

Faith leaders press Obama for torture commission: National Religious Campaign Against Torture

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Prominent religious officials led a march to the White House last month to urge President Obama to form a commission of inquiry into interrogation practices under the Bush administration. The clerics and other senior religious leaders and supporters who joined them for the “public witness” formed a crowd adorned with robes, collars, hijabs and yarmulkes.

“It is often said the way to move forward is putting behind the past,” said Michael Kinnamon, general secretary of the National Council of Churches, as he stood in front of the White House. “We who gather here today believe the way to the future comes after a full disclosure of truth of wrongdoing.”

The rally was sponsored by the National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT), which has applauded Obama’s executive order requiring that the U.S. abide by international anti-torture agreements.

But the interfaith organization also wants a nonpartisan truth commission to investigate past torture practices, similar to that of postapartheid South Africa. “Only by knowing the truth will the American people have the opportunity to develop a strong conviction that torture must never be justified,” said Ingrid Mattson, president of the Islamic Society of North America.

A delegation of 33 faith leaders met with White House officials after the public demonstration on June 11. They delivered a letter, signed by 51 senior religious officials, in support of a commission of inquiry “to hold us all accountable for the policies and acts carried out in our name.”

A truth commission could be a hard sell. A recent CBS News/*New York Times* poll found that a majority of Americans (62 percent) are against such hearings. Obama

has already stated his opposition, preferring to move forward rather than look back.

“The only way forward is through our past,” countered William Sinkford, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, as he stood before the crowd of about 100 people. At a predemonstration news conference Sinkford said, “We cannot be afraid of the painful truths that a commission may reveal.”

While mainline Protestant denominations and other progressive religious groups were well represented, prominent evangelical voices were noticeably absent from the march. Steve Martin, a United Methodist minister and executive vice president of Evangelicals for Human Rights, was on hand, but EHR is an outreach venture by NRCAT to recruit evangelicals to the cause.

A Pew Forum survey found that white evangelical Protestants (62 percent) were the most likely group to condone torture, topping white mainline Protestants (46 percent) and the religiously unaffiliated (40 percent).

NRCAT does not yet have a clear picture of what a commission of inquiry would look like, according to Richard Killmer, president of the group, which counts 250 religious organizations among its members. There is disagreement in the ranks over whether criminal investigations should be part of the truth hearings. Some prefer South Africa’s model, where there were guarantees of amnesty for truth-tellers.

Nonetheless, the leaders agree that the priority now is full disclosure. “What our country has done must be exposed and never committed again,” said Rabbi Steve Gutow, president of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs. “Let us learn what we did and put it to rest.” *-Religion News Service*