

Catholic leaders in Cuba speak out against repression. They need our support.

As in most other places around the world, the Catholic clergy in Cuba are usually busy presiding over rituals and practices and instructing followers in the faith. Parish priests celebrate daily Mass, hear confessions every week, visit the sick in hospitals and nursing homes, and offer spiritual direction. Nuns serve their community mostly through helping the poor, teaching after school, and providing health care. Committed to a life of faith, poverty, and chastity, they almost never get involved in the political or economic dialogue of the nation.

But a couple of weeks ago, something unusual happened. Eighteen Catholic orders who work in Cuba published an open letter to government authorities denouncing the lack of freedom of expression and the economic precariousness to which the island's population is subjected. It is no accident that the letter was circulated only days after a group of Catholic priests and lay ministers posted a video on social media demanding change and expressing support for a group of dissidents who went on hunger strike to call attention to repressive and brutal practices of the Cuban government.

There seems to be a gathering of momentum to the Catholic clergy's messages. For instance, in January, a virtual Catholic group named "Areópago Cubano" also published its own open letter titled, "I Have Seen the Affliction of My People", which details the suffering that the Cuban people are experiencing and calls for political change. To date, more than 1,000 people representing a variety of faiths and sectors in Cuba have signed the letter.

In the Areópago letter, crafted by 20 or so young priests from the province of Camagüey in the north central part of the island, the priests affirm that in Cuba, "the people have to learn to live in a 'desert of freedoms' where they must choose between freedom and the comforts of life." As impassioned and strongly worded as the priests' letters and statements are, their tone is always respectful and marked by love for country. In one instance, for example, the authors write that they "contemplate the reality of the Island with immense love, as a son does with his mother."

Faith workers such as these priests and nuns have the pulse of the people and the local communities. A large majority of Cubans profess religious faith, and as many as 70 percent identify with a specific church. Despite numerous and formidable government-imposed obstacles, church networks offer the largest and most viable civil society platforms for supporting development and humanitarian relief efforts.

The U.S Department of State agrees with the message of these Catholic leaders. Its 2020 Report on International Religious Freedom, released on May 12, states that “Catholic and Protestant Church leaders, both in and outside the government-recognized Council of Cuban Churches (CCC), continued to report frequent visits from state security agents and CCP officials for the purpose of intimidating them and reminding them they were under close surveillance.” The report adds that Cuban Christians are prohibited from establishing schools, creating newspapers, or spreading their message through the media. Last December, the Secretary of State again placed Cuba on the Special Watch List for countries whose governments "engage in or tolerate" severe violations of religious freedom.

Recently, Cuban television and bloggers are trying to discredit the religious messengers by broadcasting their names and insinuating sexual and other kinds of misconduct. They have also slandered them by calling them mercenaries and terrorists. The organization I lead, Outreach Aid to the Americas (OAA), and others have urged the authorities to treat the religious advocates with dignity and respect.

There is no question that the regime’s attacks are born out of its inability to control its critics or to refute criticisms of the island’s grim realities — something that is plain to any honest observer of the reality on the island. Fundamentally, this is a government whose determination to cling on to power renders it unable to have a constructive dialogue with its citizens.

At OAA we advocate for freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief as an essential human right without which there cannot be a healthy civic space. The time has come for the Cuban government to allow the faith community the freedom to exercise its calling to alleviate suffering and save lives.

Furthermore, when religious communities in Cuba face violations to freedom of religion or belief, other fundamental rights, such as freedom of expression, association, assembly, and movement, and the right to non-discrimination, are often curtailed as well. In denying these rights, the Cuban government is choking

off the nation's nascent civil society, whose beauty, creativity, and initiative show us what a truly free Cuba can achieve.

Cuba's nuns, priests, pastors, and other faith leaders are respected voices in the community, and they are increasingly acting as brave human rights defenders who speak truth to power. The United States should work with international and regional stakeholders to generate external pressure while also fostering internal conditions that enable and protect civic space and human rights advocates, including faith-based actors, through a framework that links civic space to key aspects of the right to freedom of religion and belief.

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