

THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

Cuba and its sad Communist saga

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Totalitarian regimes don't tolerate dissent, so the unrest in Cuba has been an astonishing sight. Thousands of Cubans have defied government protest bans and endured a heavy-handed police response to express dismay at ongoing repression — and frustration at food lines, electricity blackouts and a worsening coronavirus situation.

The Cuban Communist authorities have shut down social media and internet access to prevent news of the protests from spreading as demonstrators chanted “freedom.” The government unleashed counter-demonstrators who chanted “I am Fidel.”

As expected, the Cuban government — and, sadly, even some American commentators — blamed the situation on the United States' economic sanctions. The Obama administration loosened the Cuban blockade, but the Trump administration imposed tougher restrictions. The Biden administration has inexplicably continued his predecessor's policy.

We've long opposed broad economic sanctions to dislodge human rights-abusing regimes. They cause deprivation among the citizenry, and can embolden tyrannical regimes. As the Cato Institute noted in 2002, “The embargo actually enhances Castro's standing by giving him a handy excuse for the manifest failures of his oppressive communist system.”

Nearly 20 years later, a different despot is in power but the regime remains as entrenched as ever. The authorities are able to blame outside forces for misery caused by an oppressive government.

“We stand with the Cuban people and their clarion call for freedom and relief from the tragic grip of the pandemic and from the decades of repression and economic suffering to which they have been subjected by Cuba's authoritarian regime,” said President Joe Biden. That struck the right note, but his administration needs to rethink its policies.

Loosening sanctions offers the best opportunity to connect with Cubans through trade and travel. Once such openings occur, despotic governments eventually struggle to maintain control. Of course, our government must continually highlight the Cuban government's appalling behavior.

It's absurd to blame the United States for Cuba's problems, but the best way to stand with the Cuban people is to try a different approach.