CUBA’S RAÚL CASTRO: REFORMER OR UNREFORMABLE?: THE EVIDENCE TO DATE

September 30, 2016. After the collapse of Soviet Communism in 1989, Cuba’s “capitalist” re-insertion into world markets and its opening to tourism from the West led to the idea that unconditional “engagement” with its regime will propel economic and political reform. Exacerbating this logic, soon after Raúl Castro assumed power July 31, 2006, he traded his military garb for expensive suits and began introducing selective measures —mostly economic— hailed by the media and international community as “reforms.” Even the world’s largest democracies now afford the Cuban military dictatorship widespread impunity, legitimacy, and support. Yet, a quarter century of unconditional engagement and almost a full decade of so-called “reforms” —now stagnated— have not translated into any significant empowerment for Cuba’s citizens. Cuba is still ranked as one of the least free countries in the world (see https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2016/cuba).

In Cuba, the usurpation by the state of civil, political, and economic rights has few historic precedents. The military’s business conglomerate has expanded its grip on capital and resources and the all-mighty Cuban state still controls most means of production. Individual rights, including private property, are constitutional aberrations; independent civil society groups, including labor unions, are outlawed. The one-party Communist system prevails, a vast repressive apparatus continue to exert totalitarian domination, and longstanding Stalinist laws have been updated and reinforced rather than diminished. All media is still in state hands and internet access is extremely restricted. Internationally, Cuba has strengthened its political and economic alliances with totalitarian/autocratic and rogue regimes with shared anti-U.S. agendas –North Korea, Iran, Russia, China, Syria, Angola, Equatorial Guinea, Saudi Arabia, etc., as well as Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia, and Ecuador, the Latin American countries on the path to the neo-communist “bolivarian alternative” they call “21st century socialism.”

As most international media coverage now centers on business “opportunities” available in a “changing” Cuba and on Hollywood celebrities cavorting in Havana, repression and persecution against human rights’ defenders has greatly intensified both in scope and viciousness since Raúl became Cuba’s president. Regime agents routinely and brutally attack defenseless civilians including women, members of civil society are prevented from gathering and have their computers and personal property arbitrarily confiscated. Killing and disappearing inconvenient individuals is, tragically, part of the methodology of control.

In conclusion, nothing in Raúl Castro’s history denotes any inclination to reform other than conveniently changing tactics as needed. His present and historic behavior is consistent with his longtime commitment to maintain power at all costs and using whatever means found handy. Unconditional engagement affording impunity, legitimacy, and assistance to the Cuban criminal regime has reinforced the totalitarian model that trampels on the rights of Cubans and erodes global freedom and security.

THE HISTORICAL RECORD: RAÚL CASTRO, A KILLING MACHINE

Raúl Castro, a longtime communist, has been directly responsible for systematic crimes against humanity over the course of the 57 year-old Castro dictatorship —first as second-in-command and head of the Armed Forces and, subsequently, as “maximum” leader for the last ten years.

Cuba Archive has amassed reports of thousands of killings and forced disappearances attributed to the Castro brothers going back to the armed struggle they led against the Batista dictatorship. Raúl Castro’s killing career, in fact, began early on. In 1956, while in exile in Mexico, he reportedly murdered a comrade. During the revolutionary struggle in the mountains, he ordered the execution of many deserters and alleged
informants. Then, as soon as the revolutionary forces took over January 1st 1959, he, with Fidel and Ché Guevara, unleashed the wave of terror designed to reduce the population into submission. Put in charge of Oriente province, Raúl had hundreds of men killed solely for wearing the uniform of the national police or the constitutional armed forces. In one day alone, on **January 12th 1959**, he had 71 men executed without trial in the city of Santiago de Cuba. All throughout the night, men were lined up in front of ditches at San Juan Hill and shot by firing squad. When the massacre was over, a bulldozer covered the mass grave. The victims included U.S. citizen of Puerto Rican heritage **Benito Cortés Maldonado**, a policeman and pilot who had joined the police force when he had come of age. Though he served under the Batista dictatorship, he was a respected professional known to have always done his duty, never committing any crimes. Believing he had nothing to fear, he did not go into hiding when Batista fled the country. But, he was arrested and falsely accused of raping a woman, then immediately sentenced to death. He left a widow and five children.

**See video testimony of Catholic priest Jorge Bez Chabebe on the mass execution of 71 men by order of Raúl Castro in Santiago de Cuba on January 12 1959.** [https://youtu.be/MS60-nyaU3g](https://youtu.be/MS60-nyaU3g) (9:03 mins.)

War crimes are also part of Raúl’s extensive killing curriculum as Cuba’s Defense Minister. During the rural uprising of the sixties against the Castros, Armed Forces executed prisoners on the spot. His trail of blood also extends beyond Cuba—in Angola, he ordered attacks on civilian populations, reportedly also with chemical weapons. On **February 24, 1996**, his Air Force ordered MiGs to shoot down three unarmed U.S.-based civilian airplanes belonging to a humanitarian group in international airspace. Two planes went down and four men were murdered: **Armando Alejandro, Mario de la Peña, Carlos Costa and Pablo Morales** (the first three were U.S. citizens).

Raúl Castro’s crimes against defenseless people attempting to flee Cuba, including children, have no precedent even among the bloodiest Latin American dictatorships. For decades, Cubans have been systematically murdered for attempting to flee the island by sea or through embassies and the U.S. Naval Base at Guantánamo. That he did or does not know is preposterous. In 1994, Cuba’s official media showed Raúl awarding medals to Cuban Border Guard sharpshooters who killed two young men, **Iskander Maleras and Luis Angel Valverde**, as they attempted to swim towards the U.S. base **January 19, 1994**.

**RAUL CASTRO’S VICTIMS FROM JULY 31, 2006 TO DATE**

Since Raúl Castro assumed command of Cuba in 2006 and until September 30, 2016, Cuba Archive has reports of 213 cases of death or disappearance of a political nature. The actual number of victims is likely many times higher, as reporting from Cuba is extremely restricted. (See “The Human Toll of Raúl Castro’s Rule: Partial Record of Deaths and Disappearances Attributed to the Cuban State July 31, 2006 – December 31, 2015” at www.cubaarchive.org, see Reports).

Notably, in the last ten years, **twelve human rights’ defenders have been killed or disappeared** at the hands of authorities, some quite evidently, others in circumstances that lead to a strong suspicion of extrajudicial killing by state agents. Because all medical facilities in Cuba are state-owned and controlled, a strong State Security presence is typical when human rights’ defenders are treated, as a result, many fear seeking medical attention.

**Prominent human rights’ activists and opposition leaders**

63 year-old, **Laura Pollán**, leader of the internationally renown women’s human rights’ group, **Ladies in White**, died **October 14, 2010** at the Calixto García Hospital of Havana under a large State Security presence. An extrajudicial killing from poisoning or a biological agent is strongly suspected, as she
developed a sudden, mysterious, and undiagnosed illness after being pricked with a needle by pro-government thugs. For over a year, members of the Ladies had reported developing physical ailments after being pricked with needles by regime supporters. Over a year earlier, Laura had also been the victim of a reportedly provoked car accident (see Atentado a Laura Pollán, see, in particular, min. 5:27 at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUS_b97RcKg).

Human rights’ activist and former political prisoner Juan Wilfredo Soto, age 46, died May 8, 2011 at a Santa Clara hospital after a brutal beating by four uniformed policemen. The blows severely damaged his pancreas and caused lesions to his kidneys. He left two children, ages 14 and 20.

Cuba’s opposition leader and recipient of the Sakharov Prize of the European Parliament, the 60 year-old Oswaldo Payá was killed July 22, 2012 with a 32-year old activist from his movement, Harold Cepero, in a car accident provoked by State Security agents and suggestive of a state murder.

Lesser known human rights’ defenders

Former prisoner of conscience Miguel Valdés Tamayo, age 50, died January 10, 2007 at the Julio Trigo Hospital of Havana, his death widely considered to have been induced or deliberate. Miguel had a heart condition (arrhythmia/irregular heart beat), but was denied permission to leave Cuba for treatment. Instead, he endured a brutal beating by a government-organized mob, repeated threats, detentions, and interrogations by State Security agents, and a severe beating in October 2006. In January 2007, he was put in intensive therapy at the hospital, but after five days transferred to a regular ward. After refusing him water for two days, doctors ordered all patients in the ward moved out. Soon, they reported he had died after two heart attacks.

Dissident Luis Angel Lima Machado, age 47, was found dead by hanging at his house in Havana on October 23, 2007. He suffered from emotional problems fueled by constant harassment from Cuban authorities. At best his suicide was induced, but there is no evidence that his death was self-inflicted. Many prisoners are reported by authorities as committing suicide by hanging, yet circumstances often point to possible murder; over 50 such deaths in prison are documented since July 31, 2006.

Activist Liborio Borroto Monroe, age 65, was killed November 19, 2007 after a horse-drawn cart ran him over at his hometown of Jatibonico, Sancti Spiritus. Earlier that day three Communist Party members had visited his home to threaten him with death for placing stickers with the word “change” on the walls of his house; he had rejected their entreaties and reiterated his commitment to the human rights struggle.

Roberto Franco Alfaro disappeared May 20, 2009 in Havana. The political police had threatened the outspoken human rights’ activist with his disappearance if he did not abandon his peaceful opposition activities. On May 20, 2009 (on the namesake for the opposition group he belonged to and anniversary of Cuba’s independence) he left his home to go fishing from the shore nearby. He never returned. He left behind an elderly mother, wife, and 8 year-old son. His wife blames the government.

Alberto Sigas Hernández, age 32, disappeared January 5, 2010 while under arrest at Villa Marista, State Security Headquarters in Havana. He had been a policeman, but became disaffected with the regime and joined a human rights’ group. State Security agents harassed him repeatedly and threatened him with his disappearance if he did not abandon his opposition activities. He left home one morning to visit his mother’s home nearby and was not seen again. Three days later his wife received a call from the local police reporting that her husband was being held at State Security headquarters and would be released within 48 to 72 hours. He never returned and authorities later denied any knowledge of his whereabouts. His wife, who was several weeks pregnant, later gave birth to a son. (See video testimony (4:10 mins.) in Spanish at https://youtu.be/UCbC4URxo04 ).
Daysi Talavera Ortiz, a female human rights’ activist and former political prisoner, died January 2011 in Matanzas after being run over by a car in mysterious circumstances.

Blind human rights’ activist Sergio Díaz Larrastegui, age 54, died April 19, 2012 at the Julio Trigo Hospital of Havana. Fellow activists believe he was assassinated. He had been expelled from his workplace and repeatedly threatened by the political police for allowing his home to serve as headquarters of the Council of Human Rights Rapporteurs. He was totally healthy when becoming very ill suddenly. Admitted to the hospital, he was diagnosed with an autoimmune liver disease and hepatic cirrhosis, caused by unidentified chemicals (could be alcohol, fat, medications, viruses, or toxic metals). After ten days, he was discharged without medical treatment. Again feeling very ill, he died almost immediately after arriving at the hospital with a large State Security presence.

In May 2014, Vicente Medrano Ramos, age 58, was found at his home in Guantánamo with his throat slit. He was a sympathizer of UNPACU, a peaceful opposition movement that had repaired the roof of his home, damaged from Hurricane Sandy in 2012. Authorities had threatened him with death for expressing his gratitude publicly all around town. The murder happened very close to a permanent security ring surrounding the UNPACU headquarters of Guantánamo.

Continued killing of civilians attempting to flee Cuba

Things haven’t changed at all at Guantánamo — the U.S. base is still surrounded by a killing field and Cuban guards with orders to shoot. Cuban authorities also continue enforcing a longstanding practice to prevent exit attempts, considered illegal when not previously authorized by the government. Many caught leaving are detained and, albeit more sporadically than in the past, some are killed.

Recent victims include 18 persons who left Cuba on a small boat from Isla de la Juventud at dawn on February 1, 2011. 24 days later, Cuban border guards reported the vessel near the coast of Pinar del Río with only one body riddled with bullets, that of Wilfredo Peña Leyva. Among those who disappeared was 42-year old Ariel García Fernández.

On December 16, 2014, Cuban-born Italian resident, 32 year-old Diosbel Díaz Beoto was killed after Cuban Border Guard sunk the boat in which he was traveling off the coast of Matanzas with 32 passengers including 7 women and 2 children. He had travelled with smugglers from Miami to pick up his wife and 5 year-old son. A Cuban Border Guard vessel shot at the boat and rammed it for two hours as the passengers screamed in terror and begged for mercy. Diosbel had been at the precise location where the Border Guard vessel rammed the boat before it sunk. Survivors insisted they had been in international waters, 22 miles away from the coast of Cuba. Cuba reported they were in Cuban territorial waters and detained the survivors for interrogation.

Yurinieski Martínez Reina, age 30, was killed April 19, 2015 at a beach in Matanzas by a State Security agent who fired on his group of five unarmed men detained for attempting to leave on a homemade raft. Yurinieski was shot in the back at short range. His body was left unattended for days, evidence removed to hinder identification. A military tribunal sentenced the perpetrator to 13 years of prison for involuntary homicide; it is not certain he is in prison.