

Cuba and Venezuela: Opposing the Imperialist War Without Defending Authoritarian Regimes

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The great dichotomy of the Cuban critical left has always been opposing the U.S. imperialist intervention, its expansionist and interference-driven character, while also denouncing the dictatorial traits and rights violations of a State that calls itself socialist. At this point, that dichotomy is more than resolved for many people, since one cannot be revolutionary and Cuban without acknowledging that the “Revolution” of ’59 died long ago and that the current State is rooted in the annulment of political rights, and has even destroyed those so-called “achievements” that the historic generation once defended. Cuba is a country where the lack of fundamental guarantees such as access to healthcare, sanitation, and dignified education is common; although these rights appear in the Constitution, in practice they are not enjoyed by the people.

Socialism as a political principle has not been applied in Cuba for a long time, nor in Venezuela. What we have are bureaucratic States whose rulers endlessly enrich themselves at the expense of poverty, without granting citizens the slightest possibility of economic or political participation.

After the social uprising of July 11 and 12, 2021, more than 1,000 people were detained, according to reports by Amnesty International and NGOs that documented sentences and detentions ranging from 5 to 30 years for participating in those protests. But criminalization did not stop with the judicial persecution of demonstrators; it extended to relatives and friends of political prisoners and to ordinary citizens who chose to denounce the arbitrariness of the processes. This persecution for political reasons is the daily bread in both Cuba and Venezuela.

A militant of the Latin American left—who mostly tends to romanticize Cuba and Venezuela—recently told me that it is interesting that Cuba’s system of citizen representation does not have a Western multiparty character and is instead based on representation from different sectors of society.

I do not believe multiparty politics is the ultimate solution to representation, considering that politics is a business of the elites and that today we witness partisan corruption across all ideologies. But in the Cuban case, we have a system where representation is coerced, since if I or any person with ideas for social change that do not respond to the orders and goals of the Communist Party attempt to take part in that political representation, undercover police—known as “state security”—will ensure through judicialization, repression, harassment of relatives and friends, and all types of social-annihilation tactics, that such a candidacy does not even reach the first rung of the representational chain.

In Venezuela, there are reports by the IACHR and Amnesty International describing restrictions on freedom of expression, criminalization of journalists and activists, and detentions following mobilizations. Additionally, although Venezuela does hold elections, there remains reasonable doubt as to whether fraud occurred in the most recent ones, since the government refused to allow a

transparent audit. That does not mean that María Corina Machado's proposal is the positive side of history—we know it is a pro-Israel, conservative, Trump-aligned platform, which is also the result of extreme polarization.

The big question is whether what remains for Cuba and Venezuela is the most reactionary right wing as a backlash against governments that, in the name of the left, have also been dictatorships. The answer is ambiguous, because although in both countries there are left-wing proposals that envision democratic pathways and fair redistribution of wealth, these are not hegemonic. For those of us who engage in politics from a left-wing perspective, our only remaining task is to prepare ourselves to dissent in both scenarios: whether facing current dictatorships or future ones.

“The Enemy”: Same Plan, Different Interests

The military escalation and the narrative of a “war on drugs” have been the historic pretext for U.S. interventions in Latin America or to justify states of exception within countries, allowing allied governments to criminalize protest and limit civil society action. The construction of the external enemy of the United States sustained the Cold War and the persecution of leftists. Today that enemy is constructed regionally through the so-called “war on drugs.”

In the case of Venezuela, for example, we have the U.S. accusation of drug trafficking against Nicolás Maduro's government. We know it is undemocratic; whether it is involved in drug trafficking, we do not know. Even so, within the U.S. regional discourse, such accusations appear suspicious.

But U.S. policy goes beyond narrative and symbolic war through fake news. During the current administration, Trump ordered multiple attacks on boats that, according to the U.S., were linked to drug trafficking. These strikes have caused dozens of deaths and triggered international protests. Media outlets such as Reuters and The Guardian have documented 15 to 20 attacks and the deployment of aircraft carriers in the region.

U.S. interventionist policy is nothing new; it is replicated year after year and attempts to return with new faces that promote collective amnesia to again hand over territories to the “good neighbor.” Examples include the Manta base in Ecuador, used to carry out Plan Colombia (only 30% of military operations from Manta took place in Ecuadorian airspace; the rest were in Colombian territory, taking advantage of geographic proximity). Recently, Ecuador held a referendum in which the public was asked, among other things, whether to permit foreign military bases on national territory. Fortunately, Ecuador gave a resounding “no” to that proposal.

The “external enemy” discourse can normalize severe internal security narratives that criminalize specific social groups: poor people, racialized communities, activists, political opponents. In states of exception, false positives, lawfare, and stigmatization of the disposable subjects of capitalism flourish.

However, the heavy-handed approach toward the enemy is common to all governments: the U.S. applies it toward Latin America and especially toward Cuba and Venezuela; Daniel Noboa applied it in Ecuador toward those who recently protested against the elimination of the diesel subsidy and the increase in neoliberal policies aligned with his pact with the IMF; and—surprise!—Cuban and Venezuelan governments have also applied it against all forms of dissent. It seems the discourse of the “besieged fortress,” the “internal war,” and the enemy serves both left- and right-wing governments.

But one cannot address the complexity of U.S. policy toward Cuba or Venezuela without discussing

economic blockades. It is unfortunate that increased U.S. sanctions have become part of the narrative used by activists in both countries to overthrow those governments. Members of the state apparatus in Cuba and Venezuela do not suffer from the blockade. In fact, the biggest business in Cuba right now stems from scarcity and the possibility for private actors to import everything that is sold. The State in Cuba is merely a bureaucratic entity, and the elites enrich themselves by negotiating through the poverty of the population, either as private individuals or through intermediaries. The blockade deepens people's poverty and sets the table for the deals of those who hold political power.

Between March 2023 and February 2024, the Cuban government estimated embargo damages at USD 5.0568 billion, according to OnCubaNews. In public health, a study found that due to the embargo and the economic crisis since 1989, Cuba has seen "declining nutrition levels, increased infectious disease rates, and deterioration of health infrastructure," explains PMC. In Venezuela, a summary by Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research estimated that U.S.-led sanctions caused losses in oil revenue equivalent to 213% of GDP from January 2017 to December 2024.

I never tire of saying it: the U.S. calls itself a democratic ambassador so many times to hide that it is the father of all Latin American dictatorships. And as Goebbels, the Nazi, said: "A lie repeated a thousand times becomes truth." The current U.S. government has learned many things from fascism. That is why defending the sovereignty of peoples against imperialism does not mean hiding that there are regimes with authoritarian practices that curtail political freedoms and criminalize protest. The duty—not even of a "revolutionary," but of a human being with humanity—is not to look away when one's people suffer, even if that means questioning those who call themselves ideological comrades.

How Does Authoritarianism Operate Today in Cuba and Venezuela?

The similarities are frightening. The discourse of the internal enemy reappears again and again in campaigns against NGOs under the slogan of "foreign funding," which extends to delegitimizing protests in Venezuela. Amnesty International reports recent cases of digital surveillance and media control, as well as the use of criminal laws to persecute protest, using ambiguous legal categories such as terrorism, contempt, and instigation, ending in pre-trial detention without transparent proceedings.

In my master's thesis, I examined the criminalization of dissent associated with the July 11, 2021 uprising, and among my research findings I came to understand that, in my country, official media, courts, and state institutions operate in coordination: they use the same discourse to justify repression and sustain an authoritarian system. Moreover, criminalization has become state policy: protesters are stigmatized to legitimize state violence and prevent future demonstrations. But as a culmination, repression does not end with arrest; it affects daily life, economic stability, and the emotional well-being of demonstrators and their families.

In Cuba there are subjects more "criminalizable" than others: intellectuals are attacked with political stigmas in the media, while people from poor neighborhoods are labeled as criminals, hiding the political nature of their protest. Trials reproduce social stigmas: misconduct, unemployment, or marginality are used as "evidence" of guilt. Official media present two camps: violent, criminal, manipulated protesters versus government supporters who are patriotic, peaceful, and victims. They also hide the internal causes of public discontent: poverty, crisis, lack of freedoms; they blame only the blockade and the U.S.

Authoritarianism in Cuba and Venezuela operates both in the factual realm of laws and physical repression of demonstrators, and in the symbolic realm of discourse that States attempt to construct

to legitimize their domination, arguing that protest or any political opposition is not permissible because these are States constantly under U.S. aggression, besieged fortresses. This does not validate the fallacious right-wing claim that a socialist state is authoritarian per se, because a socialist state must be built on massive citizen participation.

This is what the Cuban critical left and much of the non-hegemonic Venezuelan left propose: anti-imperialist self-determination of our peoples, the right to political participation, and the critique of States that have long operated under capitalist rules and have strayed from any possible revolution. Aggression toward Cuba and Venezuela is both national and transnational: it comes from the empire and from those who hold political power today.

How can North American Civil Society Help?

Given the contexts of Cuba and Venezuela and the degree of U.S. interference, it is complicated to call for collaboration from U.S. civil society. But the rise of fascisms and authoritarianisms is global, and history has shown that changing things in a single country—hegemonic or counter-hegemonic—is not enough. Therefore, the first call to North American left-wing civil society is an obvious but necessary one: to help Cuba and Venezuela, “change your own country.” The U.S. is decisive in the destiny of Latin America, and as long as its foreign policy is based on aggression and assimilation of other territories, democratization in our countries will be extremely difficult.

However, there are more attainable horizons, such as creating verification networks and counter-narratives. We must start by understanding nuance and speaking critically about Cuba and Venezuela in every possible space. We must fight against the blockade—this is non-negotiable—but we must also use every form of international pressure to create space for critical left-wing activists and to protect their integrity in the face of criminalization.

Another avenue could be supporting independent Cuban media with a critical left-wing approach, so that the reality portrayed about Cuba does not depend on funding from the State Department and the CIA. Likewise, influencing international organizations from other perspectives: What if we began speaking before national and international bodies with an anti-interventionist, anti-blockade discourse while also denouncing the lack of political rights in Cuba and Venezuela? It seems that criticism of authoritarianism belongs to the right, and criticism of imperialism belongs to the left, but what if we start breaking polarization and speak from objectivity?

We are not naïve: there are dictatorships that repress, and there is an empire seeking to intervene. Our loyalty is to human dignity: to the right to protest, to organize, to speak one’s truth, and to live with dignity. Fascism has many faces, and we must speak about the U.S. state’s role in the genocide in Palestine and the systematic genocide of African populations for extractivist purposes.

In Latin America, they at least worried about maintaining the façade of the “war on drugs”; in Africa they have simply silenced an entire continent. We must talk about Cuba and Venezuela, and the fact that we gather to do so responds to geographic proximity and the ideological characteristics of their governments, because we still face the Cold War’s lingering effects and a left-wing dictator always seems more frightening. But what about right-wing dictatorships? Let’s talk about Ecuador, El Salvador, or Argentina as well. The fragile equilibrium of this world is collapsing, and today more than ever we will need many revolutions to save ourselves as a species. Alone and atomized in our realities or countries, we will not be able to fight fascism. It will be a world revolution—or we will become extinct.