



**THE CRITICAL TESTING GROUND OF TENNESSEE:  
RESISTING RACIAL PROTOCOL AND PLANTATION POLITICS**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

ONCE AGAIN, THE COUNTRY IS compelled to come into consciousness of itself, this time on the critical testing ground of Tennessee where lessons, if taken seriously, can aid in overcoming the crisis in American society that virtually everyone concedes. Clearly, it is a compelled consciousness of itself far from heaven and Fox News. Indeed, it is in glaring contradiction to U.S. society's self-medicating notions and illusion-inducing claims of "a more perfect union," "a city on a hill," and a real democracy defined by a "government of the people, by the people and for the people." The reality U.S. society now faces in Tennessee is not only the repercussions from Republican racist expulsion of the two young Black Tennessee House Representatives, Justin Jones and Justin Pearson and giving a reprieve to their White ally, Rep. Gloria Johnson. It must also face and find a way to deal with the perversion of democracy and the poverty of moral principles and practice this crude performance reveals, exposed again to the world.

Indeed, the country, represented in Tennessee, is called into account for its "stop wokeness acts", not only in Florida, but also around the country. And here, it is important to note that these "stop wokeness acts" are not only directed against Black Studies and Black people and other similar studies and peoples of color. It is also against awareness and wokeness of White people themselves, especially young Whites, particularly against facing and correcting the terrible things done and continuing to be done against us and others different and vulnerable in this country and in the world and to the earth and the world itself. It is this unrepentant and corrupt mentality that is also committed to banning and burning books, outlawing learning,

frightening and firing teachers, pretending a moral concern and intellectual competence it does not have and claiming a superiority its inferior conceptions and expressions of humanity clearly contradict.

And as we see in Tennessee and have seen elsewhere, such a mentality is against Black people, especially two young Black men, having the audacity to be the moral and social vanguard in matters of vital importance, speaking truth to the people and to power, and speaking, organizing, demonstrating and acting in the name and interest of all the people. Certainly, as seen by their retaliatory expulsion of Reps. Pearson and Jones, these guardians of a bygone era resent and retaliate against Black people who even dare to demand action to save the lives of children, even their own, and to protect people from the scourge and rage of gun violence. And they demonstrate a special resentment and rage against these young Black men who have the audacity to demonstrate more humanity, intellectual insight and moral agency than the self-defined chosen and elect with its self-proclaimed manifest destiny and duty to conquer, convert, exploit and coopt the world.

Tennessee's rulers, like the compatriots in other parts of the country, are committed to a historical and ongoing *racial protocol* and plantation politics that resists reason, dismisses compelling moral concerns and is committed to dominance at all costs. It is a system of racist rules, requirements and practices for Black people, especially, and other peoples of color to follow in relation to White people under the pain and penalty of repression, injury and death.

Thus, the White and Republican dominated Tennessee legislature found it "disrupt-

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tive and dishonoring” of their business as usual for Reps. Pearson and Rep. Jones to join their constituents, even in recess, in demanding gun reform after a mass shooter killed three children and three adults in Nashville and in light of the continuing mass shootings and killings across the country using military grade guns. More than the respect for the living or the dead, racial protocol demanded punishment for the two young Black men who dared to not be silenced. Indeed, after their mics were repeatedly cut off during the week, they improvised and brought a bullhorn to speak to the issue and to give voice to the people present and absent for whom the right to security of person and freedom from the terror of gun violence is a pressing and priority issue.

Clearly, it is good to see Black people and especially two young Black men at the forefront in the struggle for gun law reform and in defense of democracy. But there are real challenges remaining going forward including: sustaining the current fervor, commitment and courage; remaining involved and active after the media tires and moves on; and avoiding collapsing racial justice and social justice instead of linking them in their distinctiveness. And we must resist the criminalization of dissent and defend democracy without focusing on it as an abstract ideal principle rather than an inclusive practice that privileges and empowers all people, not just one people.

Also, critical and essential to this moment of rightful exposure, righteous anger, and the clarion and compelling call for action is the move from plantation politics born with the racial protocol in both its Southern and Northern forms. Haji Malcolm taught that “What (Black people) experience in this country is one huge plantation system” and the defining difference is not its geography but its various forms and functioning.

Indeed, it is a context which cultivates and compels an unhealthy dependence rather than interdependence of persons and people, a deference to Whites rather than a continuing demand and struggle for equal mutual respect and shared status, shared wealth and shared power even among allies. This is the meaning of our contention that our oppressor cannot be our teacher and our allies cannot be our tutor. We must speak our own special cultural truth and make our own unique contribution with others in how this country is reconceived and reconstructed.

**|** AND TO MOVE BEYOND THIS MOMENT and emerging movement, we must place it within the context of the overall struggle to radically reconceive and reconstruct U.S. society structurally. This means practicing a freedom and a self-determination dedicated to a shared and inclusive dignity affirming, life-enhancing and world-preserving good for everyone and everywhere. It is these values and practices that the two young Black leaders, Justin Pearson and Justin Jones, rightly calls building on and advancing the legacy and struggle of our ancestors.▲

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