

Written Testimony  
By Rosa María Payá

Hearings to Examine Women Leaders Countering Authoritarianism  
Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
September 21, 2022

In her seminal book, [Sex and World Peace](#), Dr. Valerie Hudson argues that the status of women is the single most important predictive factor in determining state stability—a hypothesis she supports with one of the largest databases on the status of women.

In truth, the state terrorism of the Cuban government affects both, men and women, in my country, but I can tell you that the status of women in Cuba is not only a predictive indicator of repression but also an indicator of how the United States will fare in terms of its own national security.

My name is Rosa María Payá, I founded a citizen initiative, Cuba Decide, whose mission is to move Cuba toward democracy. With thousands of promoters on the Island, over the course of the last two years, we have lived a radical increase in courageous activism and peaceful demonstrations but, alongside, an equally intense increase in repression.

Ten years ago, the Castro brothers ordered [the murder of my friend Harold Cepero, and my father, Oswaldo Payá](#), a civic leader who mobilized thousands of citizens in demand of legal changes to guarantee human rights. For more than 8 years the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) has been investigating his murder. All deadlines have been met and the proceedings have been exhausted, but we are still awaiting the publication of the final report condemning the regime for the attack. We thank the United States Senate for unanimously approving the resolution to renaming the street in front of the Embassy of Cuba in the District of Columbia after Oswaldo Payá. I respectfully ask this committee to follow up for it to be implemented by the District of Columbia and to encourage the IACHR to act and soon issue a decision so that [finally there could be an opportunity for truth and justice in Oswaldo Payá's death](#).

And, if the treatment of women is indeed an indicator, I offer you the way my mother was treated in 2013 when she had to leave Cuba because my father's murderers harassed my brothers and threatened me with death. And then, in 2017, when she returned to

visit her husband's tomb and the political police detained and expelled her, with the collaboration of American Airlines, even though my mother is a Cuban citizen, and all her papers were in order. Similar experience has been suffered by many other Cuban citizens including several female activists lately. That's only one example of how a company with a US flag colludes with the dictatorship to violate Cubans' human rights. This needs to stop.

Violence is the language of the authorities in Cuba.

And, if a woman is a symbol for Cuba, her name is Mayelin Rodríguez, who is 21 years old and has been detained, held incommunicado. Her crime? She was filming a peaceful demonstration.

If a woman is Cuba, her name is Sayli Navarro. She is 36 years old and serving a sentence of 8 years for going to a police station to ask about the disappeared persons from the protests of July 11. Her father was with her and is now serving 9 years in prison while we sit here.

On March 2nd, the regime sentenced Sayli and her father (Félix Navarro) to 8 and 9 years in prison for the fabricated crimes of contempt and attack. The authorities of the regime took her from the sham trial, chained her hands and feet. They were detained on July 12, 2021 at the police station in Perico, Matanzas. They were violently arrested in the unit: Sayli was pinned down between several women, grabbing her by the neck, while her father was pushed away.

Sayli Navarro has lost a lot of weight since she was sent to prison and she has suffered punishment from the regime for making complaints from prison. Her mother has denounced the regime for the precarious situations in which both her daughter and the rest of the inmates of this prison have to endure. Sayli only has access to one daily bucket of water – a yellowish water without decontamination treatment.

If a woman is Cuba, her name is Aymara Nieto, the mother of two girls whom she has not seen grow up because, since May 2018, she has been imprisoned for demanding the liberation of the political prisoners.

She is serving an unfair sentence of four years for the crimes of attack, damage and contempt, fabricated by the State Security. She was detained by agents of the Ministry of the Interior, when she was leaving the headquarters of the Ladies in White trying to march peacefully demanding freedom for all political prisoners. Days later she was

sentenced in a trial manipulated by the Castro regime and sent to the El Guatao women's prison in Havana. In March 2020, she was transferred to a prison at the other end of the country, in Manatí, in the province of Las Tunas, more than 600 kilometers from her relatives. The distance from the family is another strategy used by the regime as a punishment mechanism against political prisoners, which adds another psychological component of torture. The prison authorities, in collusion with the political police, constantly violate their right to telephone calls to prevent complaints about the critical situation and the mistreatment of the guards. She has been beaten on several occasions and confined to a punishment cell. This is the second political sentence suffered by Aymara Nieto. In 2016, both she and her husband, Ismael Boris Reñí, also an UNPACU activist and promoter of Cuba Decide, were unjustly imprisoned for two years.

Berta Soler Fernandez is the leader of the Ladies in White, a citizen movement that brings together wives and relatives of political prisoners. She was born on July 31, 1963, in Matanzas, Cuba. In recent years, she has been subjected to multiple arbitrary arrests and harassment by the repressive forces of the Cuban regime, to prevent her from raising her voice demanding the release of political prisoners in Cuba.

There are more than 1000 political prisoners in Cuba, that is more than the political prisoners in all of Latin America combined. At least 220 women have been imprisoned since July 11, more than 100 of them remain incarcerated according with several Cuban ONGs.

Cubans are hungry.

My country is on the brink of a humanitarian tragedy. According to Hanke's Misery Index 2021, Cuba is the [most miserable country in the world](#), driven by a soaring inflation rate and shortages of basic products. The regime is incapable of providing a solution, but it violates the most basic economic rights of its citizens, persecutes private entrepreneurship and does not respect private property.

Mothers cannot feed their children.

Why should this matter to Americans?

Because the world still believes you are the beacon of hope and freedom.

But also, because it is in your self-interest.

In the last 10 months alone, almost 2% of the Cuban population have crossed the US southern border in a coordinated reckless operation between the authorities in Havana and Managua.

Our region has paid a high price for tolerating 6 decades of dictatorship in Cuba and the criminal apparatus that presides over it. A regime that has cost the end of the democracy in Nicaragua and Venezuela and the largest refugee crisis of our life. The dictatorship in Cuba threatens peace and security of the entire continent, provides sanctuary to terrorists. That is why it is not only just but critical to keep Cuba on the list of states sponsors of terrorism.

The Cuban regime is the best transatlantic ally of the Kremlin using its press agencies to spread false news about the invasion of Ukraine and the false narrative of the Putin regime. Actually, in recent times, Cuba has tightened the strategic and military agreement with Russia. And it is only 90 miles away.

But you have the tools to end the regime and this threat to national security.

First, you have the Cuban people. Despite the terror, the humanitarian crisis, and the exodus, Cubans keep fighting for freedom. In fact, last August was the month with the second largest number of protests recorded in the last 6 decades.

Second, you have the tools.

We encourage the Biden administration to:

1. Apply individual sanctions—making full use of the Global Magnitsky Act—targeting top officials and individuals involved in human rights abuses in Cuba.  
Many government officials spend the year sentencing people to prison and then they, or their relatives, come to the United States to go Christmas shopping.
2. Stop any attempt to appease the Cuban Regimen and instead demand the unconditional release of all political prisoners; the end of repression; respect in law and in practice of freedom of expression, association (including independent political parties), public assembly, and economic freedom.
3. Create an international effort —a coalition of nations— in support of the holding of a [binding plebiscite](#) so that the Cuban people can choose to change the system towards democracy peacefully.

There is precedent to success. We ask the administration and the Congress to remember that not too long ago, American companies embraced the Sullivan Principles to end South African Apartheid. Please, request from the American companies the same corporate responsible behavior towards the Cuban people. It is only just and It will be very effective.

Furthermore, we invite all the members of this committee to participate in the [Transatlantic Parliamentary Forum for a Free Cuba](#) that gathers legislators from Europe and the Americas, in support of a democratic transition in Cuba and peace in The Americas.

It is time for the international community to side the cause of freedom for Cuba, we invite the European Union and OAS members should take similar steps to the aforementioned points and use all available tools, including the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Mechanism and the Interamerican Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance, to address the threat posed by the Cuban Regime.

Finally, we call on all freedom loving people of the world to use their platforms to show solidarity with Cuban People.

In closing, I'd like to share a story you may not know.

In 1781, when George Washington's Continental Army was depleted, Admiral De Grasse was sent to Cuba to raise money. The Ladies of Havana donated 1.2 million pounds of silver. Many historians have argued that the donation—equivalent to \$262 million today, was the foundation on which the building of democracy was built. Their gift came with a letter: This is "So the American mothers' sons are not born as slaves."

While my country remains enslaved, so will be the future of American democracy and security.

All we are asking is for the United States to use the powerful tools that Congress has created to support the people of Cuba, the women of Cuba, in their just quest for freedom.

Their future impacts yours.

Thank you.