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On Oct. 10, say a prayer for Cuba and the destiny of its people

Opinion BY TEO BABÚN

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Someday Cuba will be free. And when it is, July 11, 2021, will be remembered as the day that Cubans across the country spoke with one voice about their desire for freedom, basic human needs and political reform. Spontaneous, peaceful demonstrations spread to more than 60 cities and towns across the island. The world heard their cries, but so did Cuba's government and Communist Party rulers. Within hours, protesters were confronted by police and paramilitary units. Some were beaten, and hundreds were detained. Many still languish in Cuba's deplorable prisons. The regime's message was clear – dissent will not be tolerated, no matter how desperate the living conditions, no matter its failure to provide essential health services and no matter how demoralized Cubans have become as their human rights have been stripped away.

In Cuba — and other countries that have faced the consequences of authoritarian dictatorships, the downtrodden find comfort — and solutions — through their faith. Despite the constant harassment of Cuba's churches, including by the Communist Party's enforcer, the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA), millions of Cubans worship and receive spiritual guidance from their religious leaders. Their churches fill the void in community social-service delivery as the government fails in that role and have become centers for dialogue and activism. But the government sows discord between churches that fall under an official caste system, including registered churches whose operations are tolerated and unregistered churches that must operate in the shadows. ORA drives wedges between religious communities to ensure each is isolated and collectively cannot threaten the regime.

History teaches us that there are two paths to freedom when faced with tyrannical rule. We can take up arms and fight for our God-given rights, but that road is inevitably paved in blood. Or we can follow the examples of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, who showed that unity, nonviolent dissent and constructive dialogue can achieve the same ends. Gandhi succeeded in and India (human rights and political independence), and King brought about civil-rights reforms in the United States.

In the aftermath of July 11, a dynamic nucleus of church leaders is uniting, for the first time, through an initiative called *Cristianos Cubanos en Comuni3n*. "C3" is a broad coalition of Catholic and Protestant leaders that share a common vision, including Christian evangelization and a collective "search for liberty, truth and goodness." As a first step, they are inviting all Cubans and friends of Cuba, on the island and abroad, to take action through an international day of prayer and fasting for Cuba on Sunday, Oct. 10. Their call is inspired by their cross-denominational belief in the transformative power of God to bring peaceful, positive, life-giving change to Cuba. And in a country where civil society is repressed, it represents a major collective action outside the control

of Cuba's repressive government. I recently met with members of C3 — all of whom have been targeted and persecuted by the Cuban government. I was impressed by their resolve: “Si se meten con uno, se meten con todos!” (“If they mess with one of us, they mess with all of us!”) Such unity within the faith community is exactly what the Cuban government does not want. But the will of the those who see through a lens of faith cannot be regulated or suppressed. Members of C3 unveiled a video of their unity in a prayer at bit.ly/39M4Gnq. It's an impressive beginning. Their initiative deserves international support. I urge all to pray on Oct. 10 — for Cuba, the unity of its people and its path to democracy, human rights and prosperity.

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