

Dissidents in Cuba

Rafael Rubio. Asociación Española Cuba en Transición

As someone pointed out yesterday, I'm not a dissident either. I'm here because, unfortunately, the Cuban government yet again has not allowed any of the Cuban democratic leaders to attend. These leaders are either in jail or are prohibited from leaving the country...they are prisoners of a larger prison.

After 47 years, Cuban dissidence has had time to pass through all the phases that dissidents normally experience. All are terrible: persecution, prison, discredit...but perhaps the most painful is oblivion.

Castro's regime discovered many years ago that the best way to weaken the strength of a democratic movement within Cuba was to act as though it did not exist, to ignore it. As if the dissidents were no more than a social anomaly, strangers living outside their land, outside their time.

Isolating dissidents causes them to feel different and to suffer the punishment of solitude on a daily basis. The slow passage of time wears down their hope and causes them to frequently question whether their battle has meaning.

There are many people around them who would like to approach them and tell them, although in a whisper, that they are on their side, that they are of the same school, but they cannot. The future of their families, their children's education, their wives' jobs, all this and more is at risk....

Citizens who live in democratic societies have the obligation to fulfil this role. To accompany the democrats, listen to them, give them voice, support them economically, continually pass on the spirit of freedom, to shout as loudly as possible to them, so that all of their neighbours hear, that they are not alone. This is how we will protect them from persecution, favour their liberation, strengthen their prestige and, above all, begin to give them a place of their own without having to wait, as was the case before, for history to do so.

Today I have received a message for this conference. A message from Oswaldo Paya one of the most prominent Cuban's dissidents. It's say so:

Dear friends,

Our movement sends greetings from Cuba.

It is important to seek continuity in efforts of solidarity with the Cuban's democrats.

The situation of the political prisoners is worsening in large part because the health of most of them is deteriorating every day. In some cases the damage is probably irreversible. This deterioration is caused by inhumane conditions, the manipulation of all aspects of prisoners' lives by the state security apparatus, and the stress caused by being confined alongside regular prisoners who are often used against political prisoners. We

know that there is a desire to help these political prisoners and we are looking for the most effective ways, both within and outside of Cuba, to mobilize these efforts. It is important and sometimes decisive when people raise their voices to defend prisoners when they are mistreated or in danger, or when they undertake a hunger strike. But this is not in and of itself a campaign for their liberation. To be effective, this campaign should be systematic and concentrated on speaking about the prisoners as not only victims of injustice and mistreatment, and not only when this can become news or when those who speak on these topics can become news.

From our point of view, this campaign has not been fully effective because it is subconsciously disconnected from the cause that these prisoners were defending: the details of their activities and its civic and peaceful nature. Their *raison d'être*, and ours, in civil struggle is to achieve peaceful change toward democracy and the defense and promotion of human rights. What we are saying may sound harsh, but it is not a criticism. It is an urgent appeal because we are not going to inform public opinion or convince others of the injustice of these imprisonments if the world does not know and understand the activities these defenders were undertaking before being thrown in jail. The campaign for Nelson Mandela was successful because it was directly tied to sharing his struggle and that of his partners against apartheid. Now we have to say it as it is. We all know that most of the 75 who were imprisoned in 2003 and others who remain in prison were jailed for promoting the Varela Project. We will not campaign for a project at the expenses of the prisoners, but we also will not silence the cause that we, including the prisoners, defend with this project: the cause of human rights and democracy. It is astonishing that this has been silenced more and more, seemingly because some individuals or groups who have much political and media influence never supported and in fact opposed the Varela Project. In this way, they silence the work of these political prisoners, who they claim to support, by omitting the just cause that they supported and continue to support.

The spokesmen of the Cuban government spread lies in Cuba and around the world about our brothers in prison. Yet we are missing the voices, both near and far, that proclaim, "They are prisoners because they defended the rights of Cubans and in most cases for promoting a legal campaign named the Varela Project!"

We ask that you work hard to organize a sustained public campaign for the liberation of all peaceful political prisoners by constantly engaging the citizens of all countries and by keeping in mind our recommendation to explain the real causes of their imprisonments.

Cuba is not only suffering from oppression: it's also in danger because those who have held absolute power for the last five decades also want to shut the doors to the future. They sow fear of the regime and of change, and through propaganda and repression they seek to stamp out courage and hope.

Solidarity should now seek to support the peaceful alternative that we have been proposing and promoting for years. Cubans certainly want peaceful change and a new life with peace and freedom. However, there seems to be a disconnect between support for this goal and support for the tangible steps we are taking to reach this goal. We do not seek support for individuals, parties, or projects, but we do seek support for the path that we have in reality begun to take. We have worked in this direction for many years, and

we are not going to abandon this path because now, more than ever, this alternative is the one that can save Cuba from much misery. We speak of a citizens' campaign to request changes to the laws so that citizen's rights will be respected. In this way, we can commence the changes that everyone wants. We are speaking of real paths to the goal of sovereignty, democracy, reconciliation, and rights. This is what we have done, but now we will do it more than ever because Cuba is looking into the future and needs this alternative for the wellbeing of all her people.

I cannot fail to mention to the country that hosts this conference, to the Czech Republic and to Slovakia: we are grateful to you as brothers for your constant solidarity, for your example, and for your inspiring companionship.

Thank you.

Oswaldo José Payá Sardiñas
Minervo Chil Siret
Ernesto Martini Fonseca