

US Hypocritical Lectures to Cuba

U.S. officials love to lecture Cuba about its human rights flaws, but – in many ways – Cuba offers equal or better protection of human rights than does the United States, says Marjorie Cohn.

By Marjorie Cohn

In advance of President Barack Obama's historic visit to Cuba on March 20, there is speculation about whether he can pressure Cuba to improve its human rights. But a comparison of Cuba's human rights record with that of the United States shows that the U.S. should be taking lessons from Cuba.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights contains two different categories of human rights – civil and political rights on the one hand; and economic, social and cultural rights on the other.

Civil and political rights include the rights to life, free expression, freedom of religion, fair trial, self-determination; and to be free from torture, cruel treatment, and arbitrary detention.

Economic, social and cultural rights comprise the rights to education, healthcare, social security, unemployment insurance, paid maternity leave, equal pay for equal work, reduction of infant mortality; prevention, treatment and control of diseases; and to form and join unions and strike.

These human rights are enshrined in two treaties – the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). The United States has ratified the ICCPR.

But the U.S. refuses to ratify the ICESCR. Since the Reagan administration, it has been U.S. policy to define human rights only as civil and political rights. Economic, social and cultural rights are dismissed as akin to social welfare, or socialism. The U.S. government criticizes civil and political rights in Cuba while disregarding Cubans' superior access to universal housing, health care, education, and its guarantee of paid maternity leave and equal pay rates.

Meanwhile, the U.S. government has committed serious human rights violations on Cuban soil, including torture, cruel treatment, and arbitrary detention at Guantanamo. And since 1960, the United States has expressly interfered with Cuba's economic rights and its right to self-determination through the economic embargo.

The U.S. embargo of Cuba, now a blockade, was initiated by President Dwight D. Eisenhower during the Cold War in response to a 1960 memo written by a senior State Department official. The memo proposed “a line of action that makes the greatest inroads in denying money and supplies to Cuba, to decrease monetary and real wages, to bring about hunger, desperation and the overthrow of the [Castro] government.”

That goal has failed, but the punishing blockade has made life difficult in Cuba. In spite of that inhumane effort, however, Cuba guarantees its people a remarkable panoply of human rights.

Healthcare

Unlike in the United States, healthcare is considered a right in Cuba. Universal healthcare is free to all. Cuba has the highest ratio of doctors to patients in the world at 6.7 per 1,000 people. The 2014 infant mortality rate was 4.2 per 1,000 live births – one of the lowest in the world.

Healthcare in Cuba emphasizes prevention, rather than relying only on medicine, partly due to the limited access to medicines occasioned by the U.S. blockade. In 2014, the Lancet Journal said, “If the accomplishments of Cuba could be reproduced across a broad range of poor and middle-income countries the health of the world’s population would be transformed.” Cuba has developed pioneering medicines to treat and prevent lung cancer, and prevent diabetic amputations. Because of the blockade, however, we in the United States cannot take advantage of them.

Education

Free education is a universal right up to and including higher education. Cuba spends a larger proportion of its GDP on education than any other country in the world. “Mobile teachers” are deployed to homes if children are unable to attend school. Many schools provide free morning and after-school care for working parents who have no extended family. It is free to train to be a doctor in Cuba. There are 22 medical schools in Cuba, up from only three in 1959 before the Cuban Revolution.

Elections

Elections to Cuba’s national parliament (the National Assembly) take place every five years and elections to regional Municipal Assemblies every 2.5 years. Delegates to the National Assembly then elect the Council of State, which in turn appoints the Council of Ministers from which the President is elected.

As of 2018 (the date of the next general election in Cuba), there will be a

limit of no more than two five-year terms for all senior elected positions, including the President. Anyone can be nominated to be a candidate. It is not required that one be a member of the Communist Party (CP). No money can be spent promoting candidates and no political parties (including the CP) are permitted to campaign during elections. Military personnel are not on duty at polling stations; school children guard the ballot boxes.

Labor Rights

Cuban law guarantees the right to voluntarily form and join trade unions. Unions are legally independent and financially autonomous, independent of the CP and the state, funded by members' subscriptions. Workers' rights protected by unions include a written contract, a 40-44-hour week, and 30 days' paid annual leave in the state sector.

Unions have the right to stop work they consider dangerous. They have the right to participate in company management, to receive management information, to office space and materials, and to facility time for representatives. Union agreement is required for lay-offs, changes in patterns of working hours, overtime, and the annual safety report. Unions also have a political role in Cuba and have a constitutional right to be consulted about employment law. They also have the right to propose new laws to the National Assembly.

Women

Women make up the majority of Cuban judges, attorneys, lawyers, scientists, technical workers, public health workers and professionals. Cuba is ranked first in Save the Children's "Lesser Developed Countries" Mother's Index. With over 48 percent women MPs, Cuba has the third highest percentage of female parliamentarians in the world. Women receive nine months of full salary during paid maternity leave, followed by three months at 75 percent of full salary. The government subsidizes abortion and family planning, places a high value on pre-natal care, and offers "maternity housing" to women before giving birth.

Life Expectancy

In 2013, the World Health Organization listed life expectancy for women in Cuba at 80; the figure was 77 for men. The probability of dying between ages 15 and 60 years per 1,000 people in the population was 115 for men and 73 for women in Cuba.

During the same period, life expectancy for women in the United States was 81 for women and 76 for men. The probability of dying between 15 and 60 per 1,000 people was 128 for men and 76 for women in the United States.

Death Penalty

A study by Cornell Law School found no one under sentence of death in Cuba and no one on death row in October 2015. On Dec. 28, 2010, Cuba's Supreme Court commuted the death sentence of Cuba's last remaining death row inmate, a Cuban-American convicted of a murder carried out during a 1994 terrorist invasion of the island. No new death sentences are known to have been imposed since that time.

By contrast, as of Jan. 1, 2016, 2,949 people were on death row in state facilities in the United States. And 62 were on federal death row as of March 16, 2016, according to Death Penalty Information.

Sustainable Development

In 2006, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), a leading global environmental organization, found that Cuba was the only country in the world to have achieved sustainable development. Jonathan Loh, one of the authors of the WWF report, said, "Cuba has reached a good level of development according to United Nations' criteria, thanks to its high literacy level and a very high life expectancy, while the ecological footprint is not large since it is a country with low energy consumption."

Stop Lecturing Cuba and Lift the Blockade

When Cuba and the U.S. held talks about human rights a year ago, Pedro Luis Pedroso, head of the Cuban delegation, said, "We expressed our concerns regarding discrimination and racism patterns in US society, the worsening of police brutality, torture acts and extrajudicial executions in the fight on terror and the legal limbo of prisoners at the US prison camp in Guantanamo."

The hypocrisy of the U.S. government in lecturing Cuba about its human rights while denying many basic human rights to the American people is glaring. The United States should lift the blockade. Obama should close Guantanamo and return it to Cuba.

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