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## *The US Has No Business Lecturing Cuba About “Free and Fair” Elections*



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In the weeks following the protests in Cuba on July 11 questions about how US President Joe Biden would react have dominated headlines. On July 22, Biden seemingly put speculation to rest by announcing that his administration will add a further set of sanctions to the already existing economic embargo. The new sanctions will apply to various figures in the Cuban armed forces as well as Cuba's Special National Brigade, which is alleged to have engaged in heavy-handed tactics against protesters. The move represents a stunning rebuke to his party's small progressive wing, which had hoped that he would at least

return Cuba policy back to the Obama era by reversing the 243 additional Trump-era sanctions, or perhaps even dropping the embargo altogether. Evidently, however, Biden and the establishment wing of the Democratic Party that he represents are now seizing on the protests as an opportunity to court the right-wing Cuban-American vote in Florida. In the wake of the protests, *Politico* reported that some Democrats are viewing the situation as a “golden opportunity” to try to win back the former swing state, which went for Trump in both the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections.

Inevitably, the protests have also served as a convenient tool for the US government and its allies in the Cuban-American exile community to reinvigorate their decades-long campaign to impose “regime change” on the beleaguered Caribbean island nation. Needless to say, at the forefront of calls for an even more aggressive US stance toward Cuba have been hardline representatives of this community. The mayor of Miami, the Babylon of militant anti-Castro agitation, has even called for direct US military intervention to “liberate” the island. In an interview with *Fox News*, Suarez even refused to rule out US airstrikes against Cuba, stating that this “has to be explored and cannot be just simply discarded as an option that is not on the table.” As would be expected, amongst the justifications for such aggressive measures is the demand for “free and fair elections,” which features prominently in the pronouncements of these figures. An open letter from Marco Rubio, the Florida exile hardliner Senator, and co-signed by House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy and 143 other members of congress, for example, states: “Freedom-loving nations must make clear our full and unwavering support for Cuba’s pro-democracy movement, and for free and fair elections, with international supervision.”

To the politically naïve, this might seem like a perfectly reasonable sentiment. After all, according to the prevailing political mentality within Western nations, the holding of “free and fair elections” is perhaps the most basic prerequisite that a country must meet in order to be accepted into the family of “freedom-loving nations.” The implicit corollary, of course, is that the US is perfectly entitled, if not duty-bound, to punish those countries that fail to meet this most fundamental of requirements. The reality, however, is that the US doesn’t have a shred of credibility when it comes to lecturing others about “free and fair elections,” let alone imposing punitive measures on those who fail to hold them. Because an investigation into the US’s behavior on the global stage reveals its stunning hypocrisy when it comes to Cuba and other US adversaries. And this hypocrisy is no accident, but rather plays an important part in providing a false veneer of credibility to the US’s self-serving foreign policy goals.

First of all, there's the issue of Washington's flagrant double standards. Because when we look at US relations with other countries it becomes obvious that the US couldn't care less whether or not another country holds "free and fair elections." That is simply not, nor ever has been, the criteria by which it predicates its treatment of other nations. Rather, administrations in Washington of both parties base their stances toward the rest of the world's countries on whether or not they are obedient to US interests. Countries deemed insufficiently obedient are singled out for "regime change," which can include sanctions, destabilization campaigns, covert support for coups or even direct military intervention. And to be clear, this applies irrespective of whether the target country holds "free and fair elections." For those countries that *are* obedient to US interests, on the other hand, there is practically nothing that Washington won't overlook. Again, that, of course, includes failure to hold "free and fair elections." Examples include Washington's alliance with the Wahhabist royal family in Saudi Arabia, an absolute monarchy where elections are held for only a handful of minor local government positions, and the dictatorships in Chile and Argentina during the second half of the twentieth century.

Note the cruel irony when it comes to the latter two examples. The US not only issued no punitive measures whatsoever against the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile or the military junta in Argentina, but rather propped them up by providing generous financial support and recognition on the world stage. And this was taking place at the very same time that Washington was escalating the embargo against Cuba. There is an even further layer of irony in the case of Chile given that the Pinochet dictatorship, which murdered thousands of political opponents and tortured many more, came to power via a US-backed and CIA-orchestrated coup that removed the democratically elected president, Salvador Allende.

This brings us to the second reason why the US has no credibility when it comes to pontificating about "free and fair elections." And that is that Washington only accepts the results of elections in other countries when it approves of the outcome. The most salient example of how this has played out in recent memory is undoubtedly Venezuela, where every single election that has been won by the governing United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) has not been recognized as legitimate by the US on spurious grounds of fraud. But when Washington's favored parties, which make up the Venezuelan opposition, won the National Assembly elections of 2015, on the other hand, accusations of vote rigging and irregularities were miraculously forgotten – conveniently enough, just in this one instance.

The contrast between Venezuela and the narco-state of President Juan Orlando Hernández's Honduras is also illustrative in this regard. Because at the same time that it was denouncing PSUV election victories in Venezuela as fraudulent, Washington completely ignored allegations of fraud in elections taking place in Honduras, in spite of a much greater preponderance of evidence. Even the pro-Washington Organization of American States (OAS) denounced the 2018 election that returned Hernández to power as fraudulent. Yet Washington nonetheless recognized the result as legitimate.

There's a further level of duplicity to this when you consider that the US shamelessly sides with its favored right-wing parties all over the region. Examples are too numerous to exhaustively enumerate, but the case of Nicaragua provides what is perhaps the most paradigmatic contemporary illustration. Ever since the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) returned to power via a democratic election in 2006, Washington has funneled tens of millions of dollars to opposition parties. The result of this is that the left in Latin America operates at a huge structural disadvantage given that their political opponents get financed by the US, the wealthiest and most powerful country in the world, lest we forget. So the US government demanding "free and fair" elections in Latin America is a bit like a gangster who has spent his entire criminal career fixing boxing matches showing up on fight night and demanding a clean bout.

As if this weren't enough, in some countries left-wing political organizing translates into literally taking one's life into one's own hands. Colombia, for instance, has in various years been deemed the most dangerous country in the world to be a union activist. This is in large part owing to a concerted campaign of murder and intimidation of social movement leaders during the presidency of Álvaro Uribe, a close US ally, and continuing today under the presidency of Iván Duque. As would be expected, Uribe received millions in US aid for so-called "counter-narcotics" operations that provided a smokescreen for these violent actions on the part of right-wing paramilitaries, such as the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). The deep intertwinement of Uribe's political faction with these groups was exposed by the 2006 Parapolitics scandal, which led to the conviction of over 30 Colombian political figures for collusion. Many of those convicted were close political allies of Uribe, including his cousin Mario Uribe.

To be clear, US election meddling has happened far beyond Latin America. Research conducted by political scientist Dov Levin found that the US has intervened in over 80 elections in 47 separate countries since the end of the Second World War. In a cruel irony, this includes meddling in the 1996 election in Russia in which Boris Yeltsin went from

polling in the single digits to winning the election after the US injected millions of dollars into his campaign and pressured the International Monetary Fund to provide Russia with what was then the biggest loan in its history. Incidentally, Levin's figure of over 80 cases does not even include examples of direct US intervention such as the CIA-orchestrated 1954 coup in Guatemala, which removed the democratically-elected government of Jacobo Árbenz, or cases of covert support for coup attempts such as that against Hugo Chávez in Venezuela in 2002.

Given these facts, the Cuban government could quite reasonably argue: *Why should we hold multiparty elections when the US will fund our opponents to the point that it will be practically impossible for us to win?* In any case, even if the Cuban Communist Party or some other socialist party *did* win an election in Cuba, the US wouldn't accept the outcome anyway. This attitude was best summed up by the notorious war criminal Henry Kissinger, who served as secretary of state during some of the US's worst atrocities abroad. He once quipped in the run up to the election in Chile that Salvador Allende went on to win: "I don't see why we need to stand by and watch a country go communist due to the irresponsibility of its people. The issues are much too important for the Chilean voters to be left to decide for themselves."

In light of these facts, Cuba's revolutionary leaders make the argument that, since multiparty "liberal democracy" in Latin America inevitably leads to the US rigging the contest by funding its preferred parties (and then intervening anyway if that doesn't work), the Cuban revolution should instead aspire to transform the country into a grassroots "participatory democracy" that puts power in the hands of workers and communities. Whatever one may think of the merits of such a system, it's difficult to deny that the reasoning makes sense at least in the context of the US's flagrant partiality toward allied right-wing parties all over Latin America and its prolific record of electoral meddling all across the world.

The third and final reality that exposes the US's hypocrisy in demanding "free and fair elections," which delivers the final blow to any remaining vestige of its pretense to credibility, is the US's own significant democratic deficits. Though US leaders present the country as the "birthplace of democracy," the "shining city on the hill" or whatever other kitsch and conceited slogan they might conjure, the US's own status as a democracy is, in fact, highly dubious. To take the most obvious example, the US doesn't even directly elect its president, who serves as both head of government and head of state. Successive governments of both parties have failed to replace the electoral college despite the fact that

it has twice this century led to the loser of the popular vote entering the White House – in both cases reactionary Republicans who presided over two of the most disastrous administrations in recent memory.

But the paltriness of the US's claim to be a democracy, in fact, runs much deeper than this. In addition to the patently undemocratic nature of the electoral college, there is also rampant voter suppression; widespread corruption of elections by the influence of campaign contributions; brazen corporate influence over elected officials; pre-selection of candidates within the two major parties' primaries; and an aggressive marginalization of third political forces that provide an alternative to the bipartisan capitalist/imperialist consensus for endless war abroad and crushing austerity at home. And far from being some kind of distant relic consigned to a less noble past, all of these factors are as much a problem today as they have ever been, if not more so. Republicans, for example, are currently going into overdrive in their use of state-level legislation to drastically reduce the number of people that can vote. Democrats are no saints in this respect either. In fact, they are often worse than their Republican rivals when it comes to efforts to keep third parties off the ballot. In August 2020, for example, *The Texas Tribune* reported that "State and national Democrats are waging a legal offensive to kick Green Party candidates off the ballot in some of Texas' highest-profile races this fall — and they are seeing success." *Citizens United* and similar Supreme Court rulings, meanwhile, have enabled completely unlimited campaign contributions as well as a shrouding the process of political fundraising in a veil of secrecy.

Closely linked to this has been the corporate buying of influence with elected officials of both parties, which is beginning to resemble state capture. Perhaps the most revealing example of this dynamic is in the area of healthcare. Despite polls showing consistent majority support for some kind of public universal healthcare system, the US still has the privatized monstrosity in which millions are left without care, tens of thousands die per year owing to lack of access, and hundreds of thousands more end up bankrupt due to inability to pay incurred healthcare costs. In February 2019, *The Intercept* reported on a leaked slideshow revealing that Nancy Pelosi and other establishment Democrats planned to torpedo plans by their party's small progressive wing to implement a single-payer system because "stakeholders are against." That is, because private health insurance companies contribute to their political campaigns.

Speaking of the progressive Democrats, the failure of Bernie Sanders to win the party's nomination twice was on both occasions the result of a deliberate effort on the part of



establishment figures to derail his campaign. Victor Tiffany of *Revolt Against Plutocracy* has amassed considerable evidence that Democratic primaries were rigged against him in both 2016 and 2020. As then DNC chair Donna Brazile put it: “If the fight had been fair, one campaign would not have control of the party before the voters had decided which one they wanted to lead.” Clearly, candidates in the US are largely pre-selected by their respective parties’ hierarchies, with primary elections often serving as little more than a formality.

Also to consider is the role of the media. Just as the corporate-owned media subjected Sanders to an effective blackout, so too has it systematically deprived third parties of the crucial airtime and column space that they need to communicate their policies to voters and expand their name recognition. In 2012, for example, Green Party presidential candidate Jill Stein was arrested at Hofstra University after appearing with her running mate in the hope of getting a space on the debate stage with then-president Barack Obama and his Republican rival Mitt Romney. This wasn’t the first time, either; during the 2000 election cycle, for example, the party’s presidential candidate Ralph Nader was systematically excluded from debates despite showing significant public support. 2020, meanwhile, saw deliberate attempts to keep Green Party candidate Howie Hawkins off the ballot in states across the country. The Green Party’s efforts to provide an alternative to the two-party duopoly have been further weakened by restrictive ballot access laws that require a party to either win a certain percentage of the vote in order to maintain ballot status or else go through an onerous signature collection process all over again.

Clearly, the US has not a shred of credibility when it comes to criticizing Cuba’s, or any other country’s lack of “free and fair elections.” If the US really cared about democracy, it would stop its habitual meddling in elections taking place elsewhere and get its own house in order by addressing the myriad deficits in democracy that exist within its own borders. We shouldn’t hold our breath, however. Neither the US’s foreign policy stances nor its electoral system at home have anything to do with promoting democracy or ensuring fairness in elections. Rather, both exist to uphold the rapacious imperialist capitalist global economic system that immiserates the majority of humanity while upholding the power of the multinational corporations and billionaires that now essentially rule the world. Those who truly care about the future of humanity and the earth that sustains it should focus their ire on that reality, rather than on misplaced concerns about the purported democratic deficits of an impoverished Caribbean island nation. Astonishingly, this country has had to

survive under the jackboot of that system yet has simultaneously been at the cutting of edge of resisting it and providing an attempt at an alternative.

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