

Civil rights leaders meet with President Obama on voting rights

Written by Freddie Allen, NNPA Washington Correspondent
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WASHINGTON (NNPA) – The Voting Rights Act is down, but not out and civil rights leaders joined President Obama and Attorney General Eric H. Holder, Jr. at the White House Monday to discuss renewed efforts in the fight against voter discrimination.

In a statement released after the meeting, Al Sharpton, civil rights activist and president of the National Action Network said: "Today the United States President and Attorney General met with a broad coalition of civil rights and voting rights leaders to assure us that they will continue to work with us to protect every American's right to vote."

Sharpton continued: "We had a great alarm when the Supreme Court ruled against Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act but after meeting with the President and the Attorney General we were assured that the Voting Rights Act may be wounded but it is not dead. It is not even critically wounded; it can and will be revived."

Last month, the Supreme Court, struck down Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, effectively neutering what many called the crown jewel of the Civil Rights Movement. Section 4 required all or parts of 15 states with track records of voter discrimination to get "preclearance" from the Justice Department or a federal court for any changes they wanted to make to voting laws. Within hours after the Supreme Court ruling in *Shelby County v. Holder*, a number of state lawmakers from previously covered states announced plans to move forward with restrictive voting laws that disproportionately affect minorities, the elderly and young voters.

Texas is one of those states.

The Lone Star State has a history of voting discrimination, the latest entry due to redistricting plans that disproportionately affected minority voters.

During a speech at the National Urban League's annual convention Attorney General Eric Holder said that, "the State of Texas should be required to go through a preclearance process whenever it changes its voting laws and practices."

Holder plans to use remaining sections of the law go after states that continue practices that

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intentionally discriminate against voters.

Barbara Arnwine, president and executive director of the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, said that uncovering and fighting voter discrimination in the current landscape is a daunting task, but she was encouraged to see how much the Department of Justice is strategizing and positioning itself to be a real force in combating racial discrimination.

Kasim Reed, mayor of Atlanta said that civil rights leaders and voting rights advocates will be doing more education than ever.

"While there are a number of adverse tactics being used to undermine the right to vote," said Reed. "While there are a number of adverse tactics being used to undermine the right to vote, if we do our job we will make sure that people maintain access to the ballot."

Reed said that he plans to work with mayors across the nation to form partnerships with civil rights organizations to assist in voter engagement and education.

Marc Morial, president and CEO of the National Urban League, said that voters must "be particularly vigilant on proposals in state legislatures when they happen, not when they gain momentum, but when they happen."

Arnwine said that her group will be looking at all the states and plans to conduct hearings nationwide to assist Congress in obtaining the data that will be necessary to create a new voting map.

"[President Obama] is committed to making sure that the right to vote is secure and strong and that he's also calling on people to do everything they can to protect their right to vote," said Arnwine. "Ultimately, it's about what the citizens will do."

Arnwine's group is part of a larger coalition formed to assist embattled voters around the nation (The Election Protection Website is www.866ourvote.org ; telephone, 866/OURVOTE).

Melanie L. Campbell, president and CEO of The National Coalition on Black Civic Participation, said that young voters have increased their civic engagement, rallying around recent Supreme Court decisions on affirmative action and the Voting Rights Act.

"Our young people are connecting the dots," said Campbell. "They connect the Stand Your Ground law to the voting rights law, so part of what's going to happen during the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington, you will see young people coming here for training and teach-ins, because they understand that the rights that need protecting all center around the Voting Rights Act."

The commemorative march in Washington will be on Saturday, Aug. 24.

"The Supreme Court decision has had a catalyzing effect. The Trayvon Martin tragedy combined with the Supreme Court decision [in *Shelby v. Holder*] really has energized people,"

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said Morial. "You've got Moral Mondays in North Carolina the Dream Defenders in Florida. The great thing about the Dream Defenders is seeing young people that are engaging and they're not looking for permission."