

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT
Online Event

“Prospects for Democracy in Cuba”

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FEATURING

Representative Albio Sires (D-NJ)

Chairman, House Foreign Affairs Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security, Migration and International Economic Policy Subcommittee

Representative Nicole Malliotakis (R-NY)

Ranking Member, House Foreign Affairs International Development, International Organizations and Global Corporate Social Impact Subcommittee

Armando Chaguaceda

Country Expert, Varieties of Democracy Project, University of Gothenburg

Deborah Ullmer

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CSIS EXPERTS

Daniel F. Runde

Senior Vice President; William A. Schreyer Chair and Director, Project on Prosperity and Development, CSIS

Juan Cruz

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Elizabeth Hoffman

Hi. Good afternoon, everyone. I am so – my name is Elizabeth Hoffman and I'm the Director of Government Relations for the Center for Strategic and International Studies. I am so pleased that my friend and colleague Dan Runde and the Project for Prosperity and Development, in conjunction with the Americas Program at CSIS, are hosting this important event today.

As you all know, on July 11th, Cubans across the island took to the streets in historic protest, motivated in part by the struggling economy and an inept response by the Cuban regime to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, at the core of the protests was a call for freedom, with the phrase “patria y vida,” inspired by a popular rap song, becoming the unofficial slogan of the protesters. The movement was spontaneous and decentralized. However, for those who follow Cuba closely, these protests were not as surprising, as discontent on the island has been bubbling over the past year.

In November 2020, the Cuban government cracked down harshly on the San Isidro Movement, a civil society group composed of artists, journalists, and academics frustrated by the Cuban regime's curbs on freedom of expression. The group was protesting the arrest of popular rapper Denis Solis and drew popular support from across the island, forcing the regime to meet with representatives of the movement and make promises for improved freedoms – although these promises were largely hollow.

For decades Cubans have been demanding greater rights and freedoms and have been met with violent repression. Activists such as Jose Daniel Ferrer, Berta Soler, Yoani Sanchez, Oscar Biscet, Oswaldo Paya, and scores of others who were arrested in the – in 2003, in what became known as the Cuban Black Spring, that paved the way for what is happening today. There is no doubt that Cuba is at a crossroads and we hope today's discussion can help inform U.S. policymakers on how best to support the aspirations for freedom in Cuba.

Today we have two of the leading voices in Congress supporting the Cuban people.

Congressman Albio Sires was born in Cuba and fled with his family in 1962. He was elected to Congress in 2005 and currently represents New Jersey's Eight Congressional District. He's the chair of the Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security, and Trade Subcommittee of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

We are also pleased to be joined by Congresswoman Nicole Malliotakis, who is currently serving her first term representing Staten Island and Brooklyn in the state of New York. She's the ranking member of the International Development, International Organizations, and Global

Corporate Social Impact Subcommittee of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

Congresswoman Malliotakis is the daughter of immigrants, her father from Greece and her mother a Cuban exile of the Castro dictatorship. In addition to having personal connections on the island, both Congressman Sires and Congresswoman Malliotakis have demonstrated principled leadership on issues of human rights and democracy in Cuba.

We are so pleased to have these two particular members with us today to give remarks on the current situation in Cuba and how the U.S. government can better support individuals striving for freedom and democracy in Cuba. We'll first recognize Congressman Sires for his remarks, followed by Congresswoman Malliotakis and then turn to Dan to moderate a panel discussion with our additional guests. Congressman Sires, please.

Representative
Albio Sires (D-NJ)

Can you hear me? Yes.

OK. First, I want to thank the Center for Strategic and International Studies for not only inviting me to speak but for shining a light on an issue that is deeply personal for me. I am happy to be here with Congresswoman Nicole Malliotakis, policy experts, and Cubans doing such an important work to advocate for democracy in Cuba.

The demonstrations that began on July 11th in Cuba have been nothing short of historic. Tens of thousands of Cubans in over 50 cities took to the streets to protest against a failed regime and a failed system. They put their lives on the line and risked jail time, beatings, torture, and death just for the opportunity to be free. We cannot lose sight of how powerful that is.

Today, in Cuba, 11 million people are denied their most basic rights. We have seen this harsh reality in the days and weeks since July 11th as the regime's security forces detained peaceful protesters and cut off internet access. Over 800 people have been detained or disappeared and at least 500 have not been able to return home.

The Biden administration has begun taking important actions against the regime. During the hearing I held last month on the Cuban protest, I called for sanctions against the perpetrators of human rights abuses and I applaud the administration for taking some initial steps to do this.

We also need to work urgently to restore and expand internet access on the island. Unfortunately, there is no easy way to solve this problem so long as the regime maintain a system of censorship, surveillance, and total state control of access to information. The regime is effective at confiscating equipment needed for satellite connections and it is adapting

and improving its censorship tools with the technical support from the Chinese government.

However, I believe we can still do much more to address this issue by working with private companies and civil society to expand internet access and help Cubans use VPNs and other circumvention tools.

We should also expand our support for Cuban civil society. I have long advocated for U.S. assistance to Cubans' pro-democracy organizations. A number of colleagues and I have proposed deepening that support at this critical moment and we will continue to call for more U.S. democracy assistance for Cuba.

Now is also the time to finally end the regime's exploitation of Cuban doctors. This is a state-sponsored form of human trafficking whereby 50,000 Cubans have their passports confiscated, their movement restricted, and their wages garnished. The regime retaliates against their family member if they try to leave the program. We saw in Venezuela how Cuban doctors were ordered not to provide lifesaving medical treatment for people who did not support the Maduro regime. This program is inhumane. I will soon be introducing my legislation to address this important issue. I hope we can put human rights and democracy at the center of our policy towards Cuba and do so in a bipartisan way.

I left Cuba at the age of 11, so the cause of freedom for the people of Cuba has been very personal for me. It has never been about politics. To me, there should be nothing polarizing about promoting human rights in Cuba. I have always opposed the idea of a military intervention and I continue to fully oppose it now. And I think that as the U.S. government, we should use all the diplomatic and economic tools that we have available to support the Cuban people in the face of the brutal dictatorship. The Cuban people have shown such tremendous courage. We must rise to the occasion and show that we stand with them. Thank you again for inviting me to speak. Thank you.

Ms. Hoffman

Thank you so much, Congressman, for your – for your poignant remarks. We'd now like to turn it over to Congresswoman Malliotakis.

Representative
Nicole Malliotakis
(R-NY)

Well, thank you very much to the Center for inviting me to participate today. And I want to thank my colleague Albio, who's been a great advocate for the Cuban people. and I share his concerns very much. I am a representative – a freshman representative, as you mentioned – from New York City. My parents are both immigrants. My father is from Greece, my mother is from Cuba. My mom fled the Castro regime in 1959. Unfortunately, in my family's circumstance, my family was split. My mom, my grandmother, and my aunt came to the United States. My grandfather stayed behind because he had two gas station and it was a small business

that he wanted to stay with and eventually the regime came and took everything from him.

So I do have family still in Cuba. My uncle and I have multiple cousins that are suffering tremendously under this brutal, murderous dictatorship – this communism that has just ruined everyone’s life and has split families apart and has really taken the dreams and aspirations of the Cuban people. You know, in Cuba – I think people need to understand what it’s like.

First of all, you all work for the government and you make \$15 a month – \$15 to \$20 it translates to. There’s a dual currency system in which you’re paid with the Cuban peso but everything is sold in the American dollar – equivalent of the American dollar. And so you really can’t do anything in terms of being able to really support your family or to even provide something as simple as a pair of shoes. You’d have to work months and months and months in order to do that. And so the Cuban people, those who are fortunate to have relatives in the United States, you know, we’re able to send some things. But the government – the reality is the government takes everything that comes into this island, which is – whether it’s medicine, whether it’s food, whether it’s money and they use it to weaponize it against their own people. And that is part of the challenge in having just, you know, Cuban Americans here who want to support and help their family, but their hands are really tied.

In addition to that, you know, Albio touched on the human rights abuses. The people are jailed, they’re beaten, they’re shot. And we’ve seen this happen. And I think – you know, look, it’s happened for decades. It happened for decades. People who peacefully protest are jailed, they disappear. But now people are actually seeing it because of the power of the internet, those videos have been able to be transmitted throughout the world and I think that’s incredibly important.

And Albio mentioned the need to restore reliable internet access and that is one of the things that we both stress with this administration. At the State Department, they said they’ve been working on it but it’s been a few weeks now and I wish there would be a little more urgency in trying to support the Cuban people in this, to ensure that they can not only connect with each other to continue organizing these protests but also so these videos can get out for the entire world to see.

I think it’s really important to also stress that, you know, this is an island that’s 90 miles from our shores, and therefore, there’s national security consequences for the United States of America. You know, I say this to my constituents, because I don’t represent a lot of Cubans and they don’t often understand – they understand that it’s personal to me, and that I have family there, and that it’s a reason why I am so passionate about this issue. But, I think from their perspective, you know, I want people to

understand here in the United States of America the grave concern is that you have this communist island nation just 90 miles away from our shores that are in cahoots with some of our biggest adversaries – Russia, Iran, China, North Korea. They are propping up this regime, and in turn the Cubans are propping up communism and socialism, the spread of it, throughout the Western Hemisphere. You look at Bolivia. You look at Chile. You look at Nicaragua, Venezuela. I mean, that is a perfect example of how the regime, the Castro regime, has helped expand communism/socialism and destroy Venezuela, which was the richest nation in South America.

I'm actually reading a book right now which is called "Why Cuba Matters." It's written by a friend of mine, Néstor Carbonell, who's from Connecticut. I just want to hold it up because I think for those of you who are interested in this topic of Cuba and why it's important to the United States of America and our own future and our national security, I really highly recommend it. I'm only on the first chapter, but so far it's been really good. He talks about a lot of – you know, a lot of work that was done from U.S. officials, military officials here in talking about the threats that it poses, particularly the coziness with the countries that I've mentioned that are adversaries to ours.

And so I will just say that I agree that, you know, we need to push for the internet access. I also agree that the sanctions are a start, but it is just a start. I don't think a lot of – those people aren't, you know, coming to the United States, they're not doing business with the United States; therefore, the sanctions don't have as much of an impact as we would like.

I want to talk a minute, though, about the need for the United States to just play a role as the leader of the free world that we've always played. You know, we need – we need the Berlin Wall moment at this time, OK? We need like a Ronald Reagan moment where, you know, the "tear down this wall," and that's what we're missing in this administration. And I'm – I've been pushing the State Department. I've been calling for the president to use his power as the leader of the free world to reach out to pro-democracy officials from around the world to garner their support in this. This is an illegitimate, murderous regime, and they need to go and the only way we're going to do that is if we build support with our allies, particularly those who are freedom-loving, pro-democracy countries. And that's what I would urge the State Department and the president at his level – not just to delegate it to somebody, low-level staffer at the State Department, but at his level he should be having these interactions.

I met with the U.N. ambassador. I expressed the same thing because I'm extremely concerned about the fact that we have China and Russia and Venezuela and Cuba, the worst human-rights violators in the world, sitting on the U.N. Human Rights Council. And if the United States wants to reengage and reenter, I think it's incredibly important that we take a

strong stand to try to clean up that organization, clean up that committee, or else it's just a sham and we're giving them legitimacy by joining without – not demanding changes and getting these members off of that. So this is something else that I've stressed.

But I just, lastly, want to talk about, you know, this idea that, you know, some of the others that I've heard in the debate talk about lifting an embargo. You know, the embargo is what the Cuban government does to its own people. Anything that comes into this island – money, food, medicine – they use it and they weaponize it against their own people. Look at how the regime, the Castro brothers live as wealthy kings and the people have nothing, OK? So they do business with everybody else in the world, and yet they've still remained a communist dictatorship for six decades. The United States, you know, reengaging with them is not going to do anything to change that unless there are serious concessions and changes made and that was my opposition to what President Obama had done. He's sort of given away the store without getting anything in exchange.

So I just wanted to bring that up as a – as a point because I think that's probably going to come up in your discussion. But that's why many of the Cuban Americans are opposed to, you know, this idea of reentering and doing business with Cuba, because we don't believe anything will change. And unless we're going to get real concessions, we shouldn't really be going down that path. And I thank you all for inviting me to speak today, and happy to join you at another, future time.

Ms. Hoffman Thank you so much Congressman Sires and Congresswoman Malliotakis. We really appreciate your participation today and we're so glad to have your voices as part of the panel.

I would now like to turn to my colleague, Senior Vice President at CSIS Dan Runde, to take over from here.

Daniel F. Runde (Off mic.)

Amalia Dache Sure. Thank you for having me here at the Center and I appreciate the Congress members' comments and passion. And so, I am a scholar of education, of activism, of race as well, so this is really the sweet spot of my research. And this moment right now, it's a watershed moment for Cuba, it's a watershed moment for Latin America, for the hemisphere, and for the world.

So the Cuban people took to the streets July 11th from the most marginalized neighborhoods on the island, right, so places that are predominantly Afro-Cuban. And the Afro-Cuban leadership of the San Isidro Movement – Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara, Maykel Osorbo – along with hundreds of other Cubans are now incarcerated and being detained.

And so it's really important to understand what's happening when we're also looking at a racial framework.

So democracy is on the horizon. I do believe that. It started with the Cuban people coming out to the streets, because freedom begins with our psychology, right, begins with the mind, right? Once your mind is free, then everything else should follow. And so, with the support of the international community, which includes us here in the United States, this can really become a reality. But we have to understand, right, if we care for – if we care about issues and seriously care about issues of social justice, of racial justice like we've cared about in the last two years, three years, since 2014, then we should care about what's happening in Cuba, a country that is a majority Afro-Cuban, right? So I think that is something that needs to be very central when we're thinking about what's next, what policy considerations should we be pushing forward, and how the racial dynamics at play really are a factor in the uprisings and the calls for change.

Mr. Runde

Thank you so much. Juan? You're on mute.

Juan Cruz

You'd think after over a year of doing this we would get the mute button right. (Laughs.) Dan, thank you very much and good afternoon.

You know, I try to be a little more restrained and cautious over the developments on the island. I want to make sure that we don't place an excessive pressure on the individuals that are expressing dissent, that we're not excessively optimistic, or that we're not reading too much.

But at the same time, how can we not be optimistic, right? This is – it would be understandable. These are uncommon events. They're authentic and they're widespread. These events are, more importantly, are concerning to the regime. Much like the Arab Spring, you know, the experts or the people following Cuba have been surprised by these events.

No one could have imagined, you know, even a few months ago that we would describe Cuba as an event – having undergone an event where people have expressed dissent in face of intimidating security, do it in – first in remote areas of the island and spread to the capital, and do so – and spreading that information via the internet and, ultimately, overturning police vehicles. I think none of us would have imagined that, and then so how can we not be optimistic?

But at the same time, I would say we must exercise caution. I, personally, don't view this as a turning point. So if it's not a turning point, what is it? You know, how do we properly interpret these events, what does it exactly mean, and what is the danger in either overestimating or underestimating what's taken place and the impact of these demonstrations?

I would offer maybe two points on that account. First, in terms of the true value of what's taking place in Cuba, one is, clearly, the population has sent a message and a warning shot to the regime and knocked the regime back on their heels. This is an expression to indicate clearly that no matter what you're doing and how much you oppress the people that people won't take it and they're going to look at the threat in the eye and take it on. I find this incredibly courageous of the people of Cuba.

But also, I hope on a separate level that it generates or it sparks a discussion in the actual leadership and the regime, and what I mean by that in the – at the top within the Communist Party and, more specifically and more importantly, I would say, in the Revolutionary Armed Forces, or the Cuban military.

And why do I mention this? Well, I mean, I would like to think that there's a discussion that could take place where in the leadership of the regime they look, and how can you sit there and equate an expression of hunger and thirst and well-being with being counterrevolutionary?

Just to borrow their own language, isn't that what the revolution was supposed to take care of, its own people? And yet here – and here's – there's an expression. I would actually say that how can you blame these individuals for having failed the revolution? The revolution has failed them.

And so I think if – as soon as some realist, maybe behind closed doors or whatever, having a conversation like this and, more importantly, cast doubt on their abilities to have governed so poorly on the island and that they're to blame for why these people are expressing themselves, and if that conversation were to take place, especially in the vanguard of the revolution, in the Cuban Armed Forces, which is the people in arms, according to them, you know, what did they have to say about all this? And maybe I'll stop there.

Mr. Runde

Thank you, Juan. That's fantastic.

Deborah, NDI follows events on the island with great interest. What's your response? What's your thought about what's happening on the ground there and what are the prospects for democracy in Cuba?

Deborah Ullmer

Thank you, Dan, and thank you at CSIS for this opportunity to reflect on the growing pro-democracy movement in Cuba.

Unlike Juan, perhaps, I'm going to err more on the optimistic side since, after all, I am in the business with National Democratic Institute that is dedicated to strengthening democratic processes and practices around

the world and having worked in Latin America and the Caribbean for more than 35 years.

The peaceful protests that erupted in Cuba on July 11th are among the largest demonstration on the island in recent years and many Cuban watchers refer to a before and after July 11th. And what's different about these protests is that they have been sparked inside poor neighborhoods, as Amalia mentioned, by citizens reflecting the general population in Cuba, including young Afro-Cubanos. As with all calls for reform, these protests did not emerge overnight and over the past several months there has been a civic energy growing around calls for freedoms as well as growing frustration with the regime over economic liberty and access to basic resources in the midst of a deepening humanitarian crises exacerbated by COVID, as manifested in the spike of peaceful protests.

In June 2021, CubaData reported that approximately 70 percent of the persons that they've surveyed inside the island expressed dissatisfaction with the government's management of the economic crises. Their previous survey, six months before that, had a rate of a little bit more than 50 percent of dissatisfaction due to the government's handling of COVID. To state the obvious, Cuba is no longer led by a charismatic leader that has been able to sustain the mystic revolution for so many decades. Other data also points to an uptick in calls for freedom. The Observatorio Cubano de Conflictos recorded approximately 600 citizen protests in Cuba during the past few months. And in the leadup to the July 11 civic protest, a good portion of those protests called for the release of the Movimiento San Isidro's leader.

The first great advancement of Movimiento San Isidro was to prevent the implementation of Decree 349, which would have severely limited artistic freedoms. The artist group has awakened a desire by Cubans to enjoy the same freedoms and democratic rights as others throughout the hemisphere, including those traditionally not involved in promoting human rights and freedoms inside of Cuba – such as the artists and religious organizations. Through their music and other forms of art, Movimiento San Isidro has been able to connect with the population and their frustrations.

The recent protests were also enabled by cellphone access to the internet on the island and internet has served as a tool to help connect Cubans to the outside world. In this regard, the Cuban government was unable to hide the images of police brutality of protests or poverty and the artist members of Movimiento San Isidro remind us that despite being subjected to strong repression, the Cubans' desire to achieve a country where everyone is recognized and granted the same rights is strong and growing. And I think this causes some source of optimism that this – there is a growing movement inside of Cuba for democracy.

Mr. Runde Excellent. Deborah, when you said 37 years I said, what, did you start as a child prodigy? Because – (laughs) –

Ms. Ullmer NDI. I should clarify, NDI, not myself. (Laughs.) Myself more than 20 years, though.

Mr. Runde (Laughs.) OK.

Well, OK, so Armando, thanks for being with us, particularly grateful that you would take time to be with us. Could you add to what's happening? You were born in Cuba and you actually lived and worked in Cuba for a period of time. So, I suspect you follow it quite closely. Can you add to what's happening in Cuba at the moment, Armando?

Armando Chaguaceda Yes, Daniel, thank you. Well, I think that it is happening in many countries in this moment. The people in Cuba are suffering the combined plight of the pandemic, the poverty, and the repression. We are living in a moment of autocratic wave in the global trends in different – with different ideologies, with different political intention. But we are living in the world that is increasingly autocratic in all the continents. You have, for example, Hungary from the right wing with Orbán. You have, of course, the left autocracies in Latin America. And that is a global phenomenon.

In this – in this frame, the so-called Cuban exceptionalism, where the Cubans enjoy some social rights in exchange to their political and civic rights, it's over. It's over. I think that today it remains only the Cuban exceptionalism in the nature of the Cuban political regime, that is autocratic regime in a mostly – not complete, but mostly democratic region – a regime done despite the recently adopted constitution that formally recognized these rights. In the practical sense, the regime denied the right of the people to exercise and demand their right.

As I like to continue in the global frame to compare, for example, as the Iranian, the Nicaragua, and Belarus regime have done recently in the face of popular protests/uprising, the Cuban government have repressed the citizen action. If you – if you compare, for example, with Algeria in 2019, but also with Russia in the crackdown of Navalny movement, the protests in Cuba have been followed but more people in jail in proportional sense with the size of the population. We could compare, for example, how many people have been repressed in Russia with Navalny crackdown movement, in Algeria, and it's bigger in Cuba. We have more than 700, by confirmed sources, including teenagers, people that have been beaten by the police and civilian forces, people without right to a lawyer.

Anyway, but I think that in this moment, Daniel and colleagues, we have explosive combination. The causes of the protest continue. The repression

increases the fear, but also the anger of the people. The legitimacy of the government does not compare, for example, the legitimacy that have the charismatic leadership of Fidel several years ago. And the people know that there are many discontent people – that they are not alone; that they have a voice. That despite the fear, once they come to the street to claim their rights this psychosocial change is very powerful, from my point of view, and is going to increase the opportunity not maybe in the short term, but in the medium term of the civic engagement in Cuba.

Mr. Runde So, Amalia, what actions would you like to see the U.S. Congress take? And how can they ensure that Afro-Cuban populations are not overlooked?

Ms. Dache Yes, yes. Thank you for that question, Daniel.

So although the movements are multiracial, right – so I'm thinking about the activism that's happening with #SOSCuba and the hashtag #PatriaYVida, when Congress puts forward policy, we have to think about the racial inequities. So when we're thinking about internet access, we have to know what the human right reports has stated about how difficult it is for Afro-Cubans to access technology and access the internet and wi-fi. We have to also understand that Afro-Cubans are also disproportionately not accessing the economy, right? We also have to know that Afro-Cubans are disproportionately the ones who are in detention centers, in jails, and in prison. You know, I think one of the last statistics that I've seen on this, because of course it's hard to get data, but it's data that 88 percent of those incarcerated are Afro-Cuban.

We also, again, have to understand that the marginalization of neighborhoods is racialized. Also the repression and the violence, the political prisoners are predominantly Afro-Cuban. So we do have to have a racial framework, right? So in thinking about the global framework, as far as issues of the political systems, we have to think about the racial framework and how that's embedded within the Cuban state.

And so when policymakers put together policy related to things like internet, or things like remittances, we have to think about how that's going to affect Afro-Cubans, if this is really going to make a difference for the majority of the population. We have to think about how we're going to get direct access to the Cuban people, in particular Afro-Cubans who are the most marginalized, and are the ones who begun this movement, and also think through, you know, how these policies are going to affect the most marginalized on the island.

Mr. Runde Congressman, I see that your hand is raised. Would you be willing to let me just call on a couple more folks? Because I want to give them homework assignments for you, Congressman, in terms of –

Rep. Sires Well, just one question and then I have to –

Mr. Runde Yes, sir. Go ahead, of course.

Rep. Sires Yeah. My question is to Amalia. First of all, let me say thank you and thank you for raising that issue about Cuba, because for years the propaganda that's been going around the world is that Cuba has no such racism. You know, that everything was fine. And the world bought it. But through all your work, you have been able to prove to the world that that's not exactly what is going on on the island. And I don't know if you saw the article on the Washington Post about a Black uprising is shaking Cuba's Communist regime?

Ms. Dache Yes. Yes, absolutely.

Rep. Sires Yes. I thought that was excellent. I actually sent it to a lot of my colleagues in the – in the Black Caucus because –

Ms. Dache Yes, absolutely. And I met with some of the CBC members a few weeks ago as well. And we talked about this – the myth of kind of the racial utopia that they had heard, and that, of course, we understood visually through the picture of Fidel in Harlem, for example, is something that we've seen in the public discourse. But when you look at the history of Cuba, when you see how these Black organizations like the NAACP, the kind of counterpoint in the United States, these organizations were banned and outlawed in 1961, right? So you have, you know, the Castro regime got rid of Black organizations, and organizing, and any type of critical conversations about race within an educational curriculum.

So how we're having conversations about CRT – critical race theory – in the United States in schools, that has been a big debate. Well, in Cuba for 60 years you have not been allowed to talk about race or measure race or have any – collect any racial data related to the Cuban inequities because of how the government censors this information. So absolutely we need more data. We need more focus on these inequities. And we're familiar with them in the United States, but we're very, you know, unfamiliar with its – with its, you know, manifestations within a communist regime like Cuba.

Rep. Sires Well, thank you very much. Thank you, Daniel.

Ms. Dache Thank you, Congressman.

Mr. Runde This is – I'm ecstatic. I'm so happy this is happening, this conversation's happening. Deborah, could I bring you into this? How can Congress take action to capitalize on the democratic fervor in Cuba before this moment passes, Deborah?

Ms. Ullmer

Thank you. I think the Senate and House Foreign Relations Committee, their hearings, their bipartisan resolutions have been tremendously helpful in expressing solidarity with the Cuban people. And that helps shine a spotlight on the human-rights situation in Cuba and provides critical backing for the Cuban activists.

Additionally, a joint statement on Cuba by the United States and 20 other countries condemning the mass arrests and detention of protesters in Cuba and calling on the government to respect fundamental freedoms helps to keep the focus on the Cuban people and principles instead of an ideology.

Another way to support Cuban activists, independent journalists, and artists is to publicly recognize and invite independent Cuban civil society organizations in multilateral spaces. In this regard, the Democracy Summit and the Ninth Summit of the Americas provide a great opportunity to revitalize global and regional commitment to core democratic principles and human rights. As the host of these summits, the United States Congress can pursue resolutions that underscore the need to collectively safeguard human rights and free and fair elections and promote transparency and accountability.

Another thing that Congressman Sires mentioned was the internet. And as we saw on July 11th, authoritarian regimes are finding more sophisticated and illiberal uses of technologies to surveil, subvert, and control their citizens. A united effort among democracy have made some progress in ensuring that new technologies are used to support freedom and human rights. The United States should work with private enterprise to promote the integrity of the underlying information space so that authentic communications underpin the legitimacy and resilience of democracies around the world, including the democratic fervor that is emerging in Cuba.

Mr. Runde

Armando, I hesitate to ask you this question because I know you had a death of someone close to you related to COVID-19 in Cuba and I know it was – it was a bit of a big ask to ask you to participate today because this just happened in the last 72 hours, and I'm really sorry about that. But I want to ask, COVID-19 and the pandemic respects no borders and it's been a real issue on the island of Cuba. Could you please talk about, how has the pandemic impacted both the conversation in Cuba politically but also economically? And what does it say about the Cuban health system? Because I think it says something about the Cuban health system.

Mr. Chaguaceda

Yes. We first – to understand the impact of the COVID pandemic in Cuba right now on the pricing and the crisis of July 11th, we first understand the whole picture, the context. First exists a deep crisis resulting of the destruction of the command economy model. There have been over for 20

years ago. But of course, at the same time, this crisis of the command economy model has been aggravated by the paralysis of the market reform that they have been removed. The regime has removed market reform one decade ago. Of course, the economic impact of the pandemic has affected tourists; that is, it's also foreign exchange and this combination, with the effect of some of the U.S. sanction, have impact the economy and the capacity of the state to change the situation. Of course, the realization of the economy in this year increased the poverty and the inequality, but especially in the COVID impact.

We have a health policy that bet everything on the development – put all the money into the development of these – its own vaccines against COVID-19. At the same time isn't clear the decision – I can't understand why the decision to reject the COVAX mechanism. The COVAX mechanism have been multilateral, have been international, guide by the, you know, Health World Organization (sic; World Health Organization), but Cuba doesn't go to this mechanism, doesn't accept to be in this mechanism. And of course, if you put all the money in an economic crisis to develop its own vaccines, that will be a good option, but combined with other measures. For example, you reject the COVAX mechanism, and you don't pay money, you don't pay attention, you don't put – paying the attention to the rest of the condition of the infrastructure of this health system, the supplies, the personnel of the health system that sustain a public-health system, the health system is in crisis.

We have seen right now in the – in the last days with relative, with friend, with people that the situation is incredible, but the people are dying. And at the same time, the government has rejected the campaign to send basic medical supplies, humanitarian measure to Cuba. And this combination of economic crisis, impacts of the pandemic, and the bad management of the crisis have been in the – in the life of the Cubans. I think that most of the people know right now in this moment two people, two relative, two friends, two neighbor that have been suffering in different way this situation. It's very – it's very sad.

Mr. Runde

Thank you, Armando

Juan, I know you are – you are – you're guarded about the prospects of democratization in Cuba, and I think it's sort of the voice of experience because you've worked on the Cuba file for a long time. So I know that it comes from your experience. But imagine for a minute what potential democratization in Cuba, how it might impact the way that Cuba reacts – interacts with other countries in Central and South America on the one hand. And then separately, a separate question for you is our friends and allies have responsibilities at this moment. I'm thinking about Spain – my beloved Spain – and Canada. I'd welcome your thoughts about what are the responsibilities like great countries like Canada and Spain as it results in the context of Cuba? So those are two kind of big questions for you.

Mr. Cruz

Thank you, Dan. Big and complicated. Listen, consistent with my pessimistic readout today, I'll say that it's unlikely that democracy be – is driven by the region. There's a lot of reasons for that. The region in particular has a – has a fear of antagonizing Cuba, or a disinterest in antagonizing Cuba. Cuba has an outsized influence in the region and, with that, outsized influence. It punches well above its weight. And when you think of taking Cuban on, in any prospect, in any way, for the countries in the region, they're first faced with a legacy of – from the '60s and '70s, when Cuba exported its violent form of revolution, which impacted on way too many of the countries in the region, and where we still feel the effects of that.

So why risk provoking the Cubans? Perhaps not to do exactly that over again, but something along those lines that could be intimidating and throw you off course if you're one of these countries. And it's not preposterous to state something like this. We have a really good example as a result of, you know, the recent violent crackdowns by the regime on the demonstrations. Only two countries in the region stepped forward to criticize this. You know, one is Chile, which we've come to expect a lot from in the world of democracy. And the second one was Peru. And to be quite frank, it was at a low cost. It was the exiting Peruvian administration so if something had gone wrong there wasn't a large price to pay.

And I think it's also important to note, as a footnote here, that the secretary general of the OAS also came out in criticism of this violent crackdown. But that gives you just an idea of the trepidation, the reluctance there is in the region when dealing with Cuba. And what's more likely is that in the re-democratization, you know, hopefully of a Cuba is the adoption of a wait-and-see attitude, being excessively cautious, of treading lightly, and ultimately taking your cue from within Cuba. And it pains me to say this, but I just don't think when it comes to Cuba it'll be different than other countries in the region. I think we're not going to get everything that we'd like to see from our – from our neighbors.

I would like to note, however, that if we take a quick view of the demonstrations, and one thing that stood out – and I'm not generalizing here – but one thing that stood out was the number of demonstrators who were either barefoot, shirtless, or both, and that just being a – one of many symbols of the – of the poverty and the hardship that's being lived. And returning to what they were asking for, the basic, basic liberties of a human being, to start off with, the issue of starvation, the need for food, and for well-being.

And so I would caution those demonstrators in our region in other countries, most notably Colombia and Chile, who were demonstrating for

vastly greater things than the basic needs of a human being, that to take note, the grass is always greener; be careful what you're demonstrating for. And to the left in the region, in these countries and others that have been demonstrating for those in the democracy, take note of what it means to demonstrate in a democracy where you cannot be violent, but you can demonstrate, versus a dictatorship where just the demonstration lands you in jail or worse. So that's sort of one of the spotlights I'd like to shed on the events.

In terms of Venezuela, for example, I'm not so sure they're in a position to do much except to be spoilers in all of this and hopefully to be, you know, the next stage, if not the first stage. And you cite Spain and Canada, and I would add Mexico to that group, three countries that have particular influence in Cuba and I think would have, with that, an obligation to push our democratic principles and ideals when Cuba's ready. Thanks.

Mr. Runde

I've got several questions from the audience. I have Mike Russell, who identifies as a Cuban-American: Is there a moral obligation for democracies to strengthen and protect each other? Is there a playbook that can be used to call out and counter threats to democracies?

So that's kind of one question from Mike Russell.

Another is from John McAuliff at the Fund for Reconciliation Development: Wouldn't ending the embargo as demanded by virtually the whole world stop punishing the Cuban people for their leaders' mistakes and create more fluidity and possibilities of change if they continue or heighten the 60-year strategy of sanctions? That's a second question.

And then from Mi Mitou at HNT. And the question is: How can the U.S., including the U.S. Congress, help Cuba – how can it support human rights in Cuba, for example, using and enabling the connectivity of the Internet?

So any of those – connectivity of the Internet to support human rights and another one is about the issue of the embargo, the U.S. embargo, and then the third is about how – what is the playbook for strengthening and supporting democracy?

Maybe, Deborah, why don't I start with this issue of the playbook for supporting and strengthening democracies and turn to you first on that issue, Deborah?

Ms. Ullmer

Sure thing. Thank you.

Yes, there is a moral obligation for democracies to support each other. We have a tremendous opportunity under the Biden administration in December that will be hosting a democracy summit. And so this is an opportunity for democracies to protect and support one another. The

playbook is in terms of supporting independent civil society. So you need to support independent voices, you need to – and however that's expressed. Movimiento San Isidro is an expression of artists. They are connecting with artists around the diaspora, you know, inside of the island because they connect with poor people. They're expressing the frustration of the Cuban – of the Cubans and they're connecting around the world through their music and other art forms. But that's also through supporting independent journalists, supporting civil society activists, human rights activists who can document what's going on and report. But these individuals, these organizations need to be recognized in multilateral forums. They need to have the opportunity as civil society around the world and particularly in democracies have the opportunity to express their viewpoints and call out their governments when their governments – and hold them accountable when they're not doing something.

Mr. Runde Amalia, would you like to take one of the questions, please?

Ms. Dache Yes. I would like to take the question related to the Internet, and I want to bring the attention of our own history here in the United States. In the beginnings of the civil rights movement, the visualization of Emmett Till's body, his mother decided to show the world what Southern white segregation looked like in the death of her son. This visualization, this powerful image impacted the success of the civil rights movement.

And so I really do believe, along with seeing the successes of racial justice movements globally, thinking about South Africa, the international community plays a huge role. Documenting the experience of what was happening in the island to Afro-Cubans, to Cubans along racial lines, is critical, and it's very important to bring in the international community together. They need to connect to the internet to share this documentation. If we don't have documentation, if we don't have data, then it's going to be hard to continue to push forward.

Mr. Runde Armando?

Mr. Chaguaceda Well, I think that we are in a huge and very, very, very sad crisis. And I think the USA should offer humanitarian support, pushing for multilateral support through this initiative with Europe, with Latin America, that brings at least the possibility to send sufficient and immediate aid to the Cuban population.

For example, U.S. government should make the statement, tell the international community that they have accept the idea of donation of millions of vaccines to the World Health Organization, but with support, for example, Red Cross, Caritas, to the island. Yes, probably it should be accept the idea that the Cuban Ministry of Health will have a role in the implementation of this aid. It doesn't matter. That's happened before in

IT, where the Cuban doctors have been working with the USA office sale and supplies.

I think that none of these ideas offer immediately this crisis support with vaccines and medicine to Cuba population deny the authoritarian nature of the Cuban regime or abandoning the democratic support to the people. But I think that without life to save right now there will be no play for another democratic future in Cuba. And I think that USA government has the capacity, and the moral capacity at the same time, to offer immediately this aid, with support of international organizations.

Mr. Runde Juan, do you want to take on any of the questions?

Mr. Cruz Not really. A lot has been said already. (Laughs.) But I would add is perhaps – and I'm not an apologist by any means – but I think that we should also evaluate the value of a few carrots and not just sticks. And the reason for that is if there's a lesson that was learned from the experience of the Obama administration's negotiations with the Cuban regime is that a lot of what was obtained that was good was done through an exercise of finding a rhythm and an ebb and flow.

Again, I'm not apologizing for anything. But if there's something good to be had from it that we can live with, we should look into that as well. I think it starts with the vaccines is a very good example, but something like that, and then demand something in return.

Mr. Runde Juan, let me just press you on – there has been – I did an article several years ago in The Hill suggesting that it was likely that U.S. government officials were being targeted with special kinds of sonic weapons. This was, like, three or four years ago, before it was more widely recognized as a thing or as a real thing. And many people have been significantly injured both in Havana but in a number of other locales. And there's a belief that perhaps some government, whether it's the Chinese government or the Russian government, has been beta-testing, if that's the right term of art, these experimental weapons on our personnel.

Could you just spend a minute on this topic? And how does that play into the potential for any kinds of back-channel conversations? I mean, doesn't that kind of – it's a significant issue that gets – if I can describe it as gets in the way of us being able to have a dialogue with the Cuban government until we address that issue?

Mr. Cruz You're exactly right, Dan. I think the important tier of this is until a real conversation can be had where the two parties sit at the table and there's some basic things we can agree upon – one thing of it is certain. Real human beings suffered real medical ailments, serious ones, while they were located in Cuba. And to say otherwise is disrespectful. And so what we need to – and disingenuous.

And what we need to do is, yes, we need to find a way to deal with that. It gets – I know what you mean. It gets in the way. We can't continue to act business as usual while this is hanging over us. And so absolutely we need to have this addressed. And I don't know how you do it. And it doesn't matter what role they played. It happened on your turf and your rules. And you have an obligation, if nothing else, under the Geneva Convention.

Mr. Runde

Thank you

Well, look, I think this has been a tremendous conversation. We like to start and begin things on time because we want people to come back to CSIS events. And I'm so grateful for this panel.

Thank you, Armando.

Thank you, Amalia.

Thank you, Deborah.

Thank you, Juan.

You're all busy people. You could have done other things with your time today. We're really – I'm very appreciative of the partnership with Elizabeth Hoffman for convening this. We got – I was so impressed by the two members of Congress.

Thank you to our audience. And this is a historic moment in Cuba, and I think we've had a chance to unpack some of the issues here. Thank you very much, and we'll see you all very soon.

(END)