

Le Monde: Castro opponents cast off differences in new push for democracy in Cuba

<http://www.worldcrunch.com/castro-opponents-cast-differences-new-push-democracy-cuba/3531>

Efforts by the government to reorganize the island's economy have sparked renewed opposition demands for serious democratic reforms. Willing for now to overlook their own differences, dissidents have joined forces under a new declaration.

By Paulo A. Paranagua

[LE MONDE](#)/Worldcrunch

HAVANA — For many years now, the famous Cuban dissident Oswaldo Paya, 59, has been living in a house in the Cerro neighborhood, a humble district in Havana. Walls in the parlor display a poster referring to the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, which Paya received in 2002; the portraits of his three children; and a picture of himself carrying the boxes containing the 25,000 signatures collected through the Varela Project. This project began in 1998 and asked for a referendum on democratic reforms in Cuba. Most of the 75 political dissidents who were convicted and sent to jail during the 2003 Black Spring were involved in the Varela Project, the most important dissident campaign to date.

On the sidewalk across the street, words painted on a wall say “on a besieged island, every dissident is a traitor.” Paya admits that his “children grew up surrounded by attacks and harassment,” but he is proud of their school results, something he attributes to their religious family education. “I met my wife in 1986, at the Cuban National Ecclesiastical Church (CNEC), which was a turning point for our Church,” adds this Christian Democrat dissident. Ten years ago he prayed for Felix Varela, leader of both the Cuban Church and of the Cuban independence movement, to bless him and his petition for a referendum.

More than a dozen years after the Varela Project was launched, Paya is once again campaigning, though within in a somewhat different context. Cuba is now being led by Fidel Castro's brother, Raul, who is looking to reorganize the country's economy. Pava has convinced the main political figures of the opposition to sign a common declaration demanding say in Raul Castro's policy decisions. The declaration was launched in mid-July.

A country is not a cake

“This is a way of reminding people that we are here, and that we are the real change,” explains Paya. “Raul Castro wants to make sure that the people who have been running the country for the past 52 years stay. Until now, the Castro brothers have run Cuba like a private farm and now they want to put it up for auction as if it were a cake to be shared. We don't want to privatize or to have foreign investments without people's approval.”

The declaration signed by the opponents asks for legislative changes so as to guarantee freedoms of speech, association, protest and movement – both inside the island and abroad. The document also demands access to the media and the Internet, free elections at every political level and the organization of a constitutional convention. As Paya says, “we are defending our free education and a free health-care systems as well as the housing system, but we demand universal human rights. Otherwise, the measures that the government adopted will increase social inequalities and thus increase the risk of a social confrontation.”

Many opponents are in favor of this peaceful transition, via a dialogue among all the Cuban people. Among those involved in the campaign are Martha Beatriz, a conservative, Cuesta Morua, a social-democratic left-winger, and former political prisoners such as Hector Maceda. Other dissidents include members of the Ladies in White group (wives or female relatives of jailed dissidents) such as Laura Pollan, and the political activist Guillermo Fariñas, well-known for his hunger strikes.

Interestingly, the opposition declaration makes no mention of the American embargo against Cuba, which many, but not all who signed the petition, would like the U.S. government to lift. The decision not to include the embargo issue was very much intention, according to Manuel Cuesta Morua. “The embargo is still a point of contention among us,” he says. “The opposition understands that the current circumstances demand that we leave old discrepancies aside.”

Cuesta Morua says there are also differences of opinion – among Cuban dissidents on the one hand, and foreign governments on the other – over the reforms being undertaken by Raul Castro. Some foreign governments are optimistic about the adjustments that are afoot. People in Cuba, in contrast, are much more jaded, insists Cuesta Morua.

“Cuban people know that the government is totally improvising so as to stay in power,” he says. “What Cuba really needs is change, not a simple economic reorganization.”

Read the [original article](#) in French

Photo - [flippinyank](#)