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Is there hope for amnesty under Bush?

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At lot of Filipinos I know voted for George W. Bush in the last election. They had various reasons for supporting Bush, but I noticed there were some common denominators.

For one, many Filipino American doctors voted for Bush because of his promise to limit malpractice awards. This is welcome news for doctors who complain of being bogged down by skyrocketing malpractice insurance costs.

There were also those who cast their vote for Bush because of his policy on outsourcing jobs to developing countries like the Philippines. Still, there were those who believed that the world is a better place because of Bush's war against terrorism.

At any rate, George W. Bush emerged in the last election with a fresh mandate—what he calls his “political capital”—which he will spend on his agenda for the next four years.

Is immigration reform anywhere in his agenda?

If the previous term of President Bush is any indication, we can hazard a pretty good guess where immigration policy will go in the next four years. Looking back, the need to fix the broken immigration policy of the US did not seem to figure prominently in the Bush administration's agenda then, except to the extent of tightening border controls supposedly in the interest of national security.

The centerpiece of this border security item in his agenda is, of course, the Patriot Act—a piece of legislation that has earned notoriety for its disrespect, if not violation, of the civil liberties of immigrants.

Many aspects of immigration law and policy cried out for reform during the past four years to no avail. For instance, Section 245 (i) of the Immigration and Nationality Act was not extended.

This legal provision is practically the only window of opportunity for undocumented migrants to legalize their status without having to go home and being barred to return to the US for 3 or 10 years. As a result, more and more of these migrants have been driven underground when Section 245 (i) expired on them.

The Development Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act was not passed. This bipartisan bill would have provided children of undocumented migrants who have lived in the US an opportunity to adjust their status and not be bound by their parents' immigration status.

There are also two immigration reform bills that have been pending for many months. One is the bipartisan Hagel-Daschle Bill and the other is the Democrat initiative called the Safe, Orderly, Legal Visas and Enforcement Act of 2004, also called the “SOLVE Act.” Both of these are far more comprehensive than President Bush's guest worker program, but were not able to take off despite the urgent need for reform.

The guest worker program, as proposed, leaves much to be desired. It can hardly qualify as an effort at immigration reform. Unlike the above-mentioned pending immigration reform bills,

the guest worker program does not have concrete provisions that deal with family reunification and national security.

It does not address the serious backlog in the processing of family immigrant visas, nor does it provide for earned adjustment of status. Neither does it address the national security issue created by the presence of an estimated 8 million undocumented migrants. It is ominously quiet about providing a clear path to US citizenship.

On his way to Mexico City last week, Secretary of State Colin Powell said the Bush administration will push for the guest worker program. Some believe that is just about the only thing the Bush administration is prepared to do for immigration policy reform.

In the meantime, the migrant community has pinned its hopes on the two pending bills in Congress that might just make their American dream come true. Will this dream turn into a nightmare?