



January 19, 2021

Honorable Delegate Anne R. Kaiser
Chair, House Ways and Means Committee
House Office Building, Room 131
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: Testimony in SUPPORT of HB53 – Election Law - Voting Rights- Imprisoned Felons

Dear Chair Anne R. Kaiser and House Ways and Means Committee Members:

On behalf of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, I thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of HB53 entitled Election Law - Voting Rights- Imprisoned Felons. CAIR is America's largest Muslim civil rights and advocacy organization. Its mission is to enhance the understanding of Islam, protect civil rights, promote justice, and empower American Muslims.

According to the Sentencing Project, felony disenfranchisement laws block millions of Americans from voting because of a felony conviction.¹ Currently in Maryland, inmates awaiting trial or those convicted of misdemeanors may vote, but convicted felons are not allowed to do so while serving out their sentences.

CAIR supports the measure to extend voting rights to imprisoned felons for several reasons. Civic participation reduces recidivism and ultimately improves public safety. It gives a sense of agency, builds self-worth and gives inmates the opportunity to exercise autonomy.

Last July, Washington, D.C. lawmakers voted to allow felons to vote while in prison, joining Maine and Vermont in expanding this right to such an extent to those who are incarcerated.²

Elections are the fundamental backbone of a democratic society. The ability to vote in our country is what separates us from autocracies and dictatorships. Stripping convicted felons serving out their sentence, of the right to vote, isolates and silences their voices.

Inmates who have the opportunity to vote have an incentive to feel empowered. They are more likely to have successful reentry upon their release. It gives them a chance to voice their concerns regarding the criminal justice system, which they have experienced firsthand.

We support this bill because it protects voter rights, restores a measure of dignity and self-worth among a silenced population, and helps promote public safety. Therefore, we respectfully urge your vote in favor of it. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Zainab Chaudry, Pharm.D.
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Council on American-Islamic Relations
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1. The Sentencing Project <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/voting-in-jails/>
Accessed January 19, 2021
2. Zauzmer, Julie and Wiggins, Ovetta. D.C. and Maryland have new policies allowing prisoners to vote. Making it happen is hard. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2020/09/28/dc-maryland-prisoners-voting/> Accessed January 19, 2021.