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## Cuba's authoritarian repression is a feature of socialism, not a bug

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After decades of oppression, the Cuban people are rising up against the island nation's authoritarian regime. Protesting the shortages and economic ruin wrought by their leaders' centralized mismanagement, Cubans can be seen in videos calling for freedom and even touting the American flag.

"The people are dying of hunger!" one woman in the province of Artemisa shouted during a filmed protest. "Our children are dying of hunger!"

The Cuban people's struggle against tyranny is rightfully winning support from many prominent Democrats and Republicans alike. Regardless of personal politics or ideology, most people still view the Cuban government's violence against protesters and the crackdown on their dissent (even reportedly shutting down the internet) as a disgusting act. And yes, that includes self-described "democratic socialists" who have praised the Cuban economic system, such as Sen. Bernie Sanders:

While it's nice to have this surface-level consensus that dictatorship is still bad, there's a deeper flaw to this liberal thinking that rains on the parade. People such as Sanders believe in socialism, which means they support "democratic," aka government, control of the means of production. They advocate for a largely government-controlled economy but insist that they support freedom on the political and personal side of society.

And maybe they do. I'm happy to give Sanders, or at least many of his supporters, the benefit of the doubt on that. But it actually doesn't matter. Because in reality, the socialist economic system they support is fundamentally incompatible with political freedom. If implemented, it erodes personal freedom, whether the original advocates intended to do so or not.

Why?

Nobel Prize-winning economist Milton Friedman explained the link between economic and political freedom in his book *Capitalism and Freedom*.

“The fundamental threat to freedom is power to coerce,” which comes from concentrated power, Friedman explained. “The kind of economic organization that provides economic freedom directly, namely, competitive capitalism, also promotes political freedom because it **separates economic power from political power** and in this way enables the one to offset the other.” (Emphasis added.)

Simply put, free market capitalism means that the control of resources is spread out across millions of consumers and businesses in an economy. Under socialism, one centralized authority, even if it is elected by 51% of the people, can control the essentials that all people need to survive, such as healthcare, for example. This gives that authority enormous leverage it can use to repress personal and political freedoms, such as the freedom of speech, that it would never have in a free market economy.

“In order for men to advocate anything, they must in the first place be able to earn a living,” Friedman explains. “This already raises a problem in a socialist society, since all jobs are under the direct control of political authorities.” This gives the government the power over people’s livelihoods.

Examples of socialist nations that end up repressing their people are too numerous to list, but here are a few: Venezuela, the former Soviet Union, North Korea, and, of course, Cuba. Meanwhile, examples of nations with socialist economies yet robust personal freedom are, well, quite difficult to conjure up. Some might point to Scandinavian nations such as Denmark, but these aren’t actually socialist societies (as the former prime minister of Denmark took pains to remind Sanders publicly).

The Scandinavian nations are market-based economies with robust economic freedom, simply with higher taxes and more welfare spending than the United States. In fact, Denmark ranks *above* the U.S. on the Heritage Foundation’s economic freedom index. In terms of actual government control of the economy, the vision embraced by Sanders, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and their ilk is actually much more radical than anything found in Scandinavia.

Defenders of Sanders might insist that his vision of “democratic socialism” does not entail full central control of the means of production. While technically true, the astronomical level of government spending Sanders endorses — \$65 trillion to \$80 trillion over a decade — would see the government account for a majority of economic activity in the U.S. The extensive regulation and mandates contained in the Green New Deal would see government control exercised over much of the rest of the economy that did remain in private hands.

Sanders’s vision for the U.S. economy is indeed a socialist one. So, it would leave no room for the preservation of political freedom over the long run.

The negative relationship between socialism and freedom is not just theoretical or historical but present in the world today. This graph from the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute shows a clear correlation between a nation’s level of economic freedom and personal freedom.

We can observe this relationship in action in Cuba right now. Government control over the basic necessities to survive has long stifled protest, but the current outburst is coming in part because the starving people no longer have anything to lose. Some of the protesters are chanting, “We have hunger, but we have no fear.”

However, it is unfortunately not true that economic freedom alone guarantees political freedom. In modern times, we’ve witnessed the authoritarian Chinese government embrace some market reforms and increased economic freedom while only further repressing the civil liberties of its people. This possibility Friedman acknowledged, writing, “History suggests only that capitalism is a necessary condition for political freedom. Clearly it is not a sufficient condition.”

But the fact nonetheless remains that opening the door to socialism puts personal freedom next up on the chopping block and paves the way for authoritarianism. This is a reality that Americans horrified by the repression in Cuba must recognize before it’s too late.