The Miami Herald

OP-ED Despite government funding cuts, Miami must remain a beacon of liberty abroad | Opinion

By Teo A. Babun
November 5, 2025

The evidence is irrefutable: when democracy weakens, prosperity declines. Nations that uphold human rights and the rule of law attract innovation and investment. Those that abandon them descend into corruption, chaos and lost opportunity.

Here in Miami-Dade and across South Florida, we understand this truth better than most. Our community is home to thousands who fled repression in Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela. Their stories remind us that freedom is not an abstraction — it's what builds families, businesses and communities. When democracy dies abroad, the aftershocks reach our shores.

Miami has become one of the hemisphere's strongest hubs for defending democracy and human rights. Organizations such as Outreach Aid to the Americas (OAA) and Florida International University (FIU) train civic and faith leaders from across Latin America to advance the rule of law, justice and community leadership.

Yet this vital work can no longer take place safely in Cuba, Nicaragua or Venezuela. Authoritarian regimes have criminalized civic education and faith-based organizing.

As a result, Miami's classrooms, churches and nonprofits have become sanctuaries for learning and renewal — spaces where freedom is still taught, celebrated and defended.

Recent cuts to U.S. democracy and humanitarian assistance programs — including those managed by USAID and the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor — are already being felt.

The absence of humanitarian aid poses a grave threat to the Western Hemisphere. Haiti continues to be ravaged by gang control, and Cuba faces extreme economic and social distress — now compounded by the devastation of Hurricane Melissa.

Turning away from these crises not only abandons those in desperate need, it invites instability that affects migration, security and economic growth right here in Florida.

These funding reductions don't just weaken support abroad — they undermine Florida's security and prosperity.

Instability in the Caribbean and Central America leads to migration surges, disrupted trade routes and humanitarian emergencies that spill across the Florida Straits. Every dollar cut from democracy and humanitarian programs abroad increases the risks we face at home.

Just last month, Miami hosted the "Faith Under Fire" symposium, co-organized by OAA and FIU. The event brought together clergy, scholars and policy leaders to expose religious persecution in Cuba and Nicaragua and outline practical U.S. policy responses.

Read more at: https://www.miamiherald.com/opinion/op-ed/article312785794.html#storylink=cpy

Over 300 participants joined in person and online — from Little Havana pastors to FIU students — proving that Miami is not only a cultural crossroads but a beacon of liberty for the hemisphere. The follow-up policy briefing in Washington, D.C. will build directly on the momentum born here in our city.

Turning away from democracy and humanitarian programs abandons those in crisis and erodes America's moral foundation. When young leaders lose access to democratic education, corruption and despair take root.

Restoring democracy and human rights funding is not charity — it's sound strategy. Defending freedom abroad protects peace, prosperity and stability here at home.

Miami has always been more than a gateway to the Americas — it's a guardian of freedom's flame. Our neighborhoods, churches and universities continue to prove that liberty still draws people toward hope.

In this pivotal moment, Florida must remain at the heart of the fight for democracy and human dignity. The investment we make in freedom beyond our shores is an investment in our own community's safety, strength and soul.

Teo A. Babun is the president and CEO of Outreach Aid to the Americas (OAA), a nonprofit religious organization dedicated to serving vulnerable communities in the Americas through humanitarian aid, development and the defense of human rights. He is the author of several books, including "Faith and Freedom in Latin America."

Teo Babun