

# WebMemo



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## Cuba Solidarity Day 2008: Remembering Our Totalitarian Neighbor

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May 21 is Cuba Solidarity Day. The day seeks to remind Americans that 90 miles away from the United States is an island nation controlled by a government that remains by all objective definitions a Communist, totalitarian regime.

In the globalizing, market-based world and more democratic hemisphere of 2008, Cuba is governed by a Communist one-party regime installed in 1959. At the helm is an ailing Fidel Castro, his 75-year-old brother Raul Castro, now officially head of state, and a handful of hardened Communists—an elite whose authority is limited only by the meager resources of the country's obsolete economy. In Cuba's Orwellian dystopia, control over all aspects of political, economic, legal, artistic, educational, and cultural life remains in the hands of Communist officials.

Because Cuba is not run by a Stalin, Mao, or Pol Pot, because there are no show trials or cultural revolutions, the world has grown accustomed to Cuba's lesser but omnipresent tyranny.

The number of citizens thrown into Cuba's gulags runs in the hundreds, not millions. Canadians and Europeans visit picturesque old Havana and enjoy the attractions of Cuban sun, surf, and sex without incident. Heads of state visit Havana hoping for a last nostalgic glimpse of Fidel or to meet with the new power brokers.

With the passage of time, the evils of Cuban Communism have become more banal, a dull ache rather than a throbbing pain. Cuba is no longer a giant aircraft carrier for the defunct Soviet Union.

Missiles that once threatened to rain nuclear annihilation on the U.S. were long ago scrapped. Cuba's interventionist military has returned from wars of national liberation in Latin America and Africa to take up safe jobs in the tourist sector and enjoy life as pensioned war veterans.

Cuba slips increasingly into the twilight zone of illiberal, anti-democratic regimes as diverse as China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Vietnam with which the U.S. maintains correct if not always friendly diplomatic and trade relations.

### **Modest Improvements under Raul's Regime.**

The transition from Fidel to Raul occurred with few signs of instability and turmoil. Since February 24, 2008, Raul Castro has launched modest economic changes. Cubans can now aspire, although few can afford, to own cell phones, DVD players, and computers (without access to the Internet). A few hated restrictions, such as the ban on patronizing tourist hotels, have been lifted. Small farmers and the self-employed will have more latitude to operate and more productive workers may receive higher wages.

Such are the baby steps toward a less draconian future. Raul Castro hints at lifting travel restrictions and ending the dual-currency divide that

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separates Cubans into haves with dollars and have-nots with Cuban pesos. Perhaps at the back of his mind is a game plan for following the Chinese or Vietnamese development model without rocking the political boat.

Cuban reforms are not undertaken with any sense of altruism or love for the Cuban people, but out of a calculated desire to profit from sales of goods in state-owned stores and to enable Communism to survive.

The Cuban economy has grown in recent years with the generous assistance of President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela and from tourist dollars and euros and higher commodity prices. The U.S. plays its part as a prime supplier of licensed food and medical sales. American agricultural and business representatives urge easier access to and credits for the Cuba market.

Yet, the state still controls 93 percent of the economy. The average income of the ordinary Cuban working under “socialist distribution” is less than \$20 per month. Foreign investments allow the regime to profit heavily on the labor of a docile, poorly compensated labor force.

The youth of the island, referred to as Generation Y, have known only the hardship of the 1990s and 2000s. Cuba’s best and brightest have become politically apathetic. They either seek to emigrate or are forced to hustle for service jobs in the dollar sector.

**Conclusion.** Sadly, as May 21 reminds us, the political climate in Cuba remains stagnant and stifling. Raul Castro commands a legion of security

agents believed to exceed 20,000, skilled in surveillance, infiltration, and the use of *agents provocateurs*. Gatherings of more than three are prohibited; individuals are subject to arrest and imprisonment for “dangerousness.” Anyone expressing inconformity with official views becomes fair game for a visit by a mob and “acts of repudiation.”

An estimated 240 political prisoners languish under the most deplorable conditions that include solitary confinement, and often beatings. Among the prisoners are many whose offenses were to demand respect for universal human rights or to call for freedom of ideas and press.

The Cuban regime demands acceptance of its legitimacy and rule without external criticism or scrutiny. Yet, when 10 *Damas en Blanca* (“Women in White”) gathered in a central Havana square, as they did on April 21, seeking freedom for kin jailed unjustly, they were met by a caravan of police officials and branded “agents of U.S. imperialism.” This is not change.

May 21 is a day for sober consideration. As citizens of a great democracy that has opposed tyranny and stood for consent of the governed and liberty and rights for individuals, we must not forget that a Communist totalitarian regime lies uncomfortably close to our shores.

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