

August 21, 2008

To: The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (Geneva)
Re: Feb., 2009 Session of the Human Rights Council (Universal Periodic Review Mechanism)

Human Rights in Cuba

The Canadian Network on Cuba, representing 25 member groups and over 55,000 Canadians in 6 provinces, is pleased to present our perspective on the topic of human rights in Cuba.

At the outset we must note an objection to the Human Rights Council's very strong emphasis on civil and political rights and thus the unstated implication that these have moral priority over other kinds of human rights, e.g., those relating to a country's economic, health and education policies. This prioritization, which arguably reflects a First World bias in the discussion of human rights, is very difficult to sustain philosophically. Although there is an obvious interaction between different kinds of human rights in terms of the nature and regularity of their observance or non-observance, it is a society's grounding in just and fair economic principles and rights which primarily ensures the robust application of important civil and political rights, rather than vice versa. In the case of Cuba, we believe that its nation-sustaining principle of building and developing a society on the basis of a worker-owned and worker-controlled economy finds reflection in stunning achievements in the legal and political spheres.

We maintain that the framework of the discussion of human rights must be situated within the context of real world history, rather than through ideological abstractions which ignore past and present realities of power. Thus, in the case of Cuba, they have to be deconstructed and understood through the prism of its particular history, especially its relations with the U.S.A. And this history unambiguously reveals systematic hostility and aggression by the government of the U.S.A. towards Cuba. From its conquest of Cuba in the Spanish American War, to its imposition of the sovereignty-denying Platt Amendment, through its ideological and material support of a number of 20th century dictatorial Cuban regimes, the U.S.A. government has deliberately and systematically undermined democratic struggles in Cuba. And its post-1959 dispositions and actions towards Cuba have continued this neo-colonial tradition. To cite just three examples, witness the U.S.A. government-sanctioned and directed invasion of Cuba in 1961, its almost half-century (U.N. denounced) economic blockade of that country and, finally, its current bellicose talk and financial underwriting of "regime change" in Cuba.

This aggression has necessitated Cuba's adoption of what may be termed an "under-siege" approach to the application of political and civil rights within its territorial borders. Historically, many other countries have done the same--because no country threatened with loss of sovereignty can permit a fifth column to develop within its borders. Cuba's key political and civil liberties, and restrictions, thus make perfect sense in this context of sovereignty defense. Take, for example, the incarceration of Cubans whose dissent was proved, in court, to be financed and directed by the U.S.A. government. When it turned out that so-called "independent journalists and librarians" were, in reality, financially dependent on a hostile, foreign power for the content of their dissent, surely no sovereign country in the world would have responded otherwise. Moreover, contrary to what some assert, any Cuban can criticize his/her government on any matter. What Cuba insists, however, is that no Cuban financed and directed by a foreign government which openly calls for the

demolition of its world-recognized achievements in health and education may disseminate such critique.

On the other hand, autonomous, home-grown political discussion and debate is not only tolerated in present-day Cuba, it is arguably more widespread than ever. Moreover, it is explicitly encouraged by the Cuban government in its electoral processes as well as in a number of other political and civil fora. To cite just one example here, Cuba has operationalized the key democratic concept of “government of, for and by the people” by negating the corrupting influence of large concentrations of money in the electoral process.

To sum up and conclude, the Canadian Network on Cuba sees the Cuban civil and political system as an expression of the will of its citizens in the exercise of the founding principle of the United Nations, namely, the human right of national self-determination.

Yours sincerely,

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