

The Canadian Network on Cuba

Human Rights in Cuba – Submission for the 44th Universal Periodic Review

The Canadian Network on Cuba, representing 24 member-organizations and over 55,000 Canadians in 6 provinces, is pleased to present our perspective on the topic of human rights in Cuba.

1. Background Information on the Canadian Network on Cuba (CNC)

The Canadian Network on Cuba (CNC) was founded on September 6, 2002. We are committed to the strengthening of friendship and solidarity between the peoples of Canada and Cuba. To this end, we work with the Cuban Institute for Friendship Amongst the Peoples (ICAP) and other international and national partners, to promote social, cultural, political, and economic relations between Canada and Cuba, on the basis of mutual respect and non-interference. We:

- Initiate, co-ordinate and co-operate in cultural, educational, political and aid campaigns and projects involving Canada and Cuba.
- Counter media and other distortions of Cuban reality by disseminating information about the achievements of socialist Cuba in areas such as education, public health, culture, democracy, and human rights.
- Work to improve Canadian foreign policy on Cuba.

From the outset, the Canadian Network on Cuba rejects the Human Rights Council's notable emphasis on civil and political rights, which imply that these rights have a moral superiority over other types of human rights, such as those related to a country's economic, cultural, health, and education policies. This prioritization reflects a First World hegemonic bias, and therefore favours the perspective of colonizing countries who regard formal civil and political rights as primary rights, in service of the freedom of capital, in the global discussion of human rights. This emphasis does not account for the historical and material reality of Cuba, and its struggle to exercise sovereignty and attain social justice. Therefore, from a philosophical standpoint, this emphasis on civil and political rights is difficult to justify.

While there is certainly an interaction between different types of human rights, a society without an underlying structure and practice of economic justice cannot support and ensure civil and political rights.

The framework of the discussion of human rights must be situated within the context of real-world history, rather than through ideological abstractions which disregard past and present realities of power.

Thus, human rights must be deconstructed and understood through the lens of Cuba's particular history, especially its relations with the United States of America. This history unambiguously exposes ongoing, systematic hostility and aggression by the USA towards Cuba; From its conquest of Cuba in the Spanish-American War, to its imposition of the sovereignty-denying Platt Amendment, through its

ideological and material support of numerous 20th century dictatorial Cuban regimes, the USA government has deliberately and systematically undermined democratic struggles in Cuba. And its post-1959 dispositions and actions towards Cuba have continued this neo-colonial practice. To cite just four examples: witness the USA government-sanctioned and directed invasion of Cuba in 1961; the more than half-century long unilateral (and UN-denounced) economic blockade designed to stifle development and force the people to go against their democratically-elected government; its maintenance of an illegal military base and prison in Cuba's Guantanamo Bay; and, finally, its current, ongoing bellicose talk and financial underwriting of "regime-change" and destabilization efforts in Cuba, via non-governmental organizations.

This relentless aggression and abuse of Cuba's right to self-determination has necessitated Cuba's adoption of what may be termed an "under-siege" approach to the application of political and civil rights within its territorial borders. Historically, many other countries have done the same, because no country threatened with loss of sovereignty can permit a fifth column to develop within its borders. Cuba's key political and civil liberties, and the nature of any restrictions, thus make perfect sense in this context of sovereignty defense against an imperial power, one that has colonized it, supported repressive dictatorships against the interest of its people, uses a blockade as economic warfare, continues to occupy an illegal military base and black site on its territory, and directly finances efforts to destabilize it through manufacturing and fomenting political unrest.

Take, for example, the protests orchestrated on July 11, 2021 in Cuba by US-funded NGOs such as *Cuba Decide*. This Miami-based NGO's CEO, Rosa María Payá, was instrumental in disseminating misinformation about fictitious detentions via flyers and videographics leading up to the mobilizations on the morning of July 11. *Cuba Decide*'s placards could be seen in various locations across Cuba on that day, and their slogans were echoed from one violent protest to the next.

The social media campaign that accompanied these protests has proven to be initiated and orchestrated by troll farm companies that received funds from the US state of Florida. On June 15, 2021, the hashtag #SOSCuba was launched by a US company the same day it was authorized to receive funding. Days earlier, hashtags appeared calling for a 'humanitarian corridor' or 'humanitarian intervention' in Cuba. Bots and troll farms were used to disseminate messages on Twitter through false accounts, including one doing five retweets per second on July 10 and 11, 2021. Twitter users had changed their geolocation to appear to be in Cuba.

Cuban citizens were contacted online and explicitly offered money in US currency to join the July 11 protests and instigate violence, while capturing footage of their deeds as proof of their service. This footage was then sent to media outlets who receive funding from the United States' intelligence cutout agencies the National Endowment for Democracy and USAID. No sovereign country can tolerate so-called dissenters dependent on a hostile, foreign power for their funding and content. There can be no doubt that any other sovereign country would act otherwise than to arrest and press charges against these individuals.

Contrary to what many assert, any Cuban citizen is free to criticize their government on any matter. What Cuba insists on, however, is that no Cuban financed and directed by a foreign government which openly calls for "regime-change" and the demolition of its world-recognized achievements in health and education may disseminate such critique. Autonomous, grassroots political discussion and debate is not only encouraged in Cuba but is now more widespread than ever before. It is explicitly promoted by the government in its electoral processes in addition to numerous other political and

civil settings. Cuba has negated the corrupting and undemocratic influences of large concentrations of money by completely removing the reliance on finances from the electoral process, so that the government is truly “of, for, and by the people”.

2. Comments & Current Observations of the Evolution of Human Rights in Cuba

LGBT, Sexual Orientation, Family & Women’s Rights

In 2022, Cubans exercised their democratic rights via a referendum on LGBT rights, adoption laws, and refined rights for seniors and children. The Cuban people overwhelmingly voted to pass its new Code of Families, which is among the most progressive in the world, and reflects the consciousness of the Cuban people. It proves the ever-forward direction of Cuba in manifesting and defending true people’s democracy, even under the devastating illegal US blockade.

Around six million Cubans participated in tens of thousands of meetings in workplaces, neighbourhoods, and mass organizations to discuss and debate the first draft of the Code. Cuban nationals living outside of Cuba were also involved, discussing, and debating using an online copy of the code created to allow questions or recommendations from Cubans abroad. In-person meetings were also held at Cuban embassies for further discussion.

The critiques and suggestions that came out of these discussions were taken into consideration; many were accepted and helped to form the 25th and final draft. Ultimately, the Code of Families, consisting of 471 articles and 117 pages, and was released to Cubans prior to commencement of the referendum voting process.

The Cuban government approached the debates and referendum on the new Code of Families as a ‘battle of ideas’. Chauvinistic attitudes have deep historical roots, and are the legacy of centuries of colonialism, Catholicism, and the imposition of slavery, followed by the influence of United States’ cultural standards imposed through imperialist domination.

The continued influence of the evangelical churches and United States’ imperialism has worked against the efforts by Cuba’s National Centre for Sex Education (CENESEX), which has nonetheless made great strides in promoting acceptance of sexual and gender diversity. These reactionary elements also affected the 2019 update to the Cuban Constitution, the first draft of which proposed re-defining marriage as ‘between two persons’ rather than ‘between a man and a woman’. Evangelical churches responded with homophobic petitions and propaganda. Similar actions were taken by the churches in protesting the Code of Families. The United States government strengthened this opposition by funding right-wing Cubans in the US, counterrevolutionaries and religious evangelicals in Cuba who seek to demonize the societal progress that the Code of Families represents. Nonetheless, the Cuban government prioritized the rights of its people, promoting and educating people on the content of the Code of Families, proving once again that socialist Cuba continues to be a society based on equality, a society that holds the well-being of its people at the forefront of all decision-making.

Regarding the status of women specifically in Cuba, there is a high level of participation of women in political and public life, with one of the highest percentages of women in parliament globally (increased to 53.4 per cent in 2021), and an increase in the representation of women in government

bodies overall. It is important to note that the illegal United States sanctions on Cuba and their devastating economic impact will continue to impede it from completely fulfilling its explicit emancipatory endeavors for the status of women in the country, particularly women with disabilities, those of African descent, and rural women.

Anti-Racism & Racial Equality

There is no political transformation in the world that has achieved the same level of racial equality as that achieved by the 1959 Cuban Revolution. However, as a unipolar world order began to emerge in the 1980s, some of these achievements began to be reversed (though racial inequality in Cuba still never attained the levels of racial inequality in most other countries). The pre-revolutionary racialized social structure of Cuba continues to shape current social inequalities in Cuba, reinforced by the United States economic blockade. With increased neoliberal policies in recent decades, the United States' ability to monitor and block international transactions through their control of the SWIFT messaging system, and Cuba losing trading partners due to the United States' stranglehold on global trade, the economic blockade has an even more devastating impact on Cubans today, and specifically on Afro-Cubans.

With much less access to financial capital, goods, and mobility, Afro-Cubans are being clearly disadvantaged by the blockade. The blockade makes access to hard currency essential, and racialized migration patterns of the past make for highly unequal access to family remittances. Additionally, the opening of private business disfavours Afro-Cubans, due to the legacy of slavery. Cubans of European descent are more likely to own pre-revolutionary cars and larger homes to use for tourism-based business, while Afro-Cubans still lack equitable access to business start-up funds due to the above-mentioned reasons related to migration patterns, and the legacy of slavery and colonialism. Moreover, the acquisition of a second foreign citizenship (mostly Spanish) is an important privilege that is almost exclusively available to the Cuban population of European descent.

There are no structural causes of racism imposed from within Cuba – these structural causes described above are related to the ongoing consequences of external imperialism and colonialism, and economic warfare against Cuba perpetrated by the United States. And, of course, the sanctions themselves make it difficult for the Cuban government to respond to these racialized discrepancies in their society. It is an effect that the United States government is keenly aware of and uses to its advantage when disseminating propaganda against the Cuban government, through the various NGOs that it funds.

In late 2019, the government of Cuba officially launched its National Racism and Racial Discrimination Program, to combat the cultural racism and racist attitudes that still exist in Cuba today. The head of the commission that directs the program is President Miguel Diaz-Canal, with 18 state agencies and an equal number of civil society organizations contributing. The Ministries of Culture, Foreign Affairs, as well as Science, Technology and Environment, are involved in the direct coordination of work, along with the Union of Cuban Writers and Artists.

Furthermore, the scientific foundations upon which the program was designed are significant, based on an initial diagnosis that was submitted to the commission for analysis. The diagnosis included the contributions of the social sciences, abundant statistical information from various sources, numerous

observations by agencies and organizations, as well as the experience and opinions of experts, intellectuals, and activists. Cuba shows genuine ambition, through its concrete actions, that it aims to combat racism in its society, and is leaps and bounds ahead of other countries in the world in this regard.

The Right to Participate in Public and Political Life – Cuba’s Participatory Democracy

Extensive popular participation is at the centre of the Cuban model of democracy and this participation impacts on the everyday issues that affect ordinary Cubans. The National Assembly is the sole body with legislative authority, with delegates – as in the provincial and municipal assemblies – directly elected by the Cuban electorate. To be absolutely clear, the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) is not an electoral party and is proscribed by law from playing any role in the nomination of candidates.

The official organs of government in Cuba are the municipal, provincial, and national assemblies of the *Poder Popular* (peoples’ power) structures. A rare closeness exists between elected municipal delegates and the people that they serve. Popular Councils, essentially neighbourhood government, provide the mandate to municipal assemblies and serve as the real basis for solving problems. Cuba consistently has voter turnouts at or well above 70%, which contrasts starkly to voter turnouts in the liberal representative democracies of Western countries, where democracy both in reality, and in public perception, has been critically eroded. There is no election campaigning permitted in Cuba; nor are there candidate financing or donations involved in elections; nor are there lobby groups. There is no oligarchy in Cuba. Cuba held democratic local elections in November 2022 to elect its Municipal Assemblies, and then its National Legislative Assembly elections just recently in March 2023.

The Right to Healthcare

The Cuban healthcare system, rooted in primary care, continues to yield outstanding results, unmatched anywhere in the world, especially when considering per capita spending — with lower infant mortality, higher life expectancies and universal coverage, it is a model for other countries, including those in the Global North or Western countries. With healthcare protection enshrined in the Cuban Constitution, and the government guaranteeing free medical treatment at home, in polyclinics, hospitals, and preventative and specialized treatment centres, along with free dental and optical care, it’s no wonder why Cuba now has a higher life expectancy than the United States.

In addition to its exceptional domestic achievements in healthcare, Cuba also consistently demonstrates international solidarity through healthcare, via its medical brigades and missions to regions and countries in need of medical personnel, Cuba’s Latin American School of Medicine training students from other countries to be doctors (free of cost), and most recently, by donating or selling at-cost its COVID-19 vaccines to countries who, like Cuba, were shut out from procuring vaccines on a global market by Western countries.

3. Conclusions

To conclude, the Canadian Network on Cuba sees the Cuban civil and political system as an expression of the will of its citizens in the exercise of the founding principle of the United Nations, namely, the

right to national self-determination. Despite the illegal, genocidal economic sanctions imposed on it by the United States, and its relative poverty, Cuba matches the world's wealthiest countries in metrics on health outcomes, education, infant mortality, and literacy, and it shames the United States and the rest of the world when it comes to gender and racial equality, political and cultural literacy, and environmental sustainability. Cuba is a victim of ongoing human rights violations, imposed by the United States of America, and nonetheless it continues to be a more democratic, fair, and just society than most.

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