

The Discreet Terror of Fidel Castro

by *Václav Havel*

This spring marks the third anniversary of the wave of repression in which Fidel Castro's regime arrested and handed down long sentences to 75 leading Cuban dissidents. Soon afterwards, many friends and I formed the International Committee for Democracy in Cuba.

The bravery of those who found their social conscience, overcame fear, and stood up to communist dictatorship remains fresh in my memory. It reminds me of the jingle of keys that rang out on Prague's Wenceslas Square -- and later around the rest of what was then Czechoslovakia -- in the autumn of 1989.

This is why I rang keys during the conference calling for democracy in Cuba that our committee held in Prague three years ago. I wanted to draw the international community's attention to the human-rights situation in Cuba, to support that country's opposition, and to encourage all pro-democratic forces. The European Union then introduced diplomatic sanctions, albeit mostly symbolic, against Castro's regime.

Soon after, however, a contrary position came to the fore. The EU opened a dialogue with the Cuban regime, sanctions were conditionally suspended, and it was even made clear to dissidents that they were not welcome at the embassies of several democratic countries. Cowardly compromise and political alibis -- as so often in history -- defeated a principled position. In return, the Cuban regime made a sham gesture by releasing a small number of the prisoners of conscience -- mostly those who were tortured and seriously ill -- who the regime most feared would die in its notorious prisons.

Those of us who live in Europe's new post-communist democracies experienced similar political deals when we lived behind the former Iron Curtain. We are also extremely familiar with the argument that European policies have not led to any mass arrests in Cuba. But democracy has shown weakness and the Cuban regime has in turn adapted its tactics.

Respected organizations like Reporters without Borders and Amnesty International have collected ample evidence of violence and intimidation against freethinking Cubans, who can expect a different kind of ring than that from jangling keys. Their cases often do not end in courts but in hospitals. Groups of "fighters for the revolution" -- in reality, the Cuban secret police -- brutally attack their political opponents and accuse them of absurd crimes in an effort to intimidate them or to force them to emigrate. On the island, such planned harassments are called "actos de repudio" -- "acts of rejection."

Political violence that creates the impression of mere street crime is never easy to prove, unlike jail terms of several years, and therefore it does not receive due attention from the world. However, thousands of former political prisoners in central and eastern Europe can attest to the fact that a kick from a secret policeman on the street hurts just as much as a kick from a warden behind prison gates.

The powerlessness of the victim of state-organized street fights and threats against his family is experienced in the same way as the powerlessness of somebody harassed during a state security investigation. Many European politicians who have sought to see the situation on the ground have been barred in recent years.

Some Europeans apparently regard Cuba as a faraway country whose fate they need take no interest in, because they have problems of their own. But what Cubans are enduring today is part of our own European history. Who better than Europeans, who brought communism to life, exported it to the world, and then paid dearly for it over many decades, know better about the torments inflicted upon the Cuban people?

Humanity will pay the price for communism until such a time as we learn to stand up to it with all political responsibility and decisiveness. We have many opportunities to do so in Europe and Cuba. And it is no surprise that the new member countries of the EU have brought to Europe fresh historical experience, and with it far less understanding for and tolerance of concession and compromise.

Representatives of the EU's member states will meet in Brussels in mid-June to review a common policy towards Cuba. European diplomats should weigh up the consequences of accommodating Castro's regime. They should show that they will neither ignore his practices nor neglect the suffering of Cuban prisoners of conscience. We must never forget the seemingly anonymous victims of Castro's "acts of rejection."

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Members of the International Committee for Democracy in Cuba

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