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January 04, 2010 1:23 PM

Nat Hentoff: The Castro brothers' big dirty secret

Nat Hentoff
Syndicated columnist

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For years I have been reporting on how [Fidel Castro](#) has been crushing internal dissent. I did this while simultaneously trying to demythicize his comrade, [Che Guevara](#), a charismatic man when he was not a merciless executioner at Havana prisons. I once met Guevara, and during our exchange at a Cuban mission in New York, we did not agree on the value of free elections. As for Fidel's brother, Raul, he continues the family tradition of adding to the prison population of Cubans caught practicing discordant political speech.

Throughout the course of these columns on the Castro dictatorship, I have cited the chronic racial discrimination against black Cubans throughout Fidel's Revolution, a "revolution" that gladdens such visitors as celebrity documentarian [Michael Moore](#), who never mentions Jim Crow on the island.



FILE PHOTO: A girl sits in a motorcycle in Havana, Saturday, Dec. 26, 2009.

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The extensive marginalization of blacks in Cuba has failed to break through into general American consciousness; but as of the Nov. 30 release of "Statement of Conscience by African Americans" ([miamiherald.com](#), Dec. 1), the big dirty secret of the Castro brothers has been exposed.

According to the resounding news release – which had the authoritative ring of Louis Armstrong's "West End Blues" – "60 prominent black American scholars, artists and professionals have condemned the Cuban regime's stepped-up harassment and apparent crackdown on the country's budding civil rights movement. This statement is the first public condemnation of racial conditions in Cuba made by black Americans."

Among the signers denouncing the "callous disregard" for the "most marginalized people on the island" are:

[Princeton University](#) professor and widely read author Cornel West; Julianne Malveaux, president of Bennett College; professor Ron Walters, University of Maryland and the Rev. Jesse Jackson's presidential campaign manager; renowned actress Ruby Dee Davis; film director [Melvin Van Peebles](#); and UCLA Vice Chancellor Claudia Mitchell-Kernan.

These protesters emphasize that "traditionally, African Americans have sided with the Castro regime and condemned the United States' policies, which explicitly work to topple the Cuban government. Yet this landmark statement by prominent African Americans condemns the growing persecution waged by the Cuban government against Afro-Cuban movements" in Cuba.

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Tellingly, these tribunes of civil rights emphasize, among other sources, including Afro-Cubans: "The U.S. State Department estimates Afro-Cubans make up 62 percent of the Cuban population, with many informed observers saying the figure is closer to 70 percent.

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"Afro-Cubans are experiencing strong and growing instances of racism on the island, with their 25-odd civil rights movements reporting a wide range of discriminatory practices in hiring, promotion and access to Cuba's socialized medicine and educational system."

When you were filming your tribute to Fidel Castro's exemplary government-controlled health system, Mr. Moore, didn't you notice the paucity of black patients?

There's more from this statement of conscience, which has received little notice in the American press as of this writing. Surely what follows should be of interest to Americans of all colors:

"Young black Cubans bitterly complain of aggressive racial profiling conducted by police, and Cuba's jail population is estimated to be 85 percent black, according to black Cuban civil rights activists." In addition, "70 percent of Afro-Cubans are said to be unemployed. In such conditions, a vigorous rebirth of Cuba's black movement, banned in the early years of the Cuban Revolution, is occurring. Cuban authorities are responding with violence and brutal civil rights violations."

In a previous column, I reported on a visit to Havana months ago by members of the Congressional Black Caucus. Several enthusiastically lauded Fidel Castro's achievements in advancing the betterment of the Cuban people, but there was not a word about the pervasive racism.

In contrast, writing about this "Statement of Conscience" challenge to the Cuban government, Juan O. Tamayo (miamiherald.com/news/americas/cuba, Dec. 1) noted that "more African Americans traveling to Cuba have been able 'to see the situation for themselves,' said David Colvin, one of the statement's organizers and former president of the National Conference of Black Political Scientists."

And, in an incisive reminder to President Obama as he advocates improved U.S. relations with the Cuban government, Victoria Ruiz-Labrit, Miami spokesperson for the Cuba-based Citizens' Committee for Racial Integration, also reminds all of us that even these Americans working for human rights in Cuba have largely omitted the race issues. But she adds, "Cuban blacks moved closer to the term 'civil rights,' because those are the rights that the movement here in the U.S. made a point of — the race issues."

The Revs. Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton — along with leaders in the NAACP and our other civil rights organizations — will, I hope, soon book passage to Cuba to stand with Cuban civil rights activists trying to get some of their members out of the Castros' prisons where they are held in cells with common criminals.

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