

Opinion: After the Cuba protests, a regime shows its true colors



Protesters in Havana on July 11. (Alexandre Meneghini/Reuters)

Opinion by the Editorial Board

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The most striking aspect of Sunday's remarkable demonstrations in Cuba was their spontaneity. The most striking aspect of the government's response was the dreary repetition of its timeworn repressive measures. Once Cuba's security services realized that hundreds of people were in the streets protesting, they swung into gear, as they have many times before, to extinguish the outburst of free speech and assembly.

The initial spark was a Facebook live video from San Antonio de los Baños, south of Havana, showing protesters in the street, fed up with electricity blackouts, food shortages, rampant coronavirus infections and a police state run by the Communist Party of Cuba. The video was up for about 50 minutes and caught on quickly, inspiring protests across the island, but then was cut off. By Monday, according to Internet monitors, Cuban authorities had largely shut down Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and Telegram — although not Twitter. Mobile screens largely went dark this week, making it extremely difficult for activists

and independent journalists to communicate. Videos from the Sunday protests showed hundreds of people with smartphones lifted above their heads to record the demonstrations. This was the most digital-savvy revolt yet in Cuba — until the regime severed the connections.

Next, the regime turned to force and coercion. The government confirmed one person died Monday during a clash between protesters and police. But unverified reports circulating in Cuba suggests the use of force to crush the protests was widespread. Videos circulating on social media showed people being roughed up by security forces. Witnesses have reported many detained or missing; activists have circulated a list of more than 100. The independent online news portal 14ymedio says that, based on fragmentary reports, there are more than 5,000 people imprisoned or being investigated for participating in the protests, among them more than 120 activists and independent journalists. A reporter for a Madrid newspaper, Camila Acosta, was among those arrested, along with three Baptist priests. The goal of such sweeping repression and arrests is to instill fear, to intimidate and silence those who would speak their minds.

In 2002 and 2003, the Castro regime was faced with another outpouring of demands for democracy. More than 25,000 Cubans had signed the Varela Project citizen petition, created by opposition leader Oswaldo Payá, calling for free speech, a free press, freedom of association, freedom of belief, private enterprise, free elections and freedom for political prisoners. The response then, too, was an attempt to crush the popular demands. In what later came to be known as the “Black Spring,” 75 people, including those collecting Varela Project signatures, activists and journalists, were arrested in March 2003 and sentenced to long prison terms. Mr. Payá was killed in a suspicious car wreck in 2012.

Protests have flared in Cuba over the years, but Sunday’s outpouring was extraordinary. Cuba’s regime responded by showing its true character — a dictatorship — and its determination to remain one.

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