Voting Rights Act Vigil Set by Civil Rights Groups

Written by Robert ID2820
Friday, 07 July 2006 12:16 -

U.S. House Bill H.R. 9 entitled 'The Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks and Coretta Scott King Voting Rights Act Reauthorization and Amendments Act of 2006', will renew provisions of the 1965 historic act that are set to expire in 2007.

Last month, the legislation was abruptly taken off the House calendar the morning of a scheduled vote after a small group of southern lawmakers voiced objections to key provisions.

Wednesday, July 12 a coalition of civil rights groups will converge upon the U.S. Capitol to hold a vigil urging prompt passage, without amendment, of the Voting Rights Act reauthorization, otherwise known as H.R. 9.

The Black Leadership Forum and the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation will lead the vigil, which will begin at 6 p.m. in front of the Longworth House Office Building, at the corner of New Jersey Avenue and South Capitol Street.

Originally enacted in 1965, the Voting Rights Act has enfranchised millions of African American citizens by eliminating discriminatory practices, such as literacy tests, poll taxes and other means that discourage political participation.

"Our Wednesday vigil aims to shine a major spotlight on one of the most important civil rights laws, whose protections are as critical now as they were in the 1960s," said Black Leadership Forum Executive Director Joe Leonard. "Our nation cannot afford to allow a few dissenting voices to undermine and reverse years of hard-fought gains. Congressional lawmakers must resist the few objectors and pass the reauthorization now - not later."

Melanie Campbell, executive director for the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation, referred to the vigil as a testament to the courage and spirit of the bill's namesakes.

"As a nation, we recently mourned the passing of Mrs. Coretta Scott King and Mrs. Rosa Parks - two of America's fiercest warriors for social change and justice," she said. "How then, can a bill

carrying the names of these brave and courageous women, coupled with the fire of freedom fighter Fannie Lou Hamer, not be the beacon for hope, and spirit that each of these women wished for all Americans, equally."

National Urban League President Marc H. Morial and NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund President and Director-Counsel Theodore Shaw will also be present at the vigil alongside with several other civil rights leaders.

"If the Voting Rights Act is going to be preserved with all of its protections, which have been so essential to guaranteeing participation to those who have been excluded from American political life, Congress must act now," Shaw said. "I am confident that this vigil will send a loud and clear message that the civil rights community won"t allow legislative inaction on this very important piece of legislation."

Recent news that the House will address the Voting Rights Act reauthorization next week has raised hope among the civil rights groups that Congress will do the right thing and pass the bill soon.

"I am hopeful that our vigil will become more of celebration of the bill's passage than a protest against congressional inaction," Morial observed. "I want to thank all the U.S. House members who are standing by their convictions in spite of pressure from a few recalcitrant lawmakers. But the proof of the strength of those convictions still lies in their ability to get the legislation to a House floor vote and passed."

Three of the Voting Rights Act's key provisions will expire in September of 2007, if the legislation is not acted upon. Section 5 requires covered jurisdictions with a long history of voting discrimination to obtain approval or "preclearance" before making any changes to their voting practices. Section 203 requires certain jurisdictions to provide language assistance to voters in areas with high concentrations of citizens with limited English proficiency and illiteracy rates higher than the national average. And Sections 6-9 authorize the federal government to use observers in elections to monitor Voting Rights Act compliance and document abuses.

National Urban League is the nation's oldest and largest community-based movement devoted to empowering African Americans to enter the economic and social mainstream. Founded in

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1912, the National Urban League, headquartered in New York City, spearheads the non-partisan efforts of its local affiliates. There are over 100 local affiliates of the National Urban League located in 35 states and the District of Columbia providing direct services to more than 2 million people nationwide through programs, advocacy and research.

The Black Leadership Forum, Inc. is a confederation of the leadership of 28 of the nation's most prominent and prestigious civil rights and service organizations. Member organizations include the NAACP, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, National Council of Negro Women, among others. Founded in 1977, the forum's mission is to promote creative and coordinated black leadership, diverse in membership but clear on its priority, to empower African Americans to improve their own lives and to expand their opportunities to fully participate in American social, economic and political life.

The National Coalition on Black Civic Participation is a national non-profit, non-partisan civic coalition of over 80 member organizations dedicated to enhancing the full participation of the Black community in all levels of civil society. Over its 30-year history, NCBCP has served as an effective convener and facilitator at the local, state and national levels of efforts to address the disenfranchisement of African Americans and other marginalized communities. For more information please visit these websites:

National Coalition on Black Civic Participation http://www.ncbcp.org

National Urban League web site http://www.nul.org