

HAWAII

Hirono Takes Stand Against Attorney General Nominee

The Hawaii senator, who moved to the United States as a child, chided Sen. Jeff Sessions for his stances on immigration reform.

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2

Hawaii Sen. Mazie Hirono, who sits on the Senate Judiciary Committee, said Thursday she plans to vote against the nomination of her colleague, Sen. Jeff Sessions, a conservative Republican from Alabama, to serve as U.S. attorney general.

Sessions is one of President-elect Donald Trump's most contested picks for the Cabinet because of his hard-line views on issues such as abortion and immigration. More than 150 civil rights, women's rights and pro-immigration groups, including the NAACP, People for the American Way and the Human Rights Campaign, have flooded the Judiciary Committee with letters opposing his appointment.

Opponents say the long-time senator is racially insensitive, opposes abortion rights and is hostile to laws protecting gays. His supporters say he is well-qualified for the job because of his experience as a former U.S. attorney and state attorney general.



Sen. Mazie Hirono serves on Senate Judiciary Committee that is holding confirmation hearings for the attorney general nominee.

In a statement, Hirono said that she respected Sessions “as a colleague,” but was “deeply concerned about how he would use his prosecutorial discretion to uphold voting rights, protect civil rights and protect a woman’s rights to choose.”

She got more personal in her spoken comments at Sessions’ confirmation hearing Tuesday.

“You probably know, Sen. Sessions, that I am an immigrant,” she said. “And you indicated in one response that you would want immigration reform to center around skills-based immigration reform. And if that were the case, my mother who brought me to this country to escape an abusive marriage would not have been able to come to this country.”

Hirono added that Trump’s views had “terrified” immigrants, gay and transgender people, women and religious minorities.

Sessions, who has repeatedly led Senate fights against comprehensive immigration reform, is expected to aggressively enforce immigration laws and advocate for them to be more restrictive.

The attorney general reports to the president, heads the Justice Department and acts as the nation's chief law enforcement officer.

In his remarks at the confirmation hearing, Sessions went out of his way to stress that he would maintain intellectual independence from Trump.

“The Office of the Attorney General of the United States is not a political position, and anyone who holds it must have total fidelity to the laws and the Constitution of the United States,” Sessions said Tuesday. “He or she must be committed to following the law. He or she must be willing to tell the president ‘no’ if he overreaches. He or she cannot be a mere rubber stamp.”

The Senate has a long history of an exaggerated formality and comity among its members, including a studied appearance of deferential respect. Hirono's decision to vote against Sessions could cause some animosity, particularly among colleagues who enthusiastically endorsed him, including Richard Shelby of Alabama and Susan Collins of Maine, who is one of the few remaining moderate Republicans in the chamber.

Sessions is personally well liked in the Senate. In his opening statement at the hearing, committee Chairman Chuck Grassley, an Iowa Republican, quoted three Senate Democrats describing Sessions as “wonderful to work with,” “a man of his word,” and “straightforward and fair.”

Sessions appears likely to win confirmation. Until November 2013, it took a three-fifth's vote of the Senate, or 60 votes, to approve a Cabinet nominee, but Senate Democrats pushed through a rule change to make it a simple majority. Democrats took the action to gain approval of President Barack Obama's appointees in the face of stonewalling by Senate Republicans.

Three years later, the Democrats are now the minority party. It takes only 51 votes to confirm a presidential appointee, and there are 52 Republicans.

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