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Protester's arrest tied to 'leak' by Edison cop

Probe links officer spoke to brother, an ICE lawyer

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The deportation arrest of an Indian man during a rally protesting alleged police brutality in Edison came after information was passed between the accused officer and his brother, an attorney with the federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency, people familiar with the case said.

The public arrest of Rajnikant Parikh as he marched in front of Edison town hall Aug. 2 inflamed tensions between the township's burgeoning Asian-Indian community and the police department, and led to a four-month internal investigation reviewed by the state attorney general and the Middlesex County Prosecutor's Office.

Until the arrest, not even Parikh's supporters knew he had a fugitive warrant based on a 10-year-old outstanding deportation order. Police Chief George Mieczkowski and Edison Mayor Jun Choi said they were unaware of the plan to arrest him at the rally.

Last month, the mayor and police chief released a joint statement calling the arrest an "unfortunate incident," and blamed improper communication between an Edison officer and an ICE official. They declined to name either.

But three people with knowledge of the internal investigation said the connection between the agencies was the Edison officer whom Parikh accused of brutality, Michael Dotro, and his brother, ICE attorney Sam Dotro. The sources spoke on the condition they not be identified because they were ordered not to discuss the case.

Choi and Mieczkowski said the internal investigation determined that two Edison officers knew of the plan to arrest Parikh at the rally, but they had acted without informing their superiors.

"While the arrest of Parikh served a legitimate law enforcement purpose, the timing and the environment of the arrest was inappropriate," according to a joint statement released last month by Choi and Mieczkowski.

Parikh was arrested at the Aug. 2 rally specifically to discredit him and his complaints against Michael Dotro, the sources said. Before federal agents arrested him, Parikh and his supporters spent nearly a month calling for Michael Dotro's suspension.

Michael Dotro arrested Parikh, a 30-year-old liquor store clerk, July 4 on charges that Parikh hit the officer and incited others to join in the attack as Dotro tried to disperse hundreds watching an illegal fireworks display at a township apartment complex.

The next day, Parikh accused Dotro of roughing him up during the arrest, and circulated a picture of Parikh's bruised face. Parikh also accused Dotro of racism. Two Indians brought similar complaints against Dotro a year earlier, but an internal affairs review of that incident cleared the officer.

Responding to Parikh's complaints, Edison police launched an internal affairs review.

Just as Parikh went public with his complaints against Dotro, the officer contacted his brother at the federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency, sources said. The conversation ultimately led to an investigation by ICE and the Aug. 2 arrest, the sources said.

That afternoon, more than 100 people had gathered outside Edison town hall, the crowd split between Parikh supporters and police supporters. Minutes after he arrived, Parikh was confronted by two

plainclothes ICE agents.

He was arrested on a decade-old deportation order on charges that he skipped a Texas immigration hearing. Parikh was taken inside police headquarters and held for two hours before agents drove him to the Middlesex County jail in North Brunswick.

Parikh's supporters immediately claimed the police colluded with ICE to silence Parikh. Choi and Mieczkowski denied knowledge of the planned arrest and any police involvement. The day after the arrest, an internal investigation cleared Michael Dotro of wrongdoing in the July 4 arrest.

ICE officials said the Aug. 2 arrest was prompted by a call from the Edison Police Department and resulted from "extensive cooperation" from the local department. The police chief denied any knowledge of those communications at the time.

In their statement last month, the police chief and mayor said the results of the Edison police investigation confirmed that an officer had contacted ICE about Parikh, but that the officer did not inform his superiors. At least one other department officer, they said, knew of the plan to arrest Parikh. Mieczkowski and Choi declined to name the officers. Mieczkowski said the department has since created a new policy for how officers handle requests for assistance from outside law enforcement agencies. The two officers involved were ordered to receive counseling, Mieczkowski said.

Michael Dotro, a patrolman with three years on the force who earns \$60,000 a year, did not respond to multiple attempts to reach him for comment. Sam Dotro, who earns more than \$87,000 a year as an ICE attorney, also declined to discuss the case through a woman who answered the door at his home.

Scott Weber, field director of the ICE Office of Detention and Removal in Newark, declined to comment about Sam Dotro's involvement or if the agency knew about Parikh's claims against Michael Dotro before making the arrest.

"Information was received from the Edison Police Department regarding an alien who was wanted on an ICE fugitive warrant," ICE spokesman Michael Gilhooly said in a statement in response to questions about the timing of the arrest and Sam Dotro's role. "(We) acted on that information and arrested Rajnikant Parikh."

Parikh remains at the Hudson County jail in Kearny. In an interview last week, he said Michael Dotro's name came up a couple of times as he was being processed after his arrest at the rally, though he didn't see the officer that day.

Parikh's attorney, Ravi Bhalla, said the Dotro brothers' involvement in ICE's arrest of Parikh raised serious questions.

"I find it very disturbing, to put it mildly," Bhalla said. "It certainly calls into question (Michael Dotro's) credibility as an officer."

The original charges against Parikh from the July arrest are pending. He also is fighting his deportation based on arguments that he applied for permanent residency in 2005 after he married Julie Patel, an Edison medical student who is an American citizen.

"They could've arrested me when I applied for a green card," said Parikh. "They wanted me, they could've arrested me anyways, anywhere."

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