration ranked number four with only 7 percent of respondents rating it as the nation's biggest problem – number four behind, I believe, the economy, health care, and I think even the war was higher than that, in terms of just the national context.

But then asking the question: is the immigration issue very important to you, 59 percent of respondents said yes; it is very important to me. And then the punch line here is that 87 percent of Hispanic voters polled would not consider voting for a candidate for the United States Congress who is in favor of forcing most illegal immigrants out of the country. So on a list of 10 issues, illegal immigration is number four. On a list of issues of does this candidate care about me and my family is probably – is number one. There's an intensity factor of voters and their desire to vote for candidates – or the decision to vote for a candidate that revolves solely around immigration.

So in summary, the president started in a good place as a senator and he's in a very powerful place as a president. But he's also in a very vulnerable place, and this is because for years, immigration has been an issue that politicians love to yell about, they love to scapegoat, and they have absolutely no desire in reaching a conclusion. They have shown, if you will, enough leg to care about the issue, whether you're for immigration reform or against immigration reform. You know, the politician that you're following has shown you enough leg to say I'm with you, but not enough leg to say I'm going to fix this problem.

So if Obama moves immigration reform without an investment, a serious investment of his political capital, his party will use an opportunity to secure Hispanic voters, immigrant voters, and voters write large who want an immigration solution, and at the end of the day will complicate his own reelection efforts.

So in short, the party that goes all in, whether they're Republican or Democrat, the party that goes all in for an immigration solution before the 2010 midterm elections will reap the benefits of an electorate that wants a solution, whether it's for their families or for their neighbors, or for the good of the country. So it's up to the White House to determine what that means, what the standards are, and then for Pelosi to organize her leadership and members within the House and then Reid to follow in the Senate. It is nearly as simple as that. (Laughter.)