

# THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

## **President's visit to Cuba is an insult to Cuban-American political refugees**

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President Barack Obama made history this week by becoming the first sitting United States President in nearly nine decades to visit the communist island of Cuba.

As a Cuban that fled to the United States seeking refuge from Communism, it has been tough to watch images of the president shaking hands with Cuban President Raul Castro and legitimizing a government that has been systematically repressing its people for half a century.

My family and I were among the fortunate ones to have left Cuba once Fidel Castro took over. Still, it was tough for my family to leave all they ever knew, not knowing when they would see our extended family once again.

Because of this experience, I have made it a point in my life to fight and defend freedom. I am proud to call the United States and Tennessee my home.

Sadly, back in Cuba, little has changed for most of the Cuban people. When Castro took over, he promised the people prosperity and a high standard of living for all. Unfortunately, the only ones that have seen their incomes rise are those in the Castro regime, and those closest to it.

For the majority of the population, basic necessities, including groceries, are scarce. Many Cubans, as a result, must find additional work to make ends meet. In fact, many well-educated Cubans, including doctors choose to work as cabdrivers instead because the pay is better — the definition of an upside down economy.

To maintain their iron grip on the island, the Castro regime has little tolerance for dissenting voices. It frequently abuses and imprisons political dissidents, including Las Damas en Blanco

(Ladies in White), an all-women human rights group in Cuba. Just a few months ago, the Castro government arrested more than 100 individuals peacefully protesting on Human Rights Day. And just before President Obama arrived in Havana, there was another round of arrests of critics of the despotic regime.

This is why well-respected organizations like the Human Rights Watch have found egregious human rights abuses in the island.

There are reports that the Castro regime has been escalating their attacks on people of faith and places of worship. In fact, according to the Cato Institute citing a report by Christian Solidarity Worldwide, "there were 220 specific violations of religious liberties in 2014, but 2,300 last year," many of which "involved entire churches or, in the cases of arrests, dozens of victims."

The irony is that back when President Obama was first running for the White House he said that normalizing relations with Cuba could only occur after the Cuban government freed all political prisoners and took some basic steps toward freedom.

None of this has happened, which makes the president's visit to Cuba all the more surprising. It is sad that one of the lasting legacies of the Obama administration will be to help prop up a communist regime that embodies the opposite of all America holds dear, including human rights, religious freedom, democracy and economic freedom.

I hope I am proven wrong for the sake of the Cuban people and all that suffer under the communist regime, but there is nothing to indicate that things will change for the better as long as the Castro brothers are in charge. The people of Cuba deserve better.