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Cuba, Nicaragua can no longer whitewash their religious freedom violations

BY TEO BABUN, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR - 09/27/23 2:00 PM ET

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Photo/Jose Luis Magana

Nicaraguan opposition leader Felix Maradiaga, right, was among some 222 prisoners of the government of Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega who arrived from Nicaragua earlier this year after an apparently negotiated release.

For authoritarian states around the globe, the United Nations has sadly long served as a place where they can whitewash or deflect the world's attention from their human rights abuses.

We see this in the cases of Cuba and Nicaragua, whose dictators have worked assiduously to manipulate the UN system to their advantage. This is especially so true of Cuba, which currently sits on the UN Human Rights Council.

Cuba's diplomatic corps at the UN not only frequently engages in underhanded and even juvenile tactics to deflect or block attention from its regime's abuses, but it also consistently obstructs the body's human rights mechanisms when it seeks answers.

For example, in recent years, Cuba has responded to official UN communications sent by independent human rights experts by rejecting all allegations and obfuscating the issues. In addition, Cuba refused to allow the previous UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Dr. Ahmed Shaheed, to visit the country to assess religious freedom conditions, despite numerous requests to do so by the mandate-holder.

Last week, during the 54th session of the Human Rights Council, my organization, Outreach Aid to the Americas, the UK-based freedom of religion advocacy organization Christian Solidarity Worldwide, hosted an event highlighting the experiences of two prominent victims of these authoritarian dictatorships.

ADVERTISING

Félix Maradiaga, a Nicaraguan opposition leader and former presidential candidate, and Enrique de Jesús Fundora, a Cuban pastor, shared their harrowing testimonies of the ongoing and severe abuses perpetrated by Cuba's Communist Party and the dictatorship of Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua against the faith community.

Maradiaga was jailed in 2021 along with six other presidential candidates for the supposed crime of challenging Ortega at the ballot box. Félix spent 20 months in the notorious El Chipote prison, where he was often prevented from being visited by his family and was denied access to a Bible. (He is a devout Catholic.) Félix was one of 222 Nicaraguan political prisoners freed in February and, like others, was stripped of his citizenship and property, and forcibly exiled to the U.S.

In Cuba, evangelical Pastor Fundora spoke out in support of those imprisoned unjustly, including many faith leaders, for participating in the historic mass protests of July 11, 2021. He and his church provided material support to families of the prisoners and for these acts, Cuban officials gave him and his family one week to leave Cuba or face imprisonment for "sedition and criminal incitement."

The testimonies of Félix and Pastor Fundora are supported by the facts. Numerous studies demonstrate that Cubans either have been targeted or know someone who has been targeted

because of their faith or religious activities. In our 2022 survey of Cuban leaders of diverse religions, an overwhelming majority said they suffer acts of state repression monthly or even weekly, that the government limits religious freedom rights in violation of constitutional guarantees, and that the state prevents churches from carrying out social services.

In the case of Nicaragua, civil rights lawyer and researcher Martha Patricia Molina has documented 529 attacks on the Catholic Church in the last five years. These attacks include imprisoning and forcibly exiling clergy, shutting down and confiscating the assets of churches and religious educational institutions and charities, and prohibiting Catholics from holding or participating in popular religious festivals and events such as processions.

Ortega continues his attacks on the Catholic Church, last month declaring the Jesuit order illegal and confiscating the Jesuit-run University of Central America, just as he has done with other private schools and universities.

In Geneva, Felix Maradiaga said, "What is happening in Nicaragua is unprecedented. We saw it before in the Soviet Union, in North Korea, and in Cuba. The international community must act with all the weight it can muster to stop what is happening in Nicaragua."

This is not hyperbole. Last year, the U.S. Department of State designated Cuba and Nicaragua as "countries of particular concern" for "particularly severe violations of religious freedom." This was the first time the two countries received this designation.

Last month, the president of the University of Notre Dame, Rev. John Jenkins, said that "Ortega's attempt to extinguish Catholicism in Nicaragua merits world condemnation on a much larger and louder scale." The same must continue to be said about the Cuban dictatorship's cruel repression of religious leaders and communities. Thanks to their courageous advocacy at the UN, Félix Maradiaga and Pastor Fundora did much to advance this objective this cause.

Now it is up to the rest of us to take action to hold these dictatorships accountable. The U.S., the European community, and neighboring states in Latin America should continue to loudly denounce the Cuban and Nicaraguan dictators for their flagrant abuses. We have seen even left-wing leaders such as Chilean President Gabriel Boric do so; this is highly welcome.

In addition, those responsible for perpetrating abuses should be subject to continued targeted sanctions and they and their families should be cut off from taking advantage of travel and educational opportunities in the U.S. and Europe, as they have brazenly done.

Maradiaga, Fundora, and others like them who are taking their stories to the world, at risk of reprisals to themselves and their families, have stepped up to the plate. Are we going to back them up?

Dr. Teo A. Babun is president and CEO of Outreach Aid to the Americas.

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