

# Opinion

## Catholic leaders in Cuba speak out against repression. They need our support

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**A**s in most places around the world, the Catholic clergy in Cuba are usually busy presiding over rituals and practices that instruct followers in the faith. Parish priests celebrate daily Mass, hear confessions every week, visit the sick in hospitals and nursing homes, offering spiritual direction. Nuns serve their community by helping the poor, teaching after school and providing healthcare.

Committed to a life of faith, poverty and chastity, they rarely get involved in political or economic dialogue.

But recently, something unusual happened. Eighteen Catholic orders working in Cuba published an open letter to government authorities denouncing the lack of freedom of expression and Cubans' economic precariousness. It is no accident that the letter was circulated only days after a group of Catholic priests and lay ministers posted a video on social media demanding change and expressing support for a group of dissidents who went on hunger strike to call attention to repressive and brutal practices of the Cuban government.

It's a sign of gathering momentum. In January, a

virtual Catholic group named "Areópago Cubano" published its own open letter, "I Have Seen the Affliction of My People," which details the Cuban people's suffering and calls for political change. To date, more than 1,000 people representing various faiths and sectors in Cuba have signed the letter.

The Areópago letter, crafted by about 20 young priests from the province of Camagüey in the north central part of the island, affirms that in Cuba, "The people have to learn to live in a 'desert of freedoms,' where they must choose between freedom and the comforts of life." As impassioned and strongly worded as the priests' letters and statements are, their tone is always respectful, marked by love for country. In one instance, the authors write that they "contemplate the reality of the Island with immense love, as a son does with his mother."

Faith workers such as these priests and nuns reflect the pulse of the people and the local communities. A large majority of Cubans profess religious faith, and as many as 70 percent identify with a specific church. Despite numerous and formidable government-imposed obstacles, church networks offer the largest and most viable civil society platforms for supporting development and humanitarian relief efforts.

The U.S. Department of State agrees with these Catholic leaders' message. Its 2020 Report on In-

ternational Religious Freedom, released on May 12, says that, "Catholic and Protestant church leaders, both in and outside the government-recognized Council of Cuban Churches (CCC), continued to report frequent visits from state security agents and [Communist Party of Cuba] officials for the purpose of intimidating them and reminding them they were under close surveillance."

The report adds that Cuban Christians are prohibited from establishing schools, creating newspapers or spreading their message through the media. Last December, the U.S. secretary of State again placed Cuba on the Special Watch List for countries whose governments "engage in or tolerate" violations of religious freedom.

Currently, Cuban television and bloggers are trying to discredit the religious messengers by broadcasting their names and insinuating sexual and other kinds of misconduct. They have also slandered them by calling them mercenaries and terrorists. The organization I lead, Outreach Aid to the Americas (OAA), and others have urged the authorities to treat the religious advocates with dignity and respect.

There is no question that the regime's attacks are rooted in its inability to control critics or to refute criticisms of the island's grim realities — something that is plain to any honest observer of the reality on the island. Fundamentally, this is a government whose determination to cling to power renders it unable to

have a constructive dialogue with its citizens.

At OAA, we advocate for freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief as an essential human right, without which there cannot be a healthy civic space. The time has come for the Cuban government to allow the faith community the freedom to exercise its calling to alleviate suffering and save lives.

Furthermore, when religious communities in Cuba face violations to freedom of religion or belief, other fundamental rights, such as freedom of expression, association, assembly, movement — and the right to not be discriminated against — are often curtailed, as well. In denying these rights, the Cuban government is choking off the nation's nascent civil society, whose beauty, creativity and initiative show us what a truly free Cuba can achieve.

Nuns, priests, pastors and other faith leaders are respected voices in Cuba, and they are increasingly acting as brave human-rights defenders who speak truth to power. The United States should work with international and regional stakeholders to generate external pressure while also fostering internal conditions that enable and protect civic space and human-rights advocates, including faith-based actors, through a framework that links civic space to key aspects of the right to freedom of religion and belief.

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