

Two leaders of faith-based immigrant rights group charge ICE with violating their rights

Kaji Douša and Ravi Ragbir of the New Sanctuary Coalition point to recent reports as evidence that they are being targeted for being outspoken advocates for immigrants.

by [Jack Jenkins](#) in the [April 24, 2019](#) issue



Kaji Douša (left), photo by New Sanctuary Coalition. Ravi Ragbir (right), photo © Erik McGregor.

For Kaji Douša, senior pastor of Park Avenue Christian Church in New York, crossing the US-Mexico border had been fairly uneventful. A former San Diego resident, she had passed through the US Customs and Border Protection checkpoints many times without incident. But in January, as she went from Tijuana back to the United States, something was different.

She described being detained for a “secondary inspection” by a CBP officer and escorted into a room where she was met by two men who wore different uniforms and interrogated her for at least an hour and a half.

Recent reports suggest that the US government is scrutinizing faith leaders such as Douša, who regularly appears on MSNBC to discuss immigration issues. [In internal Department of Homeland Security documents obtained by a San Diego NBC affiliate,](#)

Douša and several others are listed in a government database of activists, journalists, and lawyers. Douša's name and photo appear with a yellow X across her face, indicating that her pass allowing for expedited screening along the Southwest US-Mexico border has been revoked.

"I was so devastated to see myself in my government's crosshairs," she said, noting that she has not been accused of any crimes. "I'm being targeted and intimidated because of my outspoken role as someone who is going to stand up for the most vulnerable people in the world."

Douša had participated in a 40-day Sanctuary Caravan to offer aid to Central American asylum seekers participating in the migrant caravan. The campaign was organized by the New York City-based New Sanctuary Coalition, a faith-based immigrant rights group cochaired by Douša.

In December, at least 30 faith leaders were arrested on a beach near San Diego protesting unjust treatment of asylum seekers. Some faith leaders were dragged on the sand by officers.

Asked to confirm the leaked documents and Douša's account, Andrew Meehan, assistant commissioner of public affairs at CBP, responded with a statement that did not directly refer to Douša or deny the authenticity of the documents uncovered by NBC. It said the agency "initiated an inquiry in February" to address "assaults against Border Patrol Agents" in November—the same month when tensions at the border rose to the point where border agents teargassed people seeking entry into the United States.

The CBP statement reads in part: "In response to recent incidents in November 2018 and January of this year, which included assaults against Border Patrol Agents, CBP identified individuals who may have information relating to the instigators and/or organizers of these attacks. . . . Efforts to gather this type of information are a standard law enforcement practice."

Douša said she was not at the border during the November confrontation and was not questioned about anything in line with the CBP's statement.

The incident is not the first time the New Sanctuary Coalition has challenged immigration officials. In February 2018 NSC, which is based at Judson Memorial Church in New York, and its executive director, Ravi Ragbir, filed a lawsuit with other

groups charging that the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency violated their First Amendment rights by [targeting Ragbir and other prominent immigrant rights advocates for surveillance, arrest, and deportation](#).

Ragbir, who is from Trinidad and Tobago, has a stay of deportation while the case, currently pending in the US Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, goes through the courts.

He sees the reports by NBC and others as supporting his case and the government's actions as an affront to freedom of speech and freedom of religion.

"It confirms what the lawsuit alleges," he wrote in an email.

[A recent article in the *Nation* uncovered evidence via a Freedom of Information Act request](#) that New Sanctuary Coalition is one of several groups that ICE has been tracking in New York City. Demonstrations affiliated with NSC showed up on an "Anti-Trump Protest" spreadsheet distributed by officials in Homeland Security Investigations, ICE's investigative arm, documenting the number of people who had signed up on social media to attend. Douša noted that the coalition also operated under President Obama. —Religion News Service

FOLLOWING UP (Updated May 20, 2019): Ragbir won his case at the US Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, on the basis of his First Amendment rights. [The court's April 25 decision stated](#) that there was "plausible—indeed, strong—evidence that officials responsible for the decision to deport him did so based on their disfavor of Ragbir's speech (and its prominence)." The ruling sent the case back to the district court and ordered a stay of deportation for Ragbir, who is executive director of the New Sanctuary Coalition of New York City, based at Judson Memorial Church.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "People: Kaji Douša and Ravi Ragbir."