

As Cuba awakes

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Abstract Addressing the social and political position of the Cuban people, the author gives an account of a very personal struggle to bring liberty and solidarity to the Cuban people. Vividly describing his efforts and experiences, the reception he has received from hostile quarters and the untiring work of the Foro Cubana campaign, Mr. Paya presents the pressing case for Cuban self-governance and determination.

Keywords Cuba · Reform · Democracy · Christian Liberation Movement · Varela project · Foro Cubano

On 9 July 2006, my three children, my wife and I were returning from Sunday mass at our parish church. We were walking along the road from the gates of El Cerro Church, which runs 800 m up the hill at Manila Park, close to my house in El Cerro, the area where I have lived now for the first 56 years of my life. When we drew close we saw a crowd of people gathered near my house and a sort of market where food and other items were being sold. In the street there were several police cars and some of the better-known neighbourhood informants used by the government to keep an eye on things and to harass people if necessary. They began to take photographs of us in a provocative manner, pointing at us and making comic gestures while they turned up the music on the loudspeakers they had installed. All this was done so that there could be no further doubt that this big show was being staged against the Paya family. A scene of public intimidation had been set up, with several pictures and signs painted on the walls. The 2.5-m-high pictures, one of them opposite my house, were caricatures depicting President Bush and ‘los gusanos’ (‘the worms’), as those who dare to dissent against the regime are known, a term which denies their very humanity.

Two large signs could be seen on walls by my house and opposite Manila Park, one of which read ‘socialism or death’. The other read, ‘in a place besieged, dissent is treason’, a phrase from St Ignatius Loyola. The posters and signs are still there. They are directed

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against my family and against the Christian Liberation Movement, but the pretext was (and remains) the so-called Bush Plan or Transition Program, which a United States government commission had drawn up and published around that time. We did not agree with the establishment of this commission, nor with the drawing up of a programme for Cuba from abroad; but it was not for this reason that the Cuban government was punishing us. Two months previously, on 10 May 2006, we had given a press conference at my house at which we published the Programme for All Cubans (Programa Todos Cubanos). The programme contained a proposal for a full constitution, an electoral law, a law of association and a plan for the transition named the Cuba First Plan (Plan Cuba Primero). This programme was drawn up by various committees after carrying out a process of dialogue and consultation involving around 12,000 people in Cuba and some Cuban exiles, many submitting their ideas and proposals in writing. A short time after we began this process of dialogue in Cuba and between Cubans, the commission was set up in the United States to draw up a separate programme, without any connection to us or our programme and in spite of our opposition. The moral support of the United States and of any other country with regard to Cuban human rights is something we value highly and are grateful for, but change in Cuba can and should only be defined by Cubans themselves. The Programme for All Cubans (www.oswaldopaya.org) offers a vision of change, giving all citizens opportunities for real choice and for designing a new constitution as part of a democratic and participative process. In this programme, the establishment of rights is the first step that will open the way to a process of transition with profound human and social consequences, carried out by Cubans and for Cubans, and reaffirming our sovereignty and independence. But the posters and festival of terror outside my house did not address this. Instead they focused on the Bush Plan. On 29 July 2006, the State Security Service, the Communist Party, Poder Popular (Popular Power) and all the arms of the repressive system once again set up tables, loudspeakers and posters opposite my house at nightfall to carry out 'another act', which had been planned weeks in advance, to 'condemn us'. They read a proclamation, shouted a lot and finally, by my house, sang the 'International', as if anyone who dissented were a fossil; all this to demonstrate their hatred for those of us who defend liberty. On 31 July it was announced that Fidel Castro had been operated on and that his condition was serious.

The events of 9 and 29 July brought back memories of 11 July 1991. At the time we had only two children, but my wife was pregnant with our third and was resting (because of the risk of losing the baby) at my parents' house, opposite Manila Park. (Thank God, the 'risk' is now 16 years old.) A few streets away stood the little house I owned, where we would collect signatures for a petition for a referendum, to be presented to the National Assembly of Poder Popular, calling for a national dialogue without exclusions of any kind. Many people came to my house to sign this petition. The State Security Service organised a very professional crowd, which carried out a great 'act of condemnation' during which about a hundred people shouted outside my terrified household. Some assailants entered the house, turning over cupboards and furniture, the beds and everything they found, and took away the petition with its signatures. They also left large signs saying 'Paya is a CIA agent' and 'Paya is a *gusano*' on the front of the house. The signs, which stayed there for some seven years, were painted in black. One of the leaders of the local Communist Party and Poder Popular, who lived in a house very close to mine, took it upon himself to etch these signs so that they could not be erased. This man, whose name I will not mention out of consideration for his family, died a few months ago in the United States, where he arrived with his wife at the end of 2007 and where his daughter and grandchildren were already living. But many of us who struggled for democratic change chose to stay here in Cuba, and many are still serving unjust and cruel prison sentences because they wanted a better

life for everyone, including those involved in the acts of condemnation and those who ordered them—these, perhaps, being the people most in need of liberation. Here we are in Cuba at the end of April 2008; the telephone was cut off a few weeks ago and there is still heavy surveillance around my house while we work for the Foro Cubano (Cuban Forum).

The Foro Cubano campaign is a peaceful civil process of popular action, with the aim of getting the people to demand fundamental rights for all Cubans and unconditional liberty for all those imprisoned for defending, promoting and peacefully exercising human rights. Despite the repression, we have organised the *Comités Ciudadanos de Reflexión y Dialogo* (Citizen Committees for Discussion and Dialogue), which are working throughout the country to promote reconciliation, freedom from fear and popular involvement in the demand for the changes necessary to make the law guarantee fundamental rights and to obtain forums for participation once those changes have been made. Part of this campaign has been the presentation of the following proposals to the offices of Poder Popular's National Assembly: a demand for change to the Electoral Law (presented on 30 August 2007), a proposal for an amnesty bill and a proposal for a national reunion bill (both presented on 18 December 2007). A National Reunion Law, recognising as Cuban citizens all Cubans who have left Cuba, would end all restrictions on the freedom to travel and eliminate all discrimination against Cubans in our own country. Foro Cubano is a work that must be completed one step at a time, but with courage and the conviction that we can achieve greater liberty and peace only if we genuinely want them.

Proyecto Varela (the Varela Project) has been revived within the Foro Cubano campaign because it symbolises the popular liberation movement, and contains the first, indispensable steps towards change that is legitimate and for the good of everyone. As a civil campaign demanding fundamental rights, Proyecto Varela has passed through several stages. At first we faced the arduous task of collecting signatures from the public while handicapped by divisive manoeuvring, infiltration by the opposition and by other parties who fought and continued to fight this initiative from within Cuba and from without. We met with repression from the regime, which employed and continues to employ all possible means to intimidate and confuse the public and to falsely represent and destroy this process. Why? Because while they do whatever they can to discourage us, to try to convince Cubans and the world that there is no alternative to this order without rights, Proyecto Varela shows that there is an alternative, the people's alternative, that of liberty and rights. Those who stand for Cuba or are connected with it, entering agreements or commitments in their own interests while the people remain without liberty or rights, do no good. Those who offer substitutes for liberty do no good, especially towards the people of Cuba and their desire for reconciliation and peaceful change. They are investing in indignities and lies.

But the strength of Proyecto Varela is in its radicalism, for it is radically pacifist and goes to the heart of the problem with a democratic solution. It has two inseparable components. First, rights for citizens so that they may participate freely in the country's political and social life and take decisions about their own lives and society, giving the people a voice in a referendum and ensuring that no one may speak for the people except the people themselves. The second liberating principle is that for the first time in their history the Cubans themselves should be the main political protagonists, using peaceful and direct means, and they should be capable of freeing themselves from the culture of fear that has paralysed them until now, calling for their rights, the rights of all Cubans, and unafraid to give their name, address and ID number. Proyecto Varela is more relevant now than ever, because Cubans now know that change is possible, and they have hope.

Introducing some changes that do not lead to rights—even positive changes bringing greater freedom and flexibility—aggravates inequality and is used to justify more intolerance of civil rights. This remains the essence of the situation: a lack of legal changes to guarantee rights, aggravated by a despotic government that will not even tell Cubans what might happen tomorrow. It is the foreign press and foreign public figures who report and speculate on what might happen here in Cuba.

Cubans saw the door opening, stuck their heads through it and had their noses chopped off, all the while being told that the changes proposed would bring them no rights or freedom and were therefore not the changes that the public desired. Cubans want a new life. Although many believe a new life can only be achieved abroad, the people as a whole will not leave and will look for this new life here. Misinterpreting this response as a willingness to tolerate more years of totalitarianism is short-sighted. However, it is astonishing how many governments, institutions, intellectuals, clergymen and other figures confuse the temporary silence of the people and a biased media devoid of rights with a permanent state of moral approval. Although this is nothing new, it is still contemptuous of Cuban rights.

Any road that leads to chaos, to shortages, to confrontation between Cubans and to a lack of order in society will only bring great human suffering and a violence that will harm all Cubans. There is no need to accept the false dichotomy of the preservation of the current totalitarianism on the one hand and this scenario of violence and chaos on the other.

If this chaotic scenario is unjust and undesirable, it is no more so than the existing conditions of anguish and the culture of fear in which we have been living for 50 years. Under the justification of defending national sovereignty, the citizens of this country have been deprived of their liberty and fundamental rights. No one can make us choose between the continuation of this order and ‘sinking into the sea’, as they say in speeches. That is ‘socialism or death’. Socialism does not mean justice and freedom, and change does not mean death. Since its founding, the Christian Liberation Movement has proclaimed the slogan ‘Liberty and Life’.

The Cuban Spring prisoners are emblematic, though they are not the only political prisoners in Cuba unjustly imprisoned for defending or peacefully exercising human rights. However, the Cuban Spring prisoners were condemned to the harshest sentences, an assault by the government’s entire repressive force on democratic opposition in an attempt to destroy the Proyecto Varela civil campaign, thus confirming it as a symbol of the popular liberation movement.

The majority of Proyecto Varela’s leaders remain in prison, as do journalists and activists from other movements. The release of political prisoners would be not only an act of humanity and justice, worthy in its own right, but also a sign that the ubiquitous state of intimidation is ending for all Cubans. There can be no just state, nor a road to genuine change, without the release of these prisoners. This should not come about because of the demands of the democratic opposition or of other countries, but because there will be no genuine movement towards rights if those who defend them are in prison.

Oswaldo José Payá Sardiñas is the founding member of the Christian Liberation Movement and the winner of the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought from the European Parliament in 2002.