

NINA MOINI:

I'm Nina Moini. You're listening to *Minnesota Now*. Thank you for joining us today. Fraud in Minnesota continues to be a powerful political topic on the national stage. Yesterday, a subcommittee of the US Senate Judiciary Committee looked at the issue in a hearing titled "Somali Fraud in Minnesota, The Tip of the Iceberg." It's likely a reference to a former federal prosecutor's assessment that there was widespread fraud in state programs.

Most of the defendants charged in the state's fraud scandal were of Somali descent. In response, President Donald Trump has attacked the state's Somali communities with a series of sweeping and racist comments, and the federal government has used fraud as the reason for a surge of immigration agents in the state of Minnesota.

University of Minnesota Professor Eric Schwartz spoke out about the impact of the surge on immigrants in yesterday's hearing. Take a listen.

[AUDIO PLAYBACK]

- It would be unconscionable for me not to raise an obvious and deep concern why this subcommittee is not focusing on a pattern of serious civil rights abuses affecting immigrant communities in Minnesota. These are the hallmarks of violations we more readily associate with countries like China or Russia. And we have told those governments that, no matter how important the law enforcement concerns, they do not justify abuses. Isn't that a message we ourselves should take on board?

[END PLAYBACK]

NINA MOINI:

And Professor Eric Schwartz joins me now. Thanks for taking the time today, Professor.

ERIC SCHWARTZ:

Oh, it's my pleasure.

NINA MOINI:

And we just heard a clip from you there in that subcommittee talking about why the focus is where it is. And what are you reflecting on today after that entire experience?

ERIC SCHWARTZ:

Honestly, I was reflecting on the fact that, if you're a member of Congress, you're part of the US government. And fundamentally, I think your most significant responsibility is to ensure that your government is acting responsibly when you're seeking to execute the laws of the land.

And it was thoroughly disheartening for me to be at a hearing where that concern, among many members on the committee, it just seemed to be irrelevant. It seemed to be of no concern. And it was disheartening because these are members of Congress who had regularly demanded of countries like Russia, China, Burma, you name it, that those countries respect the rights of their people no matter how important the law enforcement imperatives might be. And it was just-- it was so disappointing for me to see just the lack of concern about that.

And the other issue was I was deeply troubled by the fact that this hearing was framed in a way to tar an entire community and only compounded by the fact that the president has referred to this community, this entire community, as garbage and has said that we don't want any Somalis in the United States. So I didn't feel great after the hearing. Let me put it that way.

NINA MOINI:

Well, explain for our listeners who may not why your set of expertise was useful to be there testifying before this subcommittee.

ERIC SCHWARTZ:

Well, I suppose the subcommittee was principally interested in talking to me for two reasons. Number one, I have a long history and record of dealing with international humanitarian and refugee issues. For eight years, I was the National Security Council principal staff member dealing with refugee and humanitarian issues during the Clinton administration.

And then I also worked on Capitol Hill on these issues. And then in the Obama administration, I was the United States Assistant Secretary of State for population, refugees, and migration. And then if you add to that the fact that I happen to have spent most of the last 15 or so years of my life as a faculty member and the dean of the Humphrey School of Public Affairs, right in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood of Minneapolis, where we have among the highest concentration of Somalis in the country. So, I guess, for those reasons, I was probably a pretty appropriate witness for this, in my view, sort of ill-named and, in many respects, ill-conceived hearing.

NINA MOINI:

So you have expertise here, being in the community, and you have expertise from a global sense of what this means on a global scale. What do you think the US is in danger of losing globally by other countries hearing disparaging remarks this way about immigrant communities? And to note, again, for our listeners, many of who know, most of the Somali Minnesotans living here are US citizens.

ERIC SCHWARTZ:

Well, we are already losing much of the advantages that we've had in the world. I mean, every country and every state wants to enhance its influence among other nations, especially when the world is composed of nations and governments that are in strategic competition with one another.

And what was, I think, and what has been the most powerful tool of American influence around the world is certainly our power, I mean, power conventionally defined in terms of military capacity, industrial capacity. Those are the conventional measurements of power.

But the United States also has reaped enormous benefits by our stated commitment, not always affected successfully, but a stated commitment to openness in terms of who we welcome. The fact that we are a country that is not defined by our nationalities, but is defined by our ideals, that's extremely valuable and unusual.

And so, believe it or not, I think the United States has, in many parts of the world, been seen-- not in all parts of the world. I don't want to be Pollyanna-ish about this-- but in many parts of the world has been seen as a welcoming place and a benign power in much of the world, especially in Asia and the countries surrounding China, but in most parts of the world.

And I think we are very rapidly losing that benefit. We are closing ourselves off. We are talking about the value of naked power. And I think that is going to have dramatic and negative consequences for Americans in the years and decades to come, unless, of course, we change it.

NINA MOINI:

And just lastly, with all of that in mind and all of the reflection that you are doing, I know you said it didn't feel great to walk out of there or to be in that experience. There were clips of you and Senator Ted Cruz from Texas in a heated exchange. But how do you feel your testimony was received by the senators?

ERIC SCHWARTZ:

Well, I mean, Ted Cruz was acting like a bully. And when somebody acts like a bully, you get kind of upset, and I did. I think and I hope that my testimony was-- by those who are sympathetic, saw it as encouraging, and a lot of emails I've received this morning suggest that that's very much the case. And I think to the extent that I can serve as an ally to those who are not in a position to fight for themselves, that's very heartening.

And I hope I upset the thinking of a lot of members who really wanted to harp on this fraud issue. Fraud is very important. But as I said in the hearing, if the administration was serious about prosecuting fraud in Minneapolis, they would not have gutted the US Attorney's office in Minneapolis, and they would have sent accountants and forensics experts to Minnesota to deal with the fraud issue instead of sending thousands of ICE and CBP agents to violate the rights of people in our community.

So the whole issue of fraud from the administration's position, you have to really raise questions about it, because look at what's happened in the US Attorney's office in Minnesota. It's a disaster. They've lost 14 members of attorneys in that staff. And it's far less equipped today than it was months ago to deal with the very issues that the committee said they were concerned about.

NINA MOINI:

Yeah. I want to thank you so much for coming on the show today and talking about this experience. For people just watching these committee hearings and these congressional hearings, they can be so theatrical that it's just fascinating to hear what it feels like when you go there with the intention of getting through to people and hopefully making change. And we really appreciate your time and sharing about that.

ERIC SCHWARTZ:

Well, I really appreciate your inviting me. It was very kind of you, and I welcome the chance to have this conversation.

NINA MOINI:

Thank you. Take care. Eric Schwartz is chair of the Global Policy at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs.