

The Reality of “Stable Conflicts”: the European Parliament Perspective

Cecilia Malmström

In the shadow of the atrocities in Beslan, the daily violence and terror in Iraq and the ethnic cleansing in Darfur, it is easy to forget about more ongoing, so-called “stable” conflicts. As we speak now, some 400 human right activists and dissidents are still in prison in Cuba, condemned to long sentences. Their crimes have been to peacefully argue for a democratic Cuba. Reporters Sans Frontiers have claimed that Cuba is now the world’s biggest prison for journalists. A few of them have recently been released for health reasons, but the majority are still there, wondering if they will ever see the blue sky again. We must not let them rot.

The European Parliament has a long history of monitoring Cuba. Since 1987 there has been no less than 22 urgent resolutions condemning the regime and calling for the release of political prisoners. Many individuals are also very closely engaged in promoting democracy and human rights in Cuba. In the last few years, activities have increased as we have noticed the growing internal opposition on the island, more organized than ever before.

My political group, the liberals in the European Parliament, presented an initiative to a small seminar in July 2002 concerned with the democratization process in Cuba. Unfortunately we failed to obtain exit visas for the participants from Cuba (friends who are now in prison) to Brussels. Their faxed messages were however read out to the present parliamentarians and journalists. The Cuban Embassy became outraged by this very modest initiative, accusing it of being an insult to the Cuban people.

Together with committed colleagues such as Mr Salafranca, we managed to convince the whole Parliament to present the prestigious Sakharov Prize to Mr Oswaldo Paya and his Varela Project in December 2002. The Sakharov Prize — named after the great Alexander Sakharov — is a yearly prize given to an individual or an organization that strives for freedom of speech, the defence of human rights and against intolerance, fanaticism and hatred. It has formerly been awarded to prominent personalities such as Nelson Mandela, Aung San Suu Kyi, Leyla Zana, Taslima Nasreen, Alexander Dubzec and Xanana Gusmao. And now Oswaldo Paya has added his name to this hall of fame.

The prize was given to Mr Paya personally but also in the name of all courageous people in Cuba. His referendum initiative impressed many of us and we thought he was a worthy winner of the prize. Through this award, we managed to place a well-needed focus on the events on the island. Until the very start of the ceremony it was unclear whether Castro would let Paya out or not, but finally he came and could collect his prize.

I met Oswaldo Paya in Havana in 2001, just before he began to collect the signatures for the Varela Project, and I was very impressed by his courage and determination. In a very short time he had managed to collect almost 12000 signatures calling for a referendum on democratic reform in Cuba. I thought that this initiative was a democratic inspiration, something that really needed support.

MALMSTROM THE REALITY OF "STABLE CONFLICTS": THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT PERSPECTIVE The big crack down on Cuban dissidents came only a few months after the Sakharov ceremony. Around 80 dissidents and human rights activists were arrested and sent to jail. It is clear that Fidel Castro is now feeling particularly threatened. Maybe the international fame of Mr Paya, reinforced by his nomination for the Nobel Prize, protected him a little. He and his family are constantly harassed and humiliated — but he can still enjoy freedom. When the president of the European Parliament, Mr Pat Cox, invited Mr Paya to Brussels one year after to come and report on the developments in Havana, he was not allowed to leave the country. We will encourage the new President of the European Parliament to renew this invitation.

I think it is fair to say that the activities of the Parliament have also had an impact on the commission which has set up an office in Havana. The European Union member states have had a clear common position on Cuba for the last year. Cuba is the only country in the region not taking part in the Cotonou agreement, a favourable trade and co-operation system between the EU and the Latin American countries. As Castro has refused to make any concessions on human rights, necessary in order to join the agreement, negotiations have been frozen for some time. However there are now signs that the new Spanish government want a more pragmatic opening towards Cuba. This must not happen.

So what can we do for our Cuban friends? We cannot sit and wait for nature to have it's way and for Castro to die. We must do all that we can in order to prepare for a peaceful transition of the Cuban society to democracy. Here are a few points for future common European strategy:

1. 1. The pressure on the Cuban regime must continue. Resolutions and state-ments by the European council, the European Parliament and national parliaments are useful and they are also a source of hope for the prisoners and their families. We must keep calling for the release of all political prisoners. Co-ordinated activities are important and we must seek to be clear and consistent, independent of which country leads the European Council.
2. 2. As Oswaldo Paya was denied the possibility of coming to the EuropeanParliament, we should explore the possibilities to send a fact-finding
1. 3. By no means should the EU give bilateral aid to the Castro regime. Cubashould not at this moment be accepted into the Cotonou agreement.
2. 4. Targeted aid should be reinforced — Europe should support the differ-ent initiatives of the opposition: the Varela project, but also the independent libraries, la mesa de reflection (a joint initiative), independent journalists and other initiatives of individuals or groups in order to strengthen civil society and prepare for the transition. In this regard it is important to evaluate the former transition aid that the EU has given to South America and Eastern Europe in order to find the best methods and mechanisms.
3. 5. The EU should keep its presence in Cuba and European embassiesshould serve as meeting places for the opposition. For instance, the Swedish Ambassador let activists meet at the Embassy. The national days-initiatives are important and must be followed by many more Embassies.
4. 6. We should increase the pressure on our American friends to lift theembargo. It has not helped the situation and it only serves as an alibi for the regime to continue its oppression. The strengthening of the American embargo is very unfortunate. A vast majority of the European Parliament is clearly against the embargo.
5. 7. We should try to find common co-ordinated diplomatic initiativesbetween Europe, Latin America and the US. The resolution on Cuba at the last UN HR session in Geneva was a very important breakthrough in this regard.

Ultimately it is only the Cuban people who can change their own future, However the EU and the rest of the world can help and support. We have many states that have gone through the painful and difficult transition process from dictatorship to democracy and there are plenty of good examples to follow. Thousands and thousands of Cubans dream of a better future without Castro and do not want to wait until he dies. They have already waited for 45 long

and difficult years. Like everybody else, the Cuban people have the right to freedom, democracy and a state of law and we have a moral obligation to help them achieve this.