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As 2023 draws to a close, let's not forget the plight of the Cuban people | Opinion

BY TEO A. BABUN
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In 2016, attendees wave flags during the Fidel Castro memorial at the Plaza of the Revolution Antonio Maceo in Santiago de Cuba. JACK GRUBER USA TODAY Sports

On Dec. 10, Cuba's Catholic bishops published their traditional Christmas message, one that invariably acknowledges the many difficulties experienced by ordinary Cubans while imparting a message of hope and encouragement. The bishops recognized that Cubans frequently feel that they are walking through the dark of night.

It has been a "very difficult year," they observe, one made more painful by the continuing exodus of the young, families and professionals fleeing Cuba's hopelessness and desperation.

The bishops call the lack of food and medicines "dramatic." They mention how prisoners are missed by their families and lament the exclusion of "legitimate opinions" and "plurality of thought" that they say can enrich Cuban society. Cubans can be excused for finding this message frustratingly timid, however, considering that the current economic crisis is the island's worst in 30 years. According to the Cuban Observatory of Human Rights, 88% of Cuban families live on less than two dollars a day — which coincides with a complete collapse of human-rights conditions.

Much stronger criticisms have been, and continue to be, voiced by brave priests and nuns throughout the island. For example, Father Alberto Reyes, a priest in the province of Camagüey, has emerged as a frequent and strong critic of the communist regime. In July he gave an interview to a Catholic news outlet in which he blamed the “totalitarian” regime for suppressing religious freedom “to the extreme.”

In August, Sister Nadieska Almeida, mother superior of the Daughters of Charity in Cuba, gave an interview to the acclaimed Cuban writer Zoe Valdés, in which she faults the ruling regime for impoverishing Cubans, accuses the communist system of seeking to “crush the human being” and says, “We are prisoners on an island that many have forgotten.”

As 2023 draws to a close, I fear that Sister Almeida may be right.

Ignoring the Cuban people’s plight and their desperate cries for freedom does not happen on its own. The Cuban regime, with the help of sympathetic nations, continues to work assiduously to ensure that the world remains woefully misinformed about, if not blind to, the ugly reality of life for millions of Cubans.

Some of us witnessed this whitewashing last month at the Universal Periodic Review of Cuba, a United Nations mechanism that allows member states to systematically review a country’s human rights record. With a few exceptions, the session was a parade of congratulatory statements on Cuba’s supposed human rights achievements, superficially mentioning initiatives such as adopting a new constitution in 2019 and updating the country’s family code to reflect a more liberal approach to gender and sexuality.

No matter that the new constitution in fact weakened religious freedom protections in the previous constitution and that the new family code threatens that the state will take custody of children whose parents reject communist indoctrination. Those member states, some of which are anxious to hide their own human rights abuses, conveniently overlook the thousands of Cuban political prisoners, government attacks against independent churches, and regime intolerance of independent civil society and human rights activists.

Thankfully, there were a few clear-eyed member states, including the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, and the United States, whose statements were connected to reality. These states urged Cuba to cease its violations of fundamental human rights, release political prisoners, and ratify key international human rights conventions such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

With numerous global crises demanding attention, it can be easy to overlook the continuing plight of our Cuban brothers and sisters. The organization I lead, Outreach Aid to the Americas, is dedicated to uplifting the vulnerable and advocating for the rights of the oppressed, not only in Cuba but also elsewhere in the Americas. I invite you to join us in this work through your prayers and by helping us send life-changing aid to Cubans. Each of us can do something to make many Cubans’ holiday season a little brighter.

Dr. Teo A. Babun is the president and CEO of Outreach Aid to the Americas, a faith-based nonprofit organization dedicated to serving vulnerable communities in the Americas through humanitarian and development assistance and human rights advocacy. He is the author of numerous books, most recently “Faith and Freedom in Latin America,” and the recipient of multiple awards for his humanitarian and human rights advocacy work.

