

The Need for International Solidarity in Support of the Struggle of the Cuban People for Freedom

Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, December 11, 2024

Being for freedom is hard. Hard for the people who struggling against the oppressive authoritarian regimes of their own countries, of course.

But apparently hard for other countries to take notice, to care, or to overcome their own country's political or economic self-interest. Being for freedom seems to be hard.

But being for authoritarian regimes seems to be easy. Standing for values is hard; ignoring values is easy.

Authoritarian countries want to reinforce their authoritarian standards, so they seek no moral compass. Democratic regimes, on the other hand, are based on certain moral concepts. Nonetheless, democratic countries seem to always have trouble finding the true north of their moral compass. They use the nation-state system's characteristics ("sovereignty" and "domestic non-interference" concepts) as an excuse for ignoring suppression of human rights.

But sovereignty and non-interference with domestic affairs of other countries does not excuse a country's own actions which support authoritarianism.

We all know about Cuba's oppressive regime. Or, we should know, unless we live with our head in the sand. Other witnesses today will describe eloquently the suffering of the Cuban people. For my purposes today, I will simply reflect that we will never know precisely how many people, longing for freedom and seeking a glimpse of humanity, have died in their unsuccessful journeys in unseaworthy craft in the Florida Straits, filled with hope and terror and ending in tragic death.

We also understand the goals and cruel motives of regime thugs, in exploiting the Cuban population for their own selfish purposes. The lust for power and greed for material dominance over others have been the drivers of actions of immortal humans, with resulting political dictatorships and exploitation of the masses, for time immemorial. Likewise, the passive tolerance of, and resulting legitimization of, such regimes has led to their acceptance by others and the woeful habit of ignoring the oppression.

This – the acceptance of oppressive regimes by non-oppressive regimes -- is more difficult to understand than the motives and purposes of the oppressors themselves.

This tolerance of oppressive states by other states – indeed, making excuses for and even supporting such oppressive state regimes – is most difficult to understand and most disappointing.

The motivation of dictatorial and oppressive states to support other similar state regimes is obvious. They share dictatorial values and have a common self-interest in protecting their regimes.

But why do democratic states tolerate, even aid oppressive dictatorial states, in which abuse and persecution of dissidents is clear and the risks which people take to escape those regimes is so high?

The United States Government, fortunately, has expressed its dissatisfaction and condemnation of the Cuban regime over the years through sanctions.

But the US government has, on occasion, exhibited weakness in its condemnation of the Cuban regime. The failure to respond to the shutdown of Brothers to the Rescue in 1996 in international airspace, involving the deaths of

three US citizens and one US resident, was a regrettable sign of weakness by the Clinton Administration.

Likewise, President Obama doing the wave and eating ice cream cones with Raul Castro in Cuba at a baseball game, engaging in friendly conversation, was lamentable fraternization which ignored the immorality of the Cuban regime and worked against the US message of illegitimacy of the Cuban regime. It also undermined the dissident movements on the island, such as the Ladies in White. While the Ladies risked jail and savage beatings on the streets of Havana, President Obama hobnobbed with their oppressors.

In addition, several US elected officials have expressed support for the Cuban regime and even visited the regime, while political prisoners languish.

Just last week, another democracy activist in Cuba was killed in prison, marking the fourth verified death of July 11th 2021 protestors in state custody according to the watchdog group Justicia 11J and the 72nd documented prison death since 2023, according to the Cuban Prisons Documentation Center.

Why have other democratic states tolerated and even embraced oppressive regimes?

First, there is the idea of non-interference in “internal affairs” of another state serves as an excuse.

Second, the idea that states should act on their own self-interest, serves to encourage narrow-mindedness.

The first idea -- non-involvement in internal affairs of other states -- is articulated in the United Nations Charter. The Charter provides that states shall

not “intervene in matters that are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state....” (Article 2, sec. 7).

I say “excuse” because the non-involvement concept does not override other principles of international law, especially those espoused in the Nuremberg War Crimes trials after World War II.

Countries which do not wish to condemn another country’s dishonorable or immoral treatment of its residents turn to the “non-interference” idea as an excuse. “Not my job,” they essentially say.

Such states use the non-interference idea in a bait-and-switch methodology. The “Bait” is the non-interference idea. The “switch” is to apply the non-interference idea beyond its proper realm, so as to diminish its own sovereign powers and responsibility to exercise those powers in an honorable fashion.

Another relevant characteristic of the international system is that a state acts (and should act) based on its own interest. Thus, “the oppression of others does not affect my interests.”

Think – Rwanda genocide or Cambodian genocide or the Holocaust.

Of course, this myopic definition of interests and the perception of threats ignores the danger of the spread of oppressive doctrine. Such expansion of oppressive doctrine is a threat and should be perceived as involving another state’s interest. But such perception requires leadership and vision, which is often in short supply.

We need such understanding about the threats posed by legitimizing oppression. “Appeasement” of oppression carries the same dangers as appeasement of military aggression.

But many democratic states see no benefit in taking a principled stand against oppression. At least, they do not see benefits sufficient to justify the reduction in trade and the loss of tourism opportunities for their own residents as visitors whose trips are partly conducted on the backs of the oppressed.

Perhaps the greatest insight in this regard is that recognizing oppression and exploitation of people is psychologically distressing. We want to think that the world is better than it really is, and seeing the reality causes cognitive dissonance. It is easier to be a Pangloss, in Voltaire's *Candide*, who always sees the world with incurable, excessive, and unrealistic optimism in this "best of all possible worlds."

But Pangloss' foolhardy optimism is unwarranted in this "most dangerous of all possible worlds".