

NDN'S HISPANIC STRATEGIC CENTER PANEL. Miriam Leiva, Cuban dissident.

I am very grateful to Joe Garcia and his colleagues. For a Cuban it is very odd to be able to address an audience openly. In my case, I have the privilege to be considered a non persona by the Cuban authorities. Oscar Espinosa Chepe, my husband, asked me to say hello to our friend Congressman Delahunt. Oscar keeps on working very hard. I feel that many good friends are among you. Excuse my not mentioning you. Many of you might not agree with my views but I take the privilege of your democracy in an exercise towards ours. Today in Cuba you could not do the same. These are my personal opinions.

July 31st, 2006 is a historic landmark in Cuba. Fidel Castro provisionally ceding power to his brother Raul Castro was the turning point of almost 48 years of totalitarian regime. His snapshots on TV sealed the popular conviction that his era had ended, and that no one will be able to establish again an almighty personal government. Cubans have passed from sudden amazement and greater fear to expectation of changes, to hopelessness, and to desperation due to the economic, social and political crisis brought by Fidel Castro's suppression of human capability to express, work and interact according to capacity and industriousness.

Six months have passed and we find no changes other than the lack of endless speeches and marches. It is obvious that Raul Castro and his entourage have not moved the society. The military have been very successful in maintaining social control with the powerful political police and hundreds of thousands of informers surveying each and every person, but Cubans increasingly show signs of discontent. Daily life is very difficult in a country where wages and pensions are very low, prices very high, peso –Cuban money- is worthless, people survive from selling in the black market; corruption is commonplace, transportation is a practical joke; the so called accomplishments in education, health care and social security have crumbled; and young people see no future. It seems that as long as Fidel Castro is alive, those close to him will try to prove he is there for their sake. The hardliners seem to be fighting hard to prevent changes, yet even to preserve power they are essential, unless Raul Castro and the military would risk an uprising and the bloodshed most Cubans do not wish.

In this context, American attitude towards Cuba could encourage changes or contribute to delaying them. Confrontation helps those against changes, democracy and respect of human rights within the Cuban government. Confrontation is taken as an alibi for repression against any sign of disagreement, especially dissent, that is the dissidents. We are accused of being mercenaries. Cubans on the Island need waves of ideas and exchange of view with our brothers and sisters living abroad, mainly in the United States. They are very dear to us, and freely coming to Cuba with their knowledge and expertise they will contribute to the Cuba we forge.

Also Americans, who take for granted their democratic rights, just by expressing daily live experiences here could help make a great difference in the knowledge and aspirations of people who are denied the right to learn what happens beyond their micro world.

Likewise allowing Cubans and Cuban Americans to freely send money to the needy on the Island would save so many and would be very praised as a good will gesture from the American government to the Cuban people: effective, widespread assistance to most of the population.

45 years ago the embargo was enacted, yet Fidel Castro will pass away alleging he is in power, he will leave this world as any other sick elderly would. The embargo has suited his purposes of having a foreign enemy; it has served him as a pretext to justify all his wrongdoings domestically and inciting anti-American sentiments and insurgency the world around. Being a clever politician, while demanding an end to the embargo, he really enjoyed it.

But when trade with the United States stands in the fifth place of Cuba's commerce, what sense does it have to maintain the embargo? Lifting the embargo means leaving the fable hardliners empty-handed. It would mean opportunities for American enterprises, providing expertise and demonstrating how a person can progress according to self effort without political compromises. It would also enable friendly countries, such as the European Union members, to devise together with the United States more effective means to assist the Cuban people on the path to democracy.

It would help many Cubans, who have been pretending for years, to put an end to double standards, to come forward with their ideas of changes. There is a hidden opposition in Cuba that is longing to come to the surface, and the moment is ripe. We must not lose it. The Cuban people do not deserve to be let in misery, missing the advantages of the XXI Century.

A main issue is the release of all prisoners of conscience and political prisoners especially the 75 inhumanly sentenced up to 28 years in jail during the Dark Spring of 2003, of which 59 are languishing with very poor health, and 11 on conditional release due to health problems can be returned to prison any moment. Shameful and criminal was the death of Miguel Valdes Tamayo last January 10th in a hospital in Havana. Although he had American and Dutch visas, he never received permission to travel abroad. Psychological torture to their families and repression against Ladies in White must stop.

We Cubans know that the future is in our hands, but American lawmakers can help us very much in our path to democracy, reconstruction and reconciliation. I am certain that all Cubans in exile, Cuban Americans and Americans wish us all the best.

In Cuba, transition is underway in the minds and hearts of Cubans.

Once again I thank Joe Garcia for this opportunity and his solidarity.

Thank you.

Havana, February 7th, 2007