

THE CUBAN EMBARGO AND HUMAN RIGHTS: APPRAISAL AND RECOMMENDATIONS

ARMANDO PEREZ ROURA^{*}

Good afternoon! I apologize for presenting in Spanish. My English is such that I prefer to present in Spanish so that the meaning of my words will not be lost today. What has happened in Cuba is something that has not happened anywhere else. Cuba was once a prosperous country, and Cubans in Cuba would not leave or travel elsewhere because everything they wanted was there. All of this came tumbling down. When the Communist system came to be instituted and said that it was going to destroy everything that there was, people thought that this was an exaggeration. But, from that vital, dynamic and prosperous republic there is today only a shadow of what there was before.

Cubans, like so many people, feel in terms of freedom and democracy. And the persecution of the government that is still in place today against those that have disagreed with it along the years has been truly terrible. Hundreds of people were killed in firing squads. Thousands have gone through its jails. It has been a very profound persecution.

This government allowed itself to become a base for Communism in the region. The reason behind the embargo is the nationalizations, the takings of the properties both of foreigners and of Cubans on the island. Cuba had in matters of sugar preferential treatment, and an agreement with the United States that the U.S. would purchase three million tons of sugar at a preferential price slightly above market price. The first thing that Fidel Castro and his comrades did was to break that contract.

Cubans at that point didn't even need visas to come to the U.S. They could come with just a passport. And that all changed once the

^{*} Director, Radio Mambí, Miami, Florida. Mr. Perez-Roura's presentation was translated into English by Ms. Cristina Maldonado.

regime sought a strategy of confrontation. It effectively led to Cuba's isolation, which morphed into Cuba's becoming a base for Soviet missiles, resulting in the Cuban missile crisis.

Kennedy dealt directly with Khrushchev, and he cut Fidel Castro completely out, leaving him a simple servant of the Soviets. Part of the finalization of that agreement was that Cubans outside Cuba would not be allowed to use either the U.S. or any other country as a base from which to fight for the liberation of their country. That put into place a guarantee that the Castro government would stay in place for a long time.

Meanwhile, the firing squads continued, as did the systematic torture of people who opposed the government in really inhuman jail conditions has continued for these almost 50 years. The Cuban people have not been a true consideration for the UN, for the OAS, or for the U.S. government.

Nobody is watching to make sure that the articles of the Declaration of Human Rights are complied with in Cuba. International politics has turned its back on our people. Abuses that occur around the world either in Asia or Africa are loudly decried. Whenever you look for an example of a dictatorship in Latin America, you always come to Pinochet and Chile. In our case, no one has turned and taken this into consideration.

Our success has been to keep alive the idea of freedom, which is well deserved and will someday come, no one knows exactly when or whether there will be allies to support its coming sooner. But at that point there will be justice applied in a correct form and judgment for those who have blood on their hands.

QUESTION AND ANSWERS

Audience: What is your opinion about the events that have happened with the European Union and human rights, so far?

Response: Regarding the European Union question. There is a dominant position within the European Union that leans towards the Cuban government in this particular case, even though there are

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people who are actively supporting the human rights position. However, Castro refuses to listen and negotiate, and while he is still in control – he has had to leave power but he is essentially still in charge --, there will not be any advances on human rights in Cuba. His brother, who is now in charge, is really as much of a criminal as he is. I heard, personally, in 1959, Raúl Castro say that he was an incredible fan of his brother's, and the truth is that Raúl has been faithful all these years. In the case of General Ochoa, he was a Cuban general who fought on behalf of the Cuban government and military in several proxy wars, and did everything that the government told him to do and then he was accused of being a drug smuggler and a contrabandist. He had great support and credibility within the military and in the 1980s he was executed by firing squad, and Raúl Castro supported this decision.

Audience: Do Cubans hate Fidel and Raúl or the United States more?

Response: Cubans have never hated the United States. They are smart enough to know that it's a tough country to deal with. It's a big country that has interests, and it acts to defend those interests in a way that is convenient to those interests. Fidel Castro hates everyone. We only ask for justice – courts, with guarantees and due process and some action to be taken to address unpunished crimes. History will judge countries that were incapable of supporting that particular initiative.

As to the question whether Cubans would be willing to intervene and try to get rid of their own government and put themselves in a situation where their sovereignty might be sold to the U.S.: No. Cubans love their liberty too much. If you go far back in Cuban history, in 1868, the Cuban War for Independence, which lasted for ten years and ended with the Saint John pact, there were great men and great ideologues of the nation at that point who gave historic examples, who had fortunes and prestige, and they gave it all up. However, they were never well used. Many of them died. Martí died in battle, so did Antonio Maceo. They never played a political role in the actual administration of the country. What you see now is Cubans who come to the U.S. without a cent in their pockets. They

come on rafts, they come in boats, illegally, and as soon as they get here they begin to study and to work and to succeed. There is nothing given to us – working is how we’ve made a path. What that translates into is that Cubans are not a group that will automatically speak ill of the U.S. once they are here. It’s a matter of manners – if you have shelter in somebody’s home, then you have to respect the fact that the country has opened its doors and its opportunities to us and Cubans have had incredible success in politics and business.

Audience: Just recently, Mexico has signed a pact with the Cuban government to return anyone they find who is trying to illegally migrate, either to Mexico or to the U.S. Do you consider this a support to the Cuban government or to the Cuban people and what do you think is going to be the impact?

Response: I can’t say something different here than what I have said on the radio. This is something that I have criticized openly, especially in the situation that Mexicans face, where here you have Mexican nationals protesting when the country undertakes to search them out and deport them. We feel it’s an unfair situation for that to be done to the Cubans. A country whose people are suffering, like Mexicans suffer when they cross the border, should have some understanding of what that implies, and there is no reason for them to be signing this pact in order to exclude people who are simply trying to be free.

Audience: What is your opinion of the work of the Carter Center?

Response: My opinion of the politics of former President Jimmy Carter is about the worst that you can have. From the beginning of his presidency, since the situation that emerged in Nicaragua, I feel that he consorted with the Sandino Communists. It’s the same as when he visited Cuba and upheld that Fidel Castro had no weapons of mass destruction. Castro has been able to gain things well from his particular post. I feel Jimmy Carter has not been at the level of what is required of a president of this country.

Audience: What do you think of the Varela Project? [Question referred to a Cuban dissident group initiative called the Varela Project.]

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Response: We have a vertical line against dealing with the Castro government. Therefore, we don't believe in Payá Sardiñas, who directs the Varela Project. Felix Varela was a great patriot and Cuban who showed, in his time, Cubans how to think, and they have applied his name to this project. This group has always promoted an arrangement with the government. We don't believe in any understandings with Communists, because they will sit and talk to you and then do whatever they want. I had at one point a conversation in Taiwan with Madame Chiang Kai-Chek, and it was about how the nationalist Chinese had been betrayed by Mao Tse Tung's people. Time has demonstrated that these agreements would not be honored, and therefore they swore never to sit down and work on any agreement with the on-continent Communists, because while they were talking, the Communists advanced. History has proven that they were right, that you just cannot talk with Communists. Some agreements have been reached, like for example in the case of North Korea, but you must watch them and still make sure that they actually happen. There were agreements with Clinton and Allbright and North Korea, but those were never complied with, they were still making nuclear weapons— what do they want them for? To use them. Agreements need other countries to watch them well. In the case of the U.S. and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, there were hundred of agreements, and there is a thick file of non-compliance.

Audience: Armando, thank you for being with us. I have a question about family separation, which is a topic that touches us all. In the 1990s, in the special period, it's come up that real contact and family support has done wonders for the goal of national reconciliation, especially in instances where there have been very long years and decades of prolonged physical separation. What is your opinion on the travel restrictions and whether this is an aspect of the embargo that should be reformed?

Response: Sincerely, I don't believe so. In the 1980s, the community trips were opened up and many Cubans who had not been back went and they took many things with them and proved that they had gotten ahead in the United States and all of this really accomplished nothing. The regime acts in its own interest. The

Cuban government, for example, charges \$150 for a permit. You add all of this up, then you factor in what you are allowed to take. It's like when you send money, it functions like a club. If you send \$100, the agency keeps 25% and then changes the balance into Cuba's second currency, *chavitos*, which are used by Cuban nationals. You have a situation here where Fidel Castro stole the republic, where he's flattened human rights consistently. Who is Fidel Castro to be the one to say that I can't go in and out of the country? From that perspective, how can you say that someone needs to go to Cuba more than once every three years, and there are lots of Cubans from here who have gone to pick up girls to have fun with, and a government that is supporting the prostitution of Cuban women is one that breaks with all ethics and morality. Cubans have been burned a lot and these wounds are going to deepen. To reach and achieve freedom at the expense of prostitution and corrupt ethics is too high a price to pay.