

## In a World Obsessed with Passport Tiers, Citizenship Is Personal and Political

*Robtel Neajai Pailey receives an unwelcome reminder that immigration hierarchies are maintained as a form of erasure and silencing.*

Late last week, I was informed that I would not be able to travel to Dubai for an important meeting scheduled months ago.

Like other countries across the globe, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) halted travel for those with Guinean, Liberian, and Sierra Leonean passports during the height of the Ebola outbreak. It has not lifted these restrictions.

The miniature red suitcase I had packed lay abandoned on my wooden floor. I caressed my dark green Liberian passport as if to reassure this inanimate marker of identity that my citizenship was not on trial here.

The spectre of Ebola had simply triumphed over reason.



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Yet, the irony of this episode hasn't escaped me. Dubai is a hub for cross-continental travel. In 2013 alone, the UAE boasted the fifth largest international migrant pool in the world — hosting 7.8 million foreign residents out of a total population of 9.2 million. Furthermore, foreign labour migrants account for 90% of the country's private workforce, mostly from Pakistan, Bangladesh and India.

Unlike the US and UK, where anti-immigrant sentiments have reached fever pitch, the UAE seems more pliant to international travellers. So, naturally, I thought it was odd when I attempted to complete the online visa form and Liberia was not listed as an option for “present nationality”. Nor were Guinea and Sierra Leone.

This was punishment for simply being born in Africa with a particular African passport. Even the organisers of the meeting were shocked, disbelief sprinkled in their conciliatory emails and phone

calls. All diplomatic channels had proved futile. The verdict was irreversible. I would not be getting on that plush Emirates flight.

Never mind that Liberia was declared **Ebola-free** on May 9, exactly one month ago.

Never mind that I have not been to my homeland in over 10 months. Nor was I asked about recent travel there.

Never mind that my country and its people are slowly trying to recover from an invisible foe that killed nearly **5 000** and infected about **11 000**.

In the past year, I've seen my passport **scrutinised** more intently than ever before, but the UAE blanket bias felt like adding salt to a fresh wound.

At first, I experienced blinding rage with a touch of indignation. The kind that gurgles in the pit of your gut, and then explodes.

Then I was amused by the absurdity of it all. If I were travelling directly from Guinea, Liberia or Sierra Leone and had a passport from a country on UAE's **list** of exemptions, I would have gotten a visa on arrival with ease. No questions asked.

Mild acceptance slowly seeped in, reminding me that we maintain immigration hierarchies as a form of erasure and silencing. In our obsession with citizenship tiers, west is best. North trumps south. And white is inevitably right.

Never mind black/brown solidarity. Or does that even exist?

I have shied away from returning home fearing the kind of immobility that sees people not as complex beings but as nameless, faceless "threats" to national security. A sedentarist kind of metaphysic that keeps *certain* people in their place.

People like me.

Truth be told, the natural human compulsion for mobility is currently under threat because of irrational immigration bans such as the UAE's.

For all the rhetoric about globalisation's free flow of ideas, capital and technology, the world remains obsessed with restricting the movement of people who don't fit into our neat boxes of what is tolerable or even desirable. The UAE saga is a microcosm of a larger debate about the need for immigration reforms worldwide.

The scapegoating of migrants across the globe deflects attention from the fact that most countries have failed to improve the quality of life of their domestic citizens. Afro-phobic **attacks** in South Africa, Australia's **Pacific Solution**, and the plight of **Rohingya Muslims** off the coast of Indonesia are extreme examples. Immigration is framed as a zero-sum game, with finite rights and resources available to a select few.

I watch migrants who look like me risk their lives on sardine-packed, rickety boats to **cross** the Mediterranean, and know intuitively that they wouldn't flee if they had a choice. With each desperate attempt to cross over, what they are effectively saying is that Europe must make amends for waging unjustifiable wars and supporting authoritarian regimes in some of their countries of origin.

Centuries ago, Africans were so eager to escape lives of bondage, some dove to sudden death in the Atlantic. They were the first forced migrants I can recall. Now, many of us travel across these same waters for short, medium and long-term trips. Not because of some deep, abiding love for

life abroad, but because it gives us a measure of flexibility. It keeps us physically connected to the rest of the world.

And for someone like me with chronic wanderlust, the ability to travel unencumbered is almost as necessary as oxygen itself.

Although a self-professed transnational, I used to be suspicious of Liberians who changed their nationality out of convenience. But after interviewing more than 200 of us across five urban centres in West Africa, North America and Europe for my doctoral **thesis** on citizenship construction and practice, I have become more empathetic. Many of us make the switch because of the access so easily denied me by the UAE.

But we shouldn't have to.

I can't say I would ever consider exchanging my passport for another, especially since Liberia prohibits dual citizenship. Yet, the UAE debacle has shaken me to the core. It's made me acutely aware that citizenship is both personal and political.

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**Robtel Neajai Pailey** is a Liberian academic, activist and author based at SOAS, University of London.

**The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.**

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