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Raul Castro turns into big brother Fidel

BY NAT HENTOFF

Popular singer Carlos Varela (known as "Cuba's Bob Dylan") came here in December "Trying to Sway America's Cuba Policy With Song and Easy Talk" (New York Times, Dec. 29), and even had lunch with a senior White House official. However, it now is grimly clear that Raul and Fidel Castro are interchangeable, as Raul keeps adding more "prisoners of conscience" (as Amnesty International describes them) to the gulags.

At least 40 Cuban advocates of human rights have been locked up during the past three years on the charge of being "dangerous." And Human Rights Watch documented "more than 40 cases under Raul Castro in which Cuba imprisoned people for 'dangerousness' because they sought to do things like staging marches or organizing independent labor unions" (New York Times, Nov. 19).

Since President Obama is concerned with human rights, he also might want to know from the Human Rights Watch report that "the younger Mr. Castro has relied in particular on a Cuban law that permits the state to imprison people even before they commit crimes." The Robert Mugabe way of ruling.

Not surprisingly, the sudden "declaration of conscience" by 60 prominent black Americans, exposing and protesting the pervasive racism against Afro-Cubans in Castroland, has not been "reported by Cuba's state media monopoly" (Latin American Herald Tribune, Dec. 19).

This customary censorship by the dictatorship has not prevented Afro-Cubans from hearing of it and being encouraged by this long-delayed support from these black Americans. And although the mainstream American media have paid little attention to their pre-emancipation proclamation, the 60 signers "are considering forming a group to follow this (Jim Crow) situation via international human rights and civil rights organizations" (Radio Marti -- www.martinoticias.com, Dec. 30).

Also welcoming this awakening to Castro racism is one of the internationally best-known prisoners of conscience: Oscar Biscet. He says of the signers: "They are now on the side of justice, and it is very important for Afro-Cubans to have on our side our American brothers. They have fought against racism, they have fought for the ideal of equality and democracy in the United States and we need that here, too." (Radio Marti).

A particularly prominent American signer, political scientist Ron Walters -- in "Racist or Revolutionary: Cuba's Identity is at Stake" (www.thedefendersonline.com) -- declares:

"Cuba's national identity is precisely what is at stake. The government cannot claim to be truly revolutionary and progressive while tolerating white elitism in its leadership and the oppression of its blackest citizens." He quotes Dr. Carlos Moore, a longtime battler against racism in Cuba:

"By denying the existence of racism in Cuba for 50 years and by brutally preventing those who wanted to confront that reality from doing so, the revolutionary regime guaranteed a safe haven for the unfettered perpetuation and growth of a racist consciousness in Cuba."

In that declaration -- in the tradition of Tom Paine's "Common Sense," instrumental in igniting the American Revolution -- the signers cited the recent imprisonment of civil rights activist Dr. Darsi Ferrer. Says his wife, Yusnaimy Jorge Soca, "It is a very positive step because before, no one wanted to talk about this. There has always been the notion that racism in Cuba did not exist, but this is a lie."

Entering what is now a worldwide conversation about the bigotry of the Castro brothers is a hero of freedom, Vaclav Havel, whose velvet Revolution helped drive the Russian dictatorship out of Czechoslovakia. Author of "The Power of the Powerless," he has won the U.S. Presidential Medal of Freedom. In a letter to Yusnaimy Jorge Soca, which I've not seen mentioned in the American press, Havel says of the Cuban resistance against the Castros:

"The Cuban opposition has my sympathies since it suffers totalitarian forms of power and ideology similar to those that I knew in the former Czechoslovakia." Then Havel went on to target passive accomplices of endemic Cuban racism: "I am very worried about the lack of willingness of the European Union to express itself clearly and draw conclusions. Even though the practices and treacheries of totalitarian regimes have been described and documented thousands of times, their lies are still underestimated, omitted or even accepted by international organizations.

"I am afraid," the liberator of his country continued, "I am afraid that your husband's arrest is just another piece of evidence of the international community's indifference towards the Castro regime's actions. ...

"Dear Mrs. Jorge Soca, I would like to assure you that I will not stop drawing attention to the violation of human and civil rights in Cuba and will seek international solidarity with the persecuted so that one day we all can see a political change in your country."

In the history of individual freedom, I am less than a cipher compared to Vaclav Havel, but I also intend to keep on writing about those American public figures and institutions who claim to be on the front line of resistance to totalitarianism and racism but continue to imbue the Cuban Revolution with a romantic aura of unparalleled liberation of each and every one of its citizens.

And I will continue to ask the leadership of the American Library Association when it will finally act directly to help remove from their prison cells the independent Cuban librarians, white and black, whom the father of this exclusionary Revolution has placed in cages.

I still cannot understand why the leading Officers of American Library Association have abandoned these other librarians. Nor do I understand why there has not been a rank-and-file rebellion against this by the ALA membership around our country. Don't they all believe in the freedom to read?
