

## **Friends of Cuba Society - South Africa (FOCUS - SA) submission to the United Nations Human Rights Council about the situation in Cuba.**

### **Introduction**

Friends of Cuba Society - South Africa (FOCUS – SA) is made up of South African citizens from all walks of life who are in solidarity with the people of Cuba. Our solidarity with the people of Cuba is informed by centuries and decades of our own struggle against colonialism and the system of apartheid, which was declared by the United Nations General Assembly as a crime against humanity and by the World Council of Churches (WCC) as a heresy.

During the many decades of our difficult and just struggle, the people and government of Cuba selflessly supported our struggle in various ways. We have shared our tears, sweat and blood with the Cubans in our struggle for our freedom and independence. Cuba also supported other anti-colonial struggles in Southern African, African and other developing countries.

Our difficult struggle culminated in the democratic breakthrough in April 1994 where adult citizens of our country for the first time exercised their democratic right to vote for a government of their choice. We remain grateful for the support the people and government of Cuba gave to us and other people of Africa without demanding any payment from countries they supported to be free.

### **Historical and current situation of Cuba.**

As people who are in solidarity with the people of Cuba, we have fore fathers and mothers who historically suffered serious humiliation as a result of violent dispossession of our land and resources above and beneath the land, we remain inspired by the principles, bravery and example of what Cuba represent to the developing countries.

Human rights in Cuba should be understood within centuries of their heroic and victorious struggle against colonialism. Their political and military struggle culminated in victory on the 31st December 1958. Since that time to date, the people of Cuba suffered greatly for exercising their sovereignty and independence. They suffered for choosing their own preferred political, social, economic and cultural system which was different to that of their big neighbour, the United States of America (USA).

There were and are various attempts by different USA governments and groups based in Miami (which the USA government politically, financially and militarily continue to support) to remove the government of Cuba through unlawful and

unconstitutional overt and covert means. This situation has led to the historical and current unilateral imposition of an economic embargo/blockade by successive USA governments against the Cuban government. It also led to the continued occupation of Cuban territory in Guantanamo Bay. The unilateral economic blockade also has extra territorial characteristics where other countries are coerced by the USA to support the blockade.

These are the two main sources of serious disagreement and dispute between Cuba and USA. The blockade has been and continues to be condemned for many years by overwhelming majority of member states of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly. Unfortunately the annual UN resolution against the unilateral economic blockade has not translated into action against the USA to lift it. The application of the U.S. economic, commercial and financial blockade for more than six decades constitutes a serious and systematic violation of human rights of the Cuban people. The blockade was intensified in the last five years, especially when the whole world was faced with the Covid-19 pandemic.

The economic blockade on Cuba has caused a lot of damage to the personal and collective livelihoods of Cuban people. Even though Cuba continues to face the over 60 years of the economic blockade, it has managed to build a society which protects the basic social, economic, cultural rights and wellbeing of majority of its citizens and not a select few.

Unlike other countries around the world which are daily characterised by daily interpersonal and general violence among their citizens (particularly among young people), Cuba has instead managed to build a progressive, literate, humane and caring society with less crime among its citizens and less gender based violence and femicide within its family structure. They managed to do that with the inhumane economic blockade imposed on them.

From our own experience and many years of relations with Cuba and its brave and principled people, below is the summary of some of the achievements of Cuba since 1959:

### **Human rights in Cuba**

Cuba has made progress in its efforts to achieve the fullest enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all its citizens. Since 2019, with the approval of the new Constitution of the country, important legislative reforms have taken place which have strengthened the human rights dispensation for the country. The new Constitution expands rights for vulnerable groups to deal with matters such as age, and significantly expands the catalogue of rights and reaffirms the universal, indivisible and interdependent nature of all human rights.

Cuba is the same as other countries around the world such as the USA which have historically used the death penalty to deal with the scourge of crime. The death penalty in Cuba has never been applied to women and people under 25 years of age. At present, those who were sentenced to death, their sentences were commuted to 30 years or life imprisonment.

The Cuban political system is based on the principles of socialist democracy and all representative organs of state power are elected and renewable. Those elected have a responsibility to account of their performance periodically and may be removed from office by citizens at any time. Besides, Cuban citizens have the right to participate in the formation, exercise and control of State power.

The Cuban State recognizes and encourages mass and social organisations that bring together different sectors of the population, represent their specific interests and incorporate them into the construction, consolidation and defence of the society and, as in most countries, the law provide mechanisms and forms in which public participation is made effective. Based on principles of socialist democracy, periodic elections are held in which the people have a high level of participation. All Cuban citizens, with legal capacity to do so, have the right to participate in periodic elections and popular referendums.

The most recent example is the election of the Deputies to the National Assembly of People's Power, which had a high level of participation taking into account all the subversive campaigns the USA Administration organised against this electoral process. With a popular engagement of 75.92%, Cubans elected the second Parliament in the world with the most presence of women.

In 2022, the Cuba Family Code was subjected to popular consultation, in which more than 6,480,000 Cubans participated. As a result of this process, 48% of the general text was modified. The Family Code was the first of its kind in the world to be submitted to a referendum process and was approved by 66.85% of the 6,269,427 Cubans (74.12% of the electoral roll) who exercised their right to vote.

Since the adoption of the new Constitution, Cuba has undergone the broadest transformation of its legal processes in recent decades, which incorporates in the administration of justice, the precepts of international treaties and advances in the practice of law in the world at the international level. There is a broad legal and regulatory framework for the promotion, protection and exercise of workers' rights, including trade union freedoms. Cuban worker unions participate in the elaboration, execution and control of development plans and the State budget.

Regarding health rights, the Cuban National Health System provides health care without any discrimination. It is based on its Primary Health Care system with community and intersectoral participation. Cuba is recognized internationally for the

high quality of its public health system, with universal coverage and free care. Diseases such as Poliomyelitis, Diphtheria, Newborn Tetanus, Pertussis, Rubella and Mumps have been eliminated.

Cuba has practiced international solidarity in the field of medical collaboration for more than 59 years, during which it has worked in 165 countries with more than 605,000 health professionals. This has benefited more than 2,000 million people in the world. At present, Cuban doctors collaborate in 56 countries with more than 23,000 health professionals.

In the midst of the difficult world situation caused by COVID - 19 pandemic, Cuba managed to send 4,700 specialists to 42 countries to help in the fight against the pandemic. South Africa was one of the countries that benefited from the Cuban medical brigades sent to fight COVID - 19 to save lives of our citizens. That's something we are deeply grateful for.

In Cuba, education is a right of all citizens and is a responsibility of the State. The Cuban government, despite the inhumane negative effects of the blockade, continues to guarantee free, affordable and quality education services for comprehensive training, from early childhood to postgraduate university education. Besides, Cuba has offered its help in the training of professionals from other countries and still does so, through a system of scholarships. Thousands of young South Africans have studied in different specialties in Cuba, with the only obligation being to return to their communities and work for their development.

The right to equality is fully incorporated in the Cuban legal system. Racial discrimination is outlawed and one of the measures taken to ensure continued progress in combating racial prejudice that persists in the behaviour of some people, has been the approval in November 2019 of the National Programme against Racism and Racial Discrimination.

Health, social security and social assistance, social and community work programmes in Cuba have made it possible to achieve a life expectancy of 78.45 years. The environment of social justice and protection promoted by the Cuban State made it possible to achieve a life expectancy of 78.45 years.

Likewise, combating all forms of discrimination against women in all spheres of society has been a priority of the Cuban State and Government from its founding. The new Constitution specifically enshrines the equality of rights and responsibilities between women and men in all spheres of society.

Women's rights to health, including sexual and reproductive health and family planning, are recognized, protected and guaranteed. As well, women's participation in decision-making is growing. Women represent 51.5% in State and Government

positions at the end of the first quarter of 2021.

Regarding the protection of children and adolescents' rights, in Cuba, the full enjoyment of all the rights of children and adolescents has continued to be promoted through the enactment of legislative, administrative and judicial provisions; the establishment of a coordination and supervision mechanism; the strengthening of data collection processes; and the formation and dissemination of effective and comprehensive policies, services and programmes, among others.

It should however be noted that the tightening of the economic, commercial and financial blockade imposed by the United States of America on Cuba hinders the extensive efforts made by the country in protecting and guaranteeing the rights of children and adolescents in Cuba.

The blockade hinders the provision of health, education and social assistance services, particularly affecting children and adolescents. In spite of this, the country continues to be at the forefront and shows levels comparable to those of developed countries in this area of work.

## **Conclusion**

As FOCUS – SA, we are confident that more progress will be achieved by Cuba if the United Nations and all its agencies work hard for the lifting of the unjust and unilateral economic blockade by the USA against Cuba and the continued occupation of Guantanamo Bay is stopped.

The continued attacks on Cuba to emasculate it politically and economically are unfair, unjust, inhumane and should be opposed by all people around the world who subscribe to the United Nations Charter.