

Cuba: Human Rights Again?

By [Saul Landau](#)

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The State Department echoed by the European Union has once again raised the human rights issue to beat up Cuba. In 1959, Fidel Castro declared his independence from the United States — possibly without realizing that punishment could last 51-plus years. Even when U.S. national interests are involved, Washington acts petulantly if not downright childishly.

Following last month's session with Cuba's diplomats on Cuban immigration quotas, narco-trafficking and other mutual interests — Bush canceled all talks in 2002 — the U.S. Interests Section sent its vehicles to fetch "dissidents" to a party. The Cuban government responded with barely concealed anger. U.S. diplomats behaved as progress toward dealing with joint concerns merits a U.S. poke in Cuba's eye: celebrating with people who announced unending opposition to Cuba's government and received U.S. perks and privileges as a result.

For example, the Interests Section supplies dissidents with a variety of "needs," such as cell phones and lap tops which, "dissidents" claim, get confiscated by Cuban State Security. "We have photographs of them selling these items," a Cuban official told me. "When the 'dissident' reports the loss, the Interests Section, meaning U.S. taxpayers — although few know it — supply them with new ones."

Did the State Department think of possible consequences of the Interests Section's little joke? Suppose Raul Castro acted in as mean-spirited a way as State's tough-guy image of him. He would announce to Cuba's considerable unemployed population that those who wanted to seek work elsewhere could do so without repercussion. Now, imagine waves of rafters landing in south Florida with its high unemployment rate!

Cuban security agents could arrest and try a group of the Interests Section's favorite "dissidents". In the ensuing trial, witnesses against them would come from State Security. The Interests Section had known them as other favored "dissidents." ("They're giving our taxpayers' money to Cuban State Security Agents? An angry Senator might ask.) In 2003, Cuba arrested 75 "dissidents," twelve witnesses testified the accused took money, goods and services from U.S. diplomats all undercover moles disguised as "dissidents."

Memory seems absent when the issue is punishing Cuba. In 2006, a former Interests Section official waxed eloquent about Cuba's human rights violations, as if the U.S. record was immaculate. Under Eisenhower and Kennedy, when Washington first belled its "democratic" principles, millions of black Americans could not vote, chain gangs flourished at state prisons, and lynching periodically took place.

Fidel Castro, the Kennedy crowd righteously sneered, refused to hold elections. Some cynics thought Kennedy and his bootlegger father had padded Illinois' ballot boxes where JFK narrowly defeated Nixon. Cuba's electoral system may have flaws, but its Supreme Court didn't declare counting votes unessential to democracy. (See *Gore v. Bush*.)

As Washington hurled its "principled" criticisms at Havana consistently over decades, it simultaneously financed thousands of terrorist attacks and assassinations against Cuba and its leaders. Killing people did not violate human rights?

In 2010, Washington continues to taunt Havana – currently for failing to rescue a "political prisoner," Orlando Zapata Tamayo, who died during a hunger strike. Zapata, arrested on assault charges, decided in prison to convert to dissidence. Videos show Cuban authorities hospitalized. No one asked for his insurance policy. The video shows him receiving top-level medical attention. A current "dissident" Guillermo Farinas then launched his hunger strike at his home until Cuba released all its political prisoners. When he fainted, Cuban authorities rushed him to the hospital.

Prisoner abuse should become a U.S. human rights scandal. A Chinese account on U.S. Human Rights cites "a report presented to the 10th meeting of the Human Rights Council of the United Nations in 2009 by its Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering Terrorism." The report showed "the United States has pursued a comprehensive set of practices including special deportation, long-term and secret detentions and acts violating the United Nations Convention against Torture." (China Daily, Marc 17, 2010)

The Chinese report, using a Department of Agriculture study, states that currently 16.7 million U.S. "children, or one fourth of the U.S. total, had not enough food in 2008." (USA Today, November 17, 2009). A Feeding America report added that "more than 3.5 million children under the age of five face hunger or malnutrition." (www.feedingamerica.org, May 7, 2009).

Washington's real issue relates to Cuban disobedience of its policies — not human rights. In fact, Cubans enjoy substantive rights American citizens don't: food, housing, medical care, and education. Cuba falls short on procedural rights regarding press and political parties.

But when the religious police in Saudi Arabia our oily partner cane women who show skin, the State Department says "Ho Hum." Nor does Cuba's Communist rule matter – witness Vietnam and China, major commercial partners of the U.S.

Ronald Reagan privatized Cuba policy, leaving it with a right wing minority sector in Miami that doesn't want improvement. Each step forward such as immigration talks in February begets a step backwards, thanks to the anti-Cuba lobby's power: one hunger striker dies; another emerges to steal headlines.

Maybe things will change when Cuba's offshore oil starts spouting!

Saul Landau is an Institute for Policy Studies fellow who received Chile's Bernardo O'Higgins award for human rights.

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