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New Zealand: shining light, or breeding ground for violent extremism?

You may not have heard of the Somalian refugee Guled Mire. He was in the news last month when he appeared before a parliamentary select committee urging the government to remove what he described as a racist restriction on refugees from Africa and the Middle East.

He was referring to a policy introduced in 2009 which requires refugees from those regions to have existing family connections in New Zealand in order to be resettled here.

Speaking in support of a World Vision petition asking for the restriction to be lifted, Mire said it was an unnecessary and racist requirement that shut vulnerable people out.

It wasn't the first time Mire had spoken out about the supposedly racist society that provided a sanctuary for him, his mother and his eight siblings after they fled civil war in Somalia 22 years ago.

Only days after the Christchurch mosque massacres in March, Mire said on TVNZ's *Breakfast* programme that he had experienced racism almost daily in New Zealand.

The Christchurch attacks, he said, were no surprise. "I think it's time that we stopped living in denial about the very form of racism that has existed in this country for such a long time. It's nothing new to us."

He struck a similar note three months later when he was interviewed for a moralistic Australian-made documentary shown on Al Jazeera television. *New Zealand's Dark Days* questioned this country's reputation as a harmonious, peaceful place and said warnings about rising Islamophobia had been repeatedly ignored.

Mire, who has worked as a government policy adviser and is described on a public speakers' website as an activist and writer, challenged the "This is not us" speech given by Jacinda Ardern in Christchurch after the shootings.

"This 'This is not us' idea is denying our lived experiences," he told the interviewer. "That racism, that hatred that exists in this nation, *is* us." He said the Muslim community in New Zealand had been calling out "violent extremism" for years.

This view aligned with a persistent far-left narrative that surfaced following the Christchurch atrocities. According to this alternative narrative, the slaughter of 51 innocent Muslims was the inevitable consequence of all-pervasive race hatred and white supremacist attitudes. This view overlooked the inconvenient fact that the alleged killer was not a New Zealander and evidently acted alone.

Mire was in the news again on Radio New Zealand this week, when he took exception to National leader Simon Bridges' dismissive comments about the Ardern-initiated "Christchurch Call". Responding to Bridges' statement that the government should concentrate on problems such as homelessness and the measles epidemic, Mire said: "It's the same sort of rhetoric used to basically marginalise us people from minority backgrounds again and again. We've always felt as though we're not accepted as New Zealanders and comments like that affirm it."

But hang on. New Zealand gave Mire and his family refuge after they fled a dangerous, violent country. It also gave him an education and the right to speak his mind, a freedom few people enjoy in the part of the world he comes from. Surely that must count for something.

And before anyone dismisses that statement as the typical racist bigotry of a privileged white guy, perhaps we should take note of the "lived experiences" of other Muslim immigrants, some of which are strikingly at odds with the impression conveyed by Mire.

For example, there's Gamal Fouda, the imam of Al Noor Mosque, where 42 worshippers were shot in the March killings. Speaking in Dunedin this week, the imam said New Zealand had been a shining light to the world following the shootings.

He recalled that when he first came to New Zealand after 9/11, he was initially afraid to walk in the streets in his religious robes for fear of being attacked. His fear began to subside after he was greeted by a stranger with the unfamiliar words "Hello, bro".

He said he was now proud to be a Kiwi. "This is my land. It is the place of my family and my children. It is my turangawaewae. I love this soil. *I love us because we are one*" [the italics are mine].

The imam noted that there was still hatred and division and people needed to speak out against racism. But otherwise the tone of his message could hardly have been more at variance with that of Guled Mire.

Then there's Abbas Nazari, an Afghani who was among the Tampa refugees given a home in New Zealand in 2001 after being refused entry to Australia. Then seven years old, Nazari settled in Christchurch with his family and this year won a Fulbright Scholarship after graduating from the University of Canterbury with first-class honours in international relations and diplomacy.

He told *The Guardian* earlier this year that he recalled his family being given a warm welcome by a huge contingent of locals when they arrived at Christchurch Airport and said the warmth and acceptance they experienced then set the tone for the family's new life.

He went on to say: "I can't recall any instances of racism, and that's the same experience for the vast majority of my family and community. I can't recall any instances where I was marginalised or I was on the receiving end of a whole heap of crap at all.

"We wove naturally into the fabric of New Zealand society. So when I hear stories of prejudice and racism, I know for sure that it exists but my experience in New Zealand has been amazingly warm and welcoming."

It doesn't sound like the same country Guled Mire describes. And then there was the story this week about the Hutt City council election candidate Shazly Rasheed, an immigrant from the Maldives, whose billboards were defaced with swastikas and racist messages.

That Rasheed's election advertising was targeted, presumably because of her skin colour, is despicable. But on the plus side she said she had lived in New Zealand for 20 years and only once been racially abused, by skinheads in Hamilton.

Even a single instance of racial abuse is one too many, but otherwise Rasheed's "lived experience" seems at variance with Guled Mire's too. You have to wonder whether the problem is with him.

I think back too to the dignified response of the Muslims who survived the Christchurch attacks. Their reaction was not one of anger, but of sadness that this terrible thing had happened in a country that they thought of – and still think of – as inclusive and welcoming.

I remember the Christchurch Muslim woman who told the BBC she and her family had come to New Zealand because it was safe and that she had never felt threatened here. And I recall the thousands of New Zealanders who showed their solidarity with the Muslim community by attending public vigils, setting up tribute sites and donating millions to a Givealittle appeal. I find it hard to reconcile all this with Guled Mire's view of New Zealand.

Which image of New Zealand is the more accurate: the hateful, racist one, or the tolerant, inclusive one? I'll go with the latter, thanks. It's pointless to deny that racism exists in New Zealand, but that doesn't make this a racist country. It seems to me that Guled Mire is himself guilty of the divisive rhetoric he accuses others of.