



## Cuba's War on Women Mirrors a Wider War on Human Rights

Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, Nancy Pelosi and fellow Democrats continue to talk about the “war on women” allegedly being waged against American women. Meanwhile, only ninety miles away in Communist Cuba a real war is waged on dissident women, who have been thrown into prisons where they are systematically beaten, tortured and starved. The plight of these female prisoners has been described in detail in human rights reports, memoirs and news reports, but to little avail. Feminist Democrats are more anxious to rail against Republicans and social conservatives in order to rally single women to vote Democratic. The feminist leaders’ willingness to turn a blind eye to what is occurring in Cuba tells us much about their phony concern for women.

The facts on the ground in Cuba also tell a story about the failure of Communism—something else the American left does not like to talk about after its long history of cheering the Cuban Revolution. We still hear rhetoric in many quarters about how Cuba has such great health care, education and social equality. Left-wing documentary filmmaker Michael Moore made the film *Sicko* in 2007 touting Cuban socialized health care.

### Appalling Prison Conditions

Reports of brutal treatment of female political prisoners in Cuba are not new. In 2003, the Cuban Foundation for Human Rights reported on the gruesome conditions and treatment of women detained in the Holguin penitentiary, operated by Castro’s State Security. The report detailed how female political prisoners were confined to narrow cells with no sunlight, cement beds, a hole in the ground for a toilet, and infestations of rats, roaches and crawling insects. These prisoners lacked adequate water, let alone running water. The food they received was often rotten and in such small quantities that even some prison officials complained.

These cells were called “drawers,” in which women remained weeks and months. The darkness of the cells led some women to have complete mental breakdowns. Sedatives were administered regularly to keep the women

quiet. Nonetheless, screams of the tormented prisoners echoed throughout the day and night. When one panicked prisoner finally could not take it anymore, she began shouting, “Get me out! Get me out! I am suffocating.” The only answer she got was a guard who told her to “stick your nose through the hole and shut up.”

Other reports of the inhumane treatment of female and male political prisoners continue to appear. In January 2003, Maritza Lugo Fernandez reported about her experience in Cuban prisons. She was first arrested for her activities in defense of human rights and for her participation in an opposition group in Cuba. She was finally exiled by the Cuban government under pressure from Amnesty International in 2002. Her experiences are detailed in her report printed by the Institute for Cuban-American Studies in Miami. Lest she be dismissed as an anti-Castro reactionary, her report reveals a true commitment to political equality and the rights of women. She declares at the outset of her report, “Since the creation of prisons in the world, especially women’s prisons, the suffering endured by all the women who had the misfortune of having to live through this sad experience has been great.” This is not the voice of a reactionary, but of a courageous female dissident who understands what a real war on women means.

In her report, Fernandez details the numerous abuses of female prisoners and the pervasive oppression of the Cuban people. She notes, “In Cuba, where tyranny, despotism, hunger, poverty, and injustice reign, as meted out by that abusive and murderous regime, everything is a crime. . . . Seeking out sources for a better living is dangerous and can carry long prison terms for Cubans, unless one has the backing of the communist mafia, which controls everything.” Many are women placed in detention centers with high-density populations. Political and criminal prisoners are placed together. Those who do manage to get out are so psychologically scarred from their experience that they never recover.

Fernandez asserts that over 50 percent of the prisoners are convicted for economic crimes against the state. These figures are not totally accurate because the government

often convicts political dissidents, especially women, for other crimes. Prostitution is so pervasive in Cuba that in 2002 the regime built a special prison system for young Cuban women arrested for prostitution.

Conditions in Cuban prisons are inhumane by anyone's standard. Punishment cells are one meter wide and two meters long. Toilets in these cells are an 8-inch-diameter hole in the floor, located at one end of the cell. At night, roaches and rats crawl through these holes. Located over the hole is a 2-inch water pipe for drinking and bathing purposes. Prison authorities turn on the water for a few minutes a day, spraying the cell so everything becomes wet, including the concrete slabs, without mattresses, where prisoners sleep. The cells are cold in the winter and oppressively hot in the summer. These cells lack electricity or windows, so prisoners don't know whether it is night or day.

Regular cells are not much better. Most are approximately 3 meters wide and 4 meters long and house four prisoners. The toilet is a hole and water comes only at bath time. A few larger cells house up to 16 or more inmates. Here there are iron bunk beds. These larger cells are especially dangerous because violent criminals are mixed with other prisoners. Food for all prisoners is of poor quality, often spoiled, and usually consists of one type of food. For example, when cabbage is in season, it is served for lunch and dinner. Breakfast consists of a small chunk of bread and tea. Often meals arrive late because fuel shortages cause the kitchen to be closed. Hungry women race to the mess hall—except political prisoners, who slowly walk to mess to show their independence from prison authorities. The pathetic diet is supplemented by family visitors, who are allowed to bring non-perishable food to inmates during visiting hours.

These conditions breed violence, which is greater in the women's prisons than in men's penitentiaries. Sometimes this violence is self-inflicted: female prisoners will stab themselves with wires or sharp objects in hopes of being sent to the infirmary. Homosexuality is widespread, with gangs forcing women into subservience. Further violence is inflicted by male guards and prison officials "reeducating" the prisoners. Male guards often force women to have sex with them. In punishment cells, prison guards are allowed to use rubber canes, known as "tonfas," to beat prisoners. There are reports, as Fernandez and other human rights groups note, that prisoners have been used without their consent for medical experiments, including the testing of vaccines.

Each morning and evening a head count is taken with women standing at attention for long periods while they are expected to recite Communist sayings. However, many

women have turned to prayer to Christ and the Virgin Mary. Throughout the prisons, small prayer groups get together to pray the Rosary, perform the laying-on of hands, and say grace at night. Prison guards are ever watchful for signs of religious devotion. Those caught in prayer groups are usually sent to punishment cells. The Catholic Church in Cuba, which has not been fully repressed, has been a major voice of protest against these conditions.

## Castro's Prisons Far Worse Than Batista's

Amnesty International and sociologists specializing in Cuban prisons estimate that Cuba has the highest percentage per capita of prisoners in the Western Hemisphere. Estimates of the number of political prisoners held in Castro prisons since he came to power in the 1960s through the late 1990s range from approximately 466,000 to 1.4 million. For a comparison, during the dictatorship of General Gerardo Machado between 1929 and 1933 some 5,000 opponents were jailed. During the reign of Fulgencio Batista from 1952 through 1958 some 500 political prisoners were held. One of these prisoners was Fidel Castro. He described his treatment in a Batista prison this way in a letter to a friend: "I'm going to dine: spaghetti with calamari, Italian chocolates for dessert and later an H-Upman #4 [cigar]. Don't you envy me? . . . When I get some sun in the mornings, wearing shorts and feeling the sea breeze, I think I'm at the beach. They are going to make me think I'm on vacation! What would Karl Marx say of such revolutionaries?"

At the time, Castro was serving a 15-year sentence at the Presidio Modelo in Isla de Pinos for an attack on the Mocada Barracks in which 100 people died. Castro and his companions served 20 months in jail for this attack before he received amnesty from the Batista regime.

Compare Castro's treatment under the Batista regime with the haunting story told by Ana Rodriguez in her 1996 memoir, *Diary of a Survivor: Nineteen Years in a Cuban Women's Prison*. Her tale is as powerful as the now-forgotten Elinor Lipper's *Eleven Years in a Soviet Labor Camp* (1951). Rodriguez writes without the eloquence of an Alexander Solzhenitsyn, but she is equally graphic in her description of Communist "justice" under the Cuban regime. As a young medical student in the late 1950s, Rodriguez welcomed the overthrow of Batista by Castro. After witnessing mass executions on television by the Castro government, she turned against the revolution and joined other students in subversive activities. She was arrested in 1961 and spent the next 12 years in prison. In 1975 she was finally released under international pressure. In 1980 she received a visa to leave the country for exile in Costa Rica and later the United States. As she flew out of the country she was thinking of one statistic: In 1959, when

Castro took over, Cuba had four prisons. As she flew away, there were 200.

### **The Dream that Inevitably Failed**

The American left welcomed Fidel Castro's overthrow of Batista in 1959. To its credit, the Eisenhower administration understood the dangers of a Communist regime located only 90 miles from the U.S. border. Apologists for the Cuban regime naively asserted that Eisenhower's refusal to meet with Castro led to Cuba's alignment with the Soviet Union. Actually, Fidel Castro and his brother Raul were devoted Marxists before they came to power in 1959. The Castro brothers worked closely with top Cuban Communist Party strategists in planning the nationalization of industries and the complete Marxist takeover of government.

The left throughout America, Latin America and Europe cheered Castro's regime, blithely ignoring mass executions and imprisonment of dissenters, many of whom had at first supported the revolution. In the United States, young leftists put up posters on their apartment walls of Communist revolutionary Che Guevara. Radical students in America organized brigades to go cut sugar cane in Cuba. In Latin America, Jesuit priests touted the Cuban Revolution as integral to liberation theology. Armed guerrilla groups sprang up throughout Central and Latin America modeled on Castro's revolutionary tactics. In Europe young revolutionaries cheered Castro and read Guevara's manual on guerrilla tactics. For these Fidelistas, Cuban socialism (read Communism) represented a new path to socialism. Communism in the Soviet Union had failed, they believed, because of a self-serving bureaucratic regime typified by Nikita Khrushchev that had betrayed the Leninist dream of equality. Castro was a true revolutionary bringing racial, social and economic equality to a downtrodden people under the yoke of U.S. and Western imperialism. Castro's one-party system and its dictatorial policies, the left argued, was a necessary step before the dream of socialist democracy could be realized.

These leftist apologists accepted Castro's one-party dictatorship, claiming that Cubans were generally better off than people in other developing countries. Although most Cubans still lived on subsistence-level wages, they had free education, subsidized medical care, housing and subsidized food. However, most were worse off than before the revolution in educational attainment, standard of living, and health. Food and fuel shortages were rampant, government corruption pervasive, and government oppression worse than under Batista. Cuba before Castro's

revolution actually ranked relatively high in standard of living compared to other Latin American countries.

The Cuban economy under Castro survived on Soviet subsidies and a few Western dollars brought in by tourists. Cuba remained primarily a sugar-exporting country dependent on Soviet and Eastern European bloc purchases of its product at inflated prices unrelated to world sugar prices. Manufacturing and economic development languished under the weight of centralized planners, many of whom were trained in the Soviet Union. Cuba under Castro became the hind teat of a stagnant Soviet economy. Castro paid his dues to be part of the Soviet club by sending Cuban troops to various African countries in the Soviet Union's proxy war against pro-Western governments.

### **Prison Terms for Unauthorized Beef**

The dream of Cuban Communism was over long before the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba lost 80 percent of both its imports and its exports, and its gross domestic product dropped by 34 percent. Food and medicine shortages became even more severe. When Russia stopped exporting low-priced petroleum to Cuba, fuel shortages worsened and the entire economy became paralyzed. Waiting for a bus might take three hours, while power outages could last up to sixteen hours. Meat became a scarce item for most Cubans. Animals in zoos began disappearing, reportedly stolen and eaten by starving Cubans. Prior to the revolution, Cubans used to boast that there were as many cows as people in the country. In an attempt to control the crisis in the 1990s, the government imposed harsh penalties for killing a cow or selling beef without government permission. In fact, in Cuba today a person can get a heavier sentence for killing a cow (ten years) than for killing a human. The sentence for selling beef illegally is up to eight years. Eating illegal beef brings a sentence of three months to a year in prison.

By the time the octogenarian Fidel Castro stepped down in 2008, the economy was in shambles. Even his once-true believer brother Raul who succeeded him was forced to announce that the Communist experiment had failed. In July 2013 the government announced new economic reforms to state-owned enterprises to give them more autonomy. Reforms allowed state-owned companies to use 60 percent of their profits after tax to recapitalize their investments. Some privatization of housing was allowed. Unfortunately, as in the former Soviet Union, such limited reforms without the rule of law serve only to perpetuate economic and social stagnation.

## Dictators Dream On in Venezuela

**D**ictators' dreams don't die easily: witness Venezuela today. Hugo Chavez came to power in 1998 in the midst of an economic crisis rallying the urban poor and peasants to his presidential campaign. Chavez modeled his revolution on Castro's Cuba. He consulted frequently with Cuban leaders in his revolutionary program of nationalizing industries, including oil and land reform. He drew upon Cubans to erect a police state to suppress political opposition. When he died in 2013 of cancer, former bus driver Nicolas Maduro succeeded him. Even though the economy was in free-fall, Maduro pushed forward Chavez's revolution. While much of Latin America had turned to pro-growth policies to bolster economic growth, the Chavez-Maduro regime turned its back on history to pursue a false dream that one-party political and economic rule was the way of the future.

With an inflation rate today of 59 percent, Venezuelan students and opposition forces have confronted the Maduro government in the streets. As protests have spread in the nation's capital, Caracas, and in eastern parts of the country, Maduro has used strong-arm tactics to maintain his power. Over the course of the last few months there have been 42 deaths and more than 973 people injured. Groups such as Human Rights Watch have denounced the brutal suppression of anti-government protesters and the censoring of the news media, including Maduro's efforts to take CNN off the airways. Opposition leaders have accused

the Obama administration of turning its back on their protests. They point to Obama's support of the Arab Spring in the Middle East and ask why the American government is not speaking out forcefully in support of their pro-democracy movement.

While Venezuelan mothers and wives witness their husbands and sons being arrested, their babies going without milk and their children malnourished, where are the American feminists who should see for themselves what a real war on women looks like? They will angrily complain about reasonable restrictions on abortion or distort income figures on gender equality, but when it comes to an actual war on women, as seen in Cuba and Venezuela, they stand mute.

Those of us truly concerned with human rights and women's rights will not stand mute. We are the voices of freedom that will be heard.

Eternal Life will present another outstanding  
*Church Teaches Forum* in Louisville, KY

July 18-19, 2014

The Galt House-West Tower • 141 N. Fourth Street  
Louisville, KY 40202 • 1-800-843-4258

Info: 1-800-842-2871

## Mindszenty Report Reprints

The Mindszenty Report is published monthly by  
Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation  
7800 Bonhomme Ave.  
St. Louis, MO 63105  
Phone 314-727-6279 Fax 314-727-5897

Subscription rate: \$20.00/year, \$36.00/two years.  
Outside the U.S.A. \$28.00

The Mindszenty Report is not copyrighted, and  
subscribers are invited to have it printed in  
their local newspapers.

Contributions to the Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation  
are tax deductible as allowed by law.

Eleanor Schlafly, *Publisher*  
e-mail: [info@mindszenty.org](mailto:info@mindszenty.org)  
web site: [www.mindszenty.org](http://www.mindszenty.org)  
[orders.inquiries@mindszenty.org](mailto:orders.inquiries@mindszenty.org)

**OBAMACARE'S COLLISION WITH RELIGIOUS LIBERTY.**  
Obamacare extended centralized power in an unprecedented way. The "contraceptive mandate" poses a particular threat to the freedom of religious employers, many of whom have pending lawsuits challenging the mandate. Ask for 6/14

**NORTH KOREA: COMMUNISM AT ITS WORST.** A United Nations body shines a light on the murderous Communist North Korea regime. Ask for 5/14

**ANCIENT CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES ENDURE TERRORISM IN EGYPT.** While the world has been focused on the Russian takeover of Crimea, radical Muslims continue to wage war on the Christians in Egypt. Ask for 4/14

1 copy	\$.75	100 copies	\$25.00
20 copies	\$10.00	500 copies	\$110.00
50 copies	\$15.00	1000 copies	\$210.00