

IMMIGRATION

Federal court in Rhode Island strikes down Trump immigration freeze based on nationality

Federal policies that had halted asylum, work permits, and green cards left countless immigrants in the United States in ‘indeterminate legal limbo,’ the judge wrote

By [Amanda Milkovits](#) Globe Staff, Updated June 5, 2026, 3:52 p.m.



US District Court in Providence. CHRISTOPHER GAVIN/GLOBE STAFF

PROVIDENCE — A federal judge in Rhode Island on Friday struck down Trump administration immigration policies that had halted asylum applications and frozen immigration and citizenship applications, work permits, and green cards for immigrants from 39 African, Asian, Latin American, and Middle Eastern countries.

In a scathing [135-page opinion](#), [US District Court Judge John J. McConnell Jr.](#) said that the policies had thrown countless immigrants living in the United States into “indeterminate legal limbo,” solely because of their nationality.

The US Citizenship and Immigration Services had justified its actions with “pretextual concerns of ‘national security’ that mask anti-immigrant sentiments that it is forbidden from letting influence its decision-making,” the judge wrote.

There was no ignoring the impact of the federal government’s policies, McConnell wrote. “Over six months later, many of those individuals remain without work, without legal status, and without any meaningful ability to plan for their futures,” the judge wrote.

McConnell declared the policies were unlawful and vacated them. The coalition of nonprofits and unions that brought the lawsuit cheered the decision.

“This ruling affirms the American doctrine of the rule of law and a place for refuge and equality for all,” said [Omar Bah](#), the founder and former executive director of the [Refugee Dream Center in Providence](#), one of the plaintiffs. “People and the community and families have suffered from all of these arbitrary policies, but today we celebrate.”

The policies of the Trump administration “have caused so much distress, family separations, fear and hopelessness, but we always believe in the judiciary that they would declare what is lawful and unlawful. Today we are grateful for that,” Bah said Friday. “We call on the administration to not ignore court ruling and to start applying the immigration laws as they should.”

The administration’s immigration policies came about after two incidents over the last year involving Afghan nationals. Last June, an [Afghan national named Nasir Ahmad Tawhedi pleaded guilty in federal court](#) to conspiring and attempting to provide material support and resources to the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham. The US Department of Justice claimed that he planned to commit an attack on Election Day 2024. In November, an [Afghan national was charged with shooting two National Guard members](#), killing one, in Washington, D.C.

President Trump and then-Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem made incendiary claims about immigrants, with Noem saying she recommended a full [travel ban](#) “on every damn country that’s been flooding our nation with killers, leeches, and entitlement junkies.”

The federal government enacted policies to squeeze immigrants from 39 countries, including Afghanistan. The result was chaos.

“The challenged policies have left millions of immigrants in legal uncertainty by indefinitely suspending asylum adjudications, freezing immigration applications for people from countries subject to the administration’s travel ban, reopening previously approved immigration cases, and

directing immigration officers to treat nationality as a significant negative factor in their decisions,” McConnell wrote.

McConnell zinged the anti-immigrant screeds that people coming to the United States should “follow the law” and “do things the right way.”

“This case serves as a perfect example of immigrants doing just that,” the judge wrote.

It was USCIS, the federal agency charged with administering those laws under the federal Department of Homeland Security, that did not follow them, McConnell wrote. The federal agency claimed statutory and regulatory authority that it didn’t possess, made decisions without reasoned explanations, and acted without regard for the reliance interests of the applicants, he wrote.

And, he said that it was impossible to ignore the “strong evidence of anti-immigrant animus” that the government held as it enacted those policies.

In response to McConnell’s ruling, the Department of Homeland Security’s general counsel, James Percival, commented Friday:

“The Left has been running the same gambit with so called ‘animus’ claims since 2017. It is sabotage dressed in legal clothing. It goes like this: (1) the admin is racist, (2) therefore a policy I don’t like is motivated by race, (3) therefore it is invalid. They have used it on virtually every Trump era Department of Homeland Security policy.”

Nonprofits that aid refugees and immigrants, and unions that represent people from those 39 countries, sued USCIS and the Department of Homeland Security. They argued that the policies violated federal immigration law, the US Constitution, and the Administrative Procedure Act.

The coalition includes Refugee Dream Center and [Dorcas International Institute of Rhode Island](#), the Service Employees International Union, International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America, African Communities Together, Venezuelan Association of Massachusetts, Partnership for the Advancement of New Americans, and American Gateways.

“Today is a good day. On behalf of the thousands of immigrants we serve, we are grateful to Judge McConnell for his ruling,” Dorcas CEO Milagro Sique said in a statement. “These policies were

wrong, plain and simple, and caused and profound fear and uncertainty for so many of our friends, neighbors, and coworkers. Having the judicial process work as intended — by upholding the rule of law — gives us some reassurance that all is not lost and allows those who have been impacted to move forward with their lives in a meaningful way.”

They were represented by Democracy Forward, [Lawyers’ Committee for Rhode Island](#), Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services, Muslim Advocates, and the South Asian American Justice Collaborative.

“Today’s decision is a powerful affirmation that the rule of law still protects immigrant communities in Rhode Island and across the country,” said Kevin Love Hubbard, counsel for the Lawyers’ Committee for Rhode Island. “The Court recognized that the government cannot throw the lives of immigrants who followed all the rules into indefinite limbo simply because of where they were born. Because of this ruling, and the courage of our Plaintiffs in bringing the case, thousands of families, workers, asylum seekers, and future citizens will now have the opportunity the law promises: to have their applications decided fairly.”

“This ruling reaffirms a basic principle: The federal government cannot shut down lawful immigration pathways or discriminate against people based on where they come from,” said Skye Perryman, president and CEO of Democracy Forward. “These unlawful policies caused enormous harm to families, workers, asylum seekers, and communities across the country who were left in limbo, unable to work, access protections, or move forward with their lives. We are pleased that the court recognized the devastating human consequences of these policies. Our communities deserve a fair process governed by law, not political targeting rooted in fear and discrimination.”