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### The Chained Pearl of Antilles:

#### Repression of Human Rights in the Cuban State

A communist state does not allow for any political or social movements inside the country. This was the case in the Soviet Union, Communist China and to today Cuba. Starting with Fidel Castro, those who opposed the regime and asked for change were faced with retaliation backed by the full power of the Cuban state. Until today, Cubans who ask for political and social reform face imprisonment. Basic rights such as freedom of speech and peaceful assembly are violated every day. While the stepping down of the Fidel Castro gave many hope that change was forthcoming, his brothers policies towards threats to the communist regime have not changed. As the United States begins to reassess its attitude towards Cuba and reestablish diplomatic relations, it is important to not forget the plight of Cubans who have been repressed for decades. However, one must understand the situation in its entirety, including the viewpoint of the Cuban government. In order to analyze the situation of Cuba empirically, this paper will examine known instances of human rights violations and discuss the actors present, both domestic and international; as well as examine the historical context under which this situation has developed.

Since the takeover of the Cuban state by Fidel Castro the “Pearl of Antilles” has become awash with violence. Especially in the last decade, with international attention shifting to the middle-east the Cuban government has been able to escalate its atrocities. “The Castro dictatorship indeed has moved with sickening speed to arrest, try, convict and sentence to draconian jail terms approximately 80 of Cuba’s bravest and brightest”<sup>1</sup>. With the world occupied by terrorist organizations who seem determined on attacking the main lands of western countries and taking over middle-eastern ones, the Cuban regime contained in the boundaries of its shores has been pushed to the sidelines.

The problems that continue to arise in Cuba effect individuals and families that are considered critics opposed to the government. Cubans live in fear of their government because of the consistent oppressive acts in which they take to limit the rights of its citizens. The conflicts in Cuba according to *Worlds Report 2014* states,

“the Cuban government continues to repress individuals and groups who criticize the government or call for basic human rights. Officials employ a range of tactics to punish dissent and install fear in the public, including beatings, public acts of shaming, termination of employment, and threats of long term imprisonment”.<sup>2</sup>

Especially the freedoms of expression, association and assembly are the ones that have suffered substantially<sup>3</sup>. Whenever people have gathered to demonstrate peacefully, the government has responded with force to break up such protests and often arrested several people. Even recently,

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<sup>1</sup> United States. Committee on International Relations House of Representatives. *Castro's Brutal Crackdown on Dissidents*. 2.

<sup>2</sup> “World Report 2014: Cuba.” Human Rights Watch

<sup>3</sup> Cuba: Silencing the Voices of Dissent, *New York: Amnesty International*. 3.

after the announcement of the U.S. and Cuba relationship normalizations the Cuban government has continued on this path breaking up peaceful gatherings, resorting to beatings and imprisonments<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, political competition has been largely absent in Cuba. The elections were often fixed and allowed no one other than the government to view the total number of ballots. Once Fidel Castro was elected he would no longer hold free elections because he claimed that the people of Cuba already voted and wanted Fidel.

While a sovereign nation is ultimately free to do as it pleases, the actions of a state are influenced by the international community; whether domestic or international. The case of Cuba has not been different either. As has been discussed before, when the USSR was still in existence it gave much support to Cuba<sup>5</sup>. Nonetheless, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union others have stepped up to ally with the small nation and provide support in the midst of American led opposition. As the legatee of the USSR the Russian Federation has continued to support Cuba and the Castro regime. In 2014 president Vladimir Putin met with Raul Castro and signed a deal which forgave the debts owned by Cuba to Russia, as well as signing security cooperation agreements<sup>6</sup>. Of course the power of the Russian state is not the same as that of the Soviet Union, but they remain a great power nevertheless. Having such an ally allows the Cuban government to not worry about complete isolation from the international community. On the other hand America has led a political and economic embargo. So while the U.S. and its allies have criticized the human rights record of Cuba, their criticism has meant little. For the past twenty

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<sup>4</sup> Martin, Sabrina. "Another Sunday, Another 89 Political Arrests in Cuba." *PanAm Post*. N.p., 04 May 2015. Web. 27 May 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Rabkin, Rhoda Pearl. *Cuban Politics: The Revolutionary Experiment*. New York: Praeger, 1991. Print. 153

<sup>6</sup> Vulf Simona [Симона Вульф], Кого выберет Куба: США или Россия? [Who will Cuba choose: USA or Russia?].

three years the United Nations have called for the end of the U.S. embargo<sup>7</sup>. And while those that oppose the embargo site over a trillion dollars lost<sup>8</sup>, the fact of the matter is that Cuba has survived with the embargo in place. So while it would unmistakably be good for Cuban economy to have the embargo lifted, the years of living with the embargo have made U.S. economic leverage less effective. Recently the Obama administration announced that the United States and Cuba will be resuming diplomatic ties<sup>9</sup>. The years of trade and political embargo have not brought about the goals they were meant to achieve and it would seem that the U.S. has decided to take a different approach. Even back in 2003 when the House of Representatives Committee on Government Reform was holding a hearing most of those that spoke did so in favor of a more constructive approach to U.S.-Cuban relations<sup>10</sup>. Even back in the U.S. there seems to be an understanding that the old methods have failed, and there is a need to try something new. There is a need to move past the history that has clouded the relations of Cuba and the U.S. and find ways to work with one another.

## **The History Behind it All**

The revolution for Cuba was an immediate change of hope for everyone in Latin America concerned with the increasing divide between the wealthy and poor. The Cuban revolution was the first successful one in Latin America since independence and this one brought much

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<sup>7</sup> "General Assembly Demands End to Cuba Blockade for Twenty-Second Year as Speakers Voice Concern over Impact on Third Countries | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases."

<sup>8</sup> "General Assembly Demands End to Cuba Blockade for Twenty-Second Year as Speakers Voice Concern over Impact on Third Countries | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases."

<sup>9</sup> Whitefield, Mimi, and Jim Wyss. "Cuba and U.S. Close to Restoring Diplomatic Ties after 'highly Productive' Meeting."

<sup>10</sup> United States. Committee on Government Reform House of Representatives. *Castro's Cuba: What is the Proper U.S. Response to Ongoing Human Rights Violations in Our Hemisphere?*

international influence with it as well, in the book *Cuba in Revolution* the author states,

“Certainly, no other connection between the peasantry and the revolution has attracted so much attention almost everywhere. Certainly, the popular conception of the reform as a clear promise of land to the peasants was not unreasonable”<sup>11</sup>. The major issues essential to the understanding of why the revolution occurred is the lack of opportunities for people in the Nations particularly those indigenous heritage because they were considered outdated to the Nation as a whole.

Various examples of colonialism that have occurred and continue to occur happen for this reason and that is to secure the power of interest in place. A Latin American gives us this insight in the perspective of what gives leeway to the a crumbling government, this account suggests, “El problema de la representacion, de las elecciones, de la vida politica, de los partidos, de las relaciones colonials similares al nuestro (Portugal y Francia), donde arraigaron sistemas de administracion asimilistas”<sup>12</sup>. Josef Opantry distinguishes the ways in which most European countries historically colonized or attempted to assimilate their culture to other nations. This passage refers to the problems existing in Cuba’s Election processes, Cuba’s political life, and Cuba’s administrations that support these causes. He goes on to say that the system is a representation of European ideals and social practices that are inherent in countries such as Portugal and France.

The Cuban Dissident movement is a response to the consistent oppression that the people of Cuba faced throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century; many families have been negatively impacted and suffer from mental and economic losses that have not been compensated. The major actors that

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<sup>11</sup> Bonchea, Ronaldo E., and Nelson P.S. “Cole Blasier,” *Social Revolution: Origins in Mexico, Cuba in Revolution*. 10.

Bolivia, and Cuba

<sup>12</sup> Opantry Josef., and Orovio Naranjo Consuelo. “Los partidos politicos cubanos de la epoca historiografia reciente.” “*Vistiando la Isla. Temas de Historia de Cuba*”. 45.

colonial en la

have been directly correlated with Cuba's oppressive government have been mainly the United States and Russia because both countries largely benefitted from geographical and resourceful locations. The true reasons as to why the United States has invested a large amount of money and effort into eradicating the expansion of communism; however, small factions existing in government have influenced and terrorized Cuban citizens for their own economic interest such as the *United Fruit Company*. Large organizations such as these have been the reoccurring cause of U.S. military presence in foreign nations, and this reason is because they have strong close relations with members of government. In this case, The CEO of the United Fruit Company is the brother of the head commander of the C.I.A. Though, not so surprising relations like this continue to be the problem of human suffrage throughout Cuba and the world because they incorporate various regulations such as labor laws that are not profitable to the distributor. These relationships protect the interest in economic gains; however, this relationship is important to me because it exemplifies the hierarchy of powers existing in families and how these families have power to influence the decision of government.

The current issue still concerning many Cubans today pertains to the U.S. embargo act and economic debts that have reached exponential highs for all three nations involved. On a personal account Fidel writes," In this regard, we should look at something that should be alarming for U.S. economist: the fact that the public debt, which took 205 years to reach \$1 trillion, increased by \$650 billion in the three year period from 1981 to 1984. I insist that no economy can bear such a burden, and I sincerely believe that the short- and medium-term results are going to be disastrous"<sup>13</sup>. Fidel often criticized the amount of effort and time the United

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<sup>13</sup> Castro, Fidel, and Jeffrey M. Elliot. "Ending the U.S. Arms Build-up/ Cuba's Preparations for Defense/ Military Attacks and Pressures on the USSR." 124.

States invested in their involvement with Latin America. The amount of money spent on the conflict is not exaggerated and it is estimated that the Soviet Union at the time also suffered the same loss and is still slowly developing their way out of the burden of this period. It is interesting to note that the debt continues to increase on and the involvement of the United States and Russia continue to be present in various countries in Latin America, Europe, or Middle Easter. These staggering statistics concern various economist who believe that the past will eventually come to haunt us in the country's most vulnerable times, as history repeats itself the reoccurring theme significantly impacts the people overall.

The ongoing movement is a current struggle native Cubans continue to face since the military dictatorship of Fidel Castro. The human rights violated in Cuba are those that consist of basic rights we enjoy every day in the United States: Freedom of speech, Free Democratic elections. The process is intended to help Cuban citizens regain their basic rights through Democratic methods, as of now 25,000 signatures have been collected to support the new laws and policies that protect these rights; however, many of the public's true popular clamor is often never expressed due to fear of the current government's status. Through decades of political oppression the people have been indoctrinated to endure this kind of treatment to the extent that if they were to oppose the government, it would very likely make them a target to the Cuban government. The systematic oppression of Cuban citizens has outraged the international community and now young men and women make radical decisions to combat against the tyrant government.

The dissident movement is important due to the fact that Cuba has had much political turmoil that in some instances has heavily impacted the U.S. Although the failure of the economic pressure exerted on Cuba is clear, many of the Cuban dissidents resent the new proposal from President Obama and Castro to normalize tensions between both countries. Cuban

dissidents believe that this act is a sign of betrayal towards the Cuban resistance because they strive for the same freedoms that the U.S. advocates for. However, by dealing with the Castro regime, they feel that the U.S. is abandoning them in their cause. Throughout the past 50 years the country has built upon itself a huge resentment towards American interest or any American interference those such as implementing a just Democratic procedure or election, though it is what the people are asking for. Understanding both past and present relationships between both Cuba and the United States has proved that these steps will not be easy to achieve; however, if these practices are used correctly and withhold Democratic procedures as they are intended then the likelihood of Cuba becoming a free and democratic nation is not far from establishment. This topic is worth analyzing because it demonstrates why basic freedoms are so hard to obtain even in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

The United States has played a major role in the political decisions that Cuba now faces. For example, the militant strategies that are heavily practiced in Cuba are all techniques taught by American troops. The United States made very apparent actions implicating a direct involvement in negotiations with Fidel Castro during Cuba's rise. Of course Cuba wanted none of this. The US does not have a very good record of interfering in other states, such as Guatemala. The US government is accused of leaving permanent damage to the survivors and their families who witnessed the true violation of their human rights. The US had a direct involvement in this act of genocide because in many occasions the United States government sent bilingual soldiers to train and guide Guatemalan men who were recruited for these attacks. The US often targeted young men with a loose sense of identity and family to commit atrocities too their own people in such a way, it made it very challenging to read and understand.



Throughout the course various elements became apparent to me in this reading such as: The US war led on terror, Human rights, and polarization between two countries.

The Domestic issues present in Cuba at the time have always led many to believe that the economic issues present in the case of Cuba lead to turmoil in the nation because all the power was given to the central government. The direct participation of the United States demonstrates the extent to which human right violations occurred with the presence of US, possibly with the help of the US. In the case, of Guatemala's indigenous population which, suffered tremendously due to concerns they expressed during labor movements that addressed working conditions and labor rights that closely unified the government and its people. The result of such movement caused a systematic liquidation that specifically targeted the indigenous people, which accounted for 85% of the total loss Guatemala faced during the revolution. The U.S. government has argued that these atrocities are justified, because they killed savage "Leftist Guerrillas" that lived on the outskirts of Mountains they claimed. For example, Montejo states, "Those who protested this deceit by the commander were threatened with prison and were told that to oppose these measures was to be an enemy of the government. That is how all these communities became subject to the will of the military and liable to sanctions or punishment if they disobeyed orders"<sup>14</sup>. The extent to which the Guatemalan government went to have the indigenous people abides to the new measures in which they were taking to pacify them. This example from Victor Montejo supports the fact that the United States has played key roles in the deterioration of various Latin American countries. Cuban dissidents have honored and seen the sacrifices made by leftist guerrillas because they are protecting the inherent value of humanity within themselves. Castro has resented the interference of the United States and has suggested that the Democratic

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<sup>14</sup> Montejo, Victor. 1987 Testimony: The Death of a Guatemalan Village. 13.

practices in western nation are as corrupt and do not represent the vast majority in which it is intended. According to Fidel Castro rulers in other countries had created a bogus democracy; since even though it was the people who had sacrificed and fought for democracy, in reality the democracy that had been created gave them no means of influencing governance and left them powerless. In his opinion a true democracy is one where man has his basic needs met by the politicians he elected to office and that was what Cuba was<sup>15</sup>. The hypocrisy in Castro's speech is later revealed during the time he remains in power and the hardships that befall the Cuban people. Though proven wrong, the United States fails to acknowledge their involvement in Latin America and disapproves of any form of reparation for the surviving victims of the revolutions held in Latin America and Cuba.

The involvement with Russia in Latin America also caused the nation to experiences turmoil in many aspects from intervention by its opposing neighbors. The rise of the communist party throughout the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century heavily increased the number of communist party gaining power in their Nations. In a passage from *The Soviet Union and Latin America* states, “theses adopted at the congress laid down that in Latin America the communists must everywhere actively participate in the revolutionary mass movements directed against the landed regime and against imperialism...but may not under no circumstance politically subordinate themselves to their temporary ally”<sup>16</sup>. Throughout entire century the Soviet Union intended to strengthen their relationship with Latin America which included the support of communist parties, as well as military weaponry to combat the interference of imperialism; however, supporting such causes has proved to Russia that supporting communist revolutions in Latin America did not benefit

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<sup>15</sup> August, Arnold. 2013. “Cuba and its Neighbors: Democracy in Motion”. 104.

<sup>16</sup> Oswald, J. Gregory. “Soviet Relations with Latin America.” 21.

themselves or their cause much at all. The author also suggests that, “it may be argued that the Cuban Lesson has taught the Soviet Union not only the Dangers of Geographic over-extension- something that the Americans are also learning anew these days- but the economic impossibility of financing every Latin American revolution that may succeed”<sup>17</sup>. Realizing that supporting communism throughout Latin America was costly, The Soviets quickly slowed down their support to Cuba and Fidel’s Guerrillas who claim they desperately needed the support. In 1967, Cubans wanted the Soviet Union to acknowledge the communist involvement in Cuba through communist party conferences. While the Soviet Union no longer exists, Cuba is still reliant on the successor Russia for support.

## **Moving Forward**

The Human Rights Violations that we see happening in Cuba are mainly the suppression of freedom of speech, peaceful assembly, free and fair elections, among others. These are all rights that have been outlined in the United Nation Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>18</sup>. We have seen the same type of violations of people’s rights in other dictatorships as well, both within and out of Latin America. There are numerous examples such as the USSR, North Korea, China, and other states that have fallen to dictatorship. In Latin America cases such as Argentina are very close. Before the start of the dirty war in Argentina the government there engaged in the same types of repressive techniques. “The State had long had the power to imprison people for

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<sup>17</sup> Oswald, J. Gregory. “Soviet Relations with Latin America.” 27.

<sup>18</sup> "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, UDHR, Declaration of Human Rights, Human Rights Declaration, Human Rights Charter, The Un and Human Rights."  
See Preamble, Articles 20 and 21

an indefinite period without specific charges and without recourse to judicial proceedings”<sup>19</sup>.

While this is not the exact case in Cuba, it is similar in many ways. Cuba has a rule which states that while the constitution recognizes freedoms and rights, none of these may go contrary to the constitution, the objectives of the state or the Cuban peoples goal of making a communist state<sup>20</sup>. This law can be interpreted as the rulers seem fit and any actions which it finds to dislike can be punished through this. While judicial practices are in place, they are beholden to the government and only rubber stamp the decision of the regime. This in effect creates the same type of situation as in Argentina. There is a strong precedent of the Cuban government to imprison people for 20-28 years<sup>21</sup>. While the prison sentence is not indefinite, such prison terms for actions such as writing articles which are critical of the government show that the government does truly possess the same type of power when it comes to detaining its citizens.

Cuba must come to change its approach but it will not do so if there are no external changes. In order to encourage Cuba to bring about change, the international community must be willing to engage in dialogue. Dialogue of mutual understanding and cooperation, not one side blaming the other for abuses and the other retaliating by doing the same. The Obama administrations step towards once again creating diplomatic ties between the two nations is an important step. The United States and its allies do possess an enormous economic leverage, however that leverage cannot be used to bring about change if it does not exist in Cuba. While the Trade Embargo has unmistakably been doing damage to the Cuban economy, Cuba has learned to live with it. If the U.S. wants to have meaningful influence in Cuba it must be engaged both politically and economically. Especially since Cuba has been moving towards social and

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<sup>19</sup> Marchak, M. Patricia, and William Marchak. *God's Assassins: State Terrorism in Argentina in the 1970s*. 128.

<sup>20</sup> Cuba: Silencing the Voices of Dissent, *New York: Amnesty International*. 1.

<sup>21</sup> United States. Committee on International Relations House of Representatives. *Castro's Brutal Crackdown on Dissidents*. 3.

political change. Raul Castro has signed laws allowing Cubans to leave the country, and even though there are strict procedures to follow this is a step forward. Furthermore, Raul Castro has said that in five years he will step down and new laws will be implemented to change the current government officials<sup>22</sup>. While it would be wrong for other countries to take this as a restoration of democracy and human rights in Cuba, it would also be wrong to completely disregard such comments. Russia, as one of Cuba's closest friends, has stood by it on the international arena and called this a huge step forward. The western countries should recognize that Cuba is on a path of change and help foster this change. That can be done by making sure that outside forces are not damaging the Cuban people. However, more than anything the Cuban people are the ones that must push for such change.

For there to be change in any nation there must be pressure from the local population. While there are small dissident movements happening in Cuba with a few hundred people maximum in support of it, the at large population has remained unengaged. This has caused many to question the validity of the dissident movement and whether they are just not disgruntled political opponents who have no support from the population<sup>23</sup>. Or similarly whether the population just has no leader to follow even if they do not like the regime. In any case, if the Cuban people want change they must show it in greater numbers and through a more unified voice. The current system of many but small dissident movements is not effective and leaves the opposition looking like it has no support. Moreover, the Cubans who are living outside of the country must provide support by lobbying the nations where they live. At the same time they

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<sup>22</sup> Vasilenkov Sergey Василенков Сергей, Кубинцам разрешили бежать из страны [Cubans are allowed to leave the country], *Pravda*, N.P. 15 Jan. 2013, Web. 14 May 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Shishkov, Andrei. Шишков, Андрей. "О новых тенденциях в политическом и экономическом развитии Кубы." *Российский институт стратегических исследований*. [New trends in Cuban Politics and Economy]

must be understanding. When the U.S. and Cuba announced their plan of restarting diplomatic relations, many Cubans living in America and some of those living inside of Cuba felt betrayed. However, this is not so. Cubans who wish to see change must recognize that change comes gradually. Demanding the resignations of the government and accepting nothing short of that is not a way to bring about change.

The lack of opportunity that existed within Cuba when the revolution first took place is present still. The Cuban people must put pressure on their government, but taking the nature of the Castro regime into question it is obvious that small scale dissent movements will not produce any change. The dictatorial nature of the regime allows it to arrest and forcefully break up protest, but that is not easily done when there are hundreds of thousands as opposed to a few dozen or even hundred protesters. This of course raises the stakes for everyone, just as in Argentina and Guatemala the existing regime was willing to carry out mass atrocities and genocide so too can the Cuban government. So the question becomes really, what is the Cuban government willing to do to hold on to power? Considering the fact that Raul Castro announced in 2013 that he would step down after five years, it seems that the regime is already beginning to disband its power. It would be wrong to sit idly by and wait for Castro to disband the regime, but it would serve to the contrary if revolutionary movements were to break out now. That could change the mind of Raul Castro, seeing the country deteriorating into chaos could make him believe once again that a strong ruler is needed more in Cuba than so called democratic processes. Right now, it would be advisable for the Cuban people to keep pushing for more rights and more freedoms through a more unified forum, but to make sure to keep all such pressure non-violent.

Time and time again we have seen that autocratic regimes lead to gross human rights violations. It has not been the different with Cuba. The socialist state that Cuba has built under the leadership of Fidel Castro and his brother Raul have left no room for political opposition. Those seeking social change have nowhere to turn to as there is no other party that can compete with the Castro regime and the government itself has been stubborn on preserving their core beliefs. The dissident movement that has grown out of this situation has been suppressed by the government and the people's rights of peaceful assembly, freedom of speech and genuine elections have all been trampled. Understanding the history of the Castro regime and the international actors helps us understand why Cuba has been experiencing these sorts of turmoil and repression. It also gives us an idea of what the next years should look like for all the parties involved. The US policy towards its neighbor state, the Castro regime and the dissidents carrying out the fight. We hope that the changing policies by the Cuban government and the by the Washington will have a positive effect on the human rights situation in Cuba. The nation is changing rapidly and one can only hope that this change will be for the better.

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