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Roar, tyrants, you cannot hide your racist deeds

BY NAT HENTOFF

The Nov. 30 "Acting on Our Conscience: A Declaration of African-American Support for the Civil Rights Struggle in Cuba" by 60 prominent black Americans denouncing the deep discrimination against Afro-Cubans by the Cuban government was a surprise because none of the five dozen signers had previously been notably critical of the Castro dictatorship. More surprising, however, was how long it took for their public outrage against the chronic marginalization of black Cubans by the Cuban government.

Dr. Mark Q. Sawyer, associate professor of both African American studies and political science at UCLA, wrote in "Racial Politics in Post-Revolutionary Cuba" (Cambridge University Press, 2006):

"The ongoing marginalization of Afro-Cubans in Cuban social, economic and political life" is shown by how "Castro's government consolidated its power by curtailing freedoms of organization in general and those of black organization in particular."

However, the new blazing statement of conscience by such dauntless champions of civil rights in America as professors Cornel West, Ron Walters and Julianne Malveaux, president of Bennett College, should awaken the many Castro supporters here -- including many on college campuses -- and spur them to confront the longtime presence in that glorious Revolution of Old Jim Crow.

This powerful, if belated, demythologizing of the coldly callous Cuban dictatorship ends with the 60 black Americans putting a face on one of the black prisoners of conscience in a Castro gulag:

"We call on the authorities and Government of Cuba to IMMEDIATELY AND UNCONDITIONALLY free our brother, Dr. Darsi Ferrer."

Carlos Moore, a well-known Cuban author and black-rights activist now living in Brazil, has circulated an international "petition on behalf of Afro-Cuban civil rights leader Dr. Darsi Ferrer," who "runs a number of independent programs designed to help impoverished, marginalized and discriminated communities in Cuba (who are overwhelmingly of African descent)" (naijablog.blogspot.com, Oct. 30).

"Because the government claims," Moore continues, "that there are no such things as poverty, racism or marginalized communities, Dr. Ferrer is regarded as a highly subversive person by the authorities." And must be put away.

Tellingly, Carlos Moore, driven by his own conscience -- and presenting a challenge to many Americans romanticizing the brutality of the Revolution -- emphasizes: "I want to make clear that this is the first time in my life, as an anti-racist activist myself, that I publicly raise a voice in support of any Cuban dissident. ... We have come to the point where to remain silent before such injustice and oppression is tantamount to be complicit with it."

Are you ready, so-called documentarian Michael Moore, to come out with your own "statement of conscience"?

On Dec. 10 -- on *Conversa Cuba* Companioni blog radio show -- there was an interview by telephone

with Dr. Ferrer's wife, Yusnaimy Jorge Soca. She told of what had happened two days before in Havana at the Villalon Park, "where we've had a peace march every year since 2006. Marchers were brutally assaulted and taken to jail cells by police.

"I was taken to a police station," she added, "and kept in a clabozo cell from 11 a.m. to about 4 p.m., but we continued to protest and yelled out in front of the Cuban police for human rights. ... I told Darsi that I was determined to march no matter what. ... State security threatened him to try to convince me not to march, but he completely refused their threats."

At the end of the radio interview with Dr. Ferrer's wife, there was this epilogue: "Folks, the tyrant can roar, but ... can no longer hide his deeds."

There are other Cubans, of varied racial backgrounds, who so subverted the Castros' owned-and-operated Revolution that they have been locked away for 20 or more years for having run independent libraries so Cubans could borrow those free-thinking books censored by that government. (A biography of Martin Luther King Jr. -- "Martin Luther King: Contra Todas Las Exclusiones" by Vicent Roussel -- in one of those libraries -- was ordered burned by a sentencing court when it was captured during a library raid.)

As I am writing this, Dr. Luis Milan Fernandez, an Afro-Cuban, a member of the Independent Cuban Medical Association, is in a psychiatric ward of the Prison of Boniato in the province of Santiago de Cuba, despite reportedly having no previous mental illnesses. He's in poor health, but no doctors are allowed. His crime? The "Manifiesto 2001," calling for fundamental freedoms in Cuba.

Another black prisoner, whom I've often written about, is Dr. Oscar Elías Biscet -- a disciple of Gandhi, Thoreau and Martin Luther King Jr. -- serving a 25-year-sentence in a maximum-security prison, where he was further punished for protesting the treatment of other prisoners. Sick with hypertension and other ailments, he's without treatment.

Dr. Biscet was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President George W. Bush. President Obama has said nothing about him or any of the prisoners of conscience.

The American Library Association keeps refusing to demand the immediate release of the independent librarians. Can ALA President Barbara Jones and the governing council spare a few words for Afro-Cuban civil rights while gently admonishing Fidel and Raul?

Maybe during this year's ALA Banned Books Week here, a charred copy of the "felonious" biography of Martin Luther King Jr. can be shown.
