

# The Reciprocal Duty of Cuba and Latin America

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Cuba has a duty to Latin America as Latin America has a duty to Cuba. On 24 February, 1996 a group of young people from different countries and different political organizations met in Mexico City to set up what we called at that time the Latin American Committee for Solidarity with Democracy in Cuba. It was a project by the new generation of worldwide citizens to support, help and co-operate with Cuban dissidents on the island. At that time the Concilio Cubano was being prepared, a national agreement which would lead to a national meeting of the non-violent opposition in Cuba. A scandalous series of events by the regime obviously prevented the organization of this meeting at all costs. I remember very well the day when we, young leaders from different Latin American regions, established the Latin American Committee for Solidarity with Democracy in Cuba. After the ceremony, in the midst of confusion and uncertainty, we learnt the news of the brutal murder of our companion Mario de la Peña, who together with other three volunteers was shot down in a plane whilst rescuing those deserting the oppression via the Straits of Florida. Our companions inspired us in our task to strengthen the Latin American solidarity movement with those in Cuba who fight for their freedom.

Several days after the horrifying incident in which we lost our companions we called a meeting of student and civil society leaders and organized a non-violent demonstration in front of the Cuban Embassy to protest against the committed crime of hate and injustice. For some decades the Cuban Embassy in Mexico had not faced moral and historic protests taking a peaceful form organized by students. As if we had stayed in Havana itself, the Cuban security agents from the diplomatic representation forgot that they were in a foreign country and, in our own land, they insulted, cursed and hit the demonstrating crowd causing injuries to several participants. After these events, a case was filed against the Cuban officials and they were brought to court for the crimes of committing injury and criminal conspiracy, with a consequent public punishment since the national and international press was informed of their brutal response to a free and peaceful demonstration. Unfortunately, at that time, Mexico was governed by a regime that took inspiration in Castrism and supported the revolution and therefore they withdrew the case prematurely. This meant that the Cuban government did not draw any conclusions from the acts of repression in foreign land and its scandalous international behaviour. However, the moral punishment of the public opinion was fatal.

I know that what we experienced in the brief but important events I have described here cannot be compared at all to the violence we are aware of and hear of carried out every day by the Cuban Government against our companions on the island. Those without a voice, those that frequently do not have the opportunity to organize a simple press conference or to inform others about what is happening. However, those that have to write, discuss, agree and pray in secrecy live their freedom behind the bars of prison or behind the bars of the whole island despite the fear spread by those with absolute power.

We have learnt many lessons after several years of solidarity and shared work concerning Cuba and additionally from experiences in various Latin American countries. First of all, the biggest fear is not felt by the non-violent dissidents but by the Cuban Government which feels real fear when facing unpredictable situations such as non-violent demonstrations. The regime loses its head and reacts in a completely predictable way when faced with moral power opposing and resisting in a peaceful way. It is unable to act in any other way than to hurl out its usual hate and violence and thus provide evidence of its injustices. The mentioned barbarism convinced even the

most romantic defenders of the misleading revolution that this government does not have any argument for continuing to deceive international public opinion. It is even unbearable for some of those thinkers of the generation of intellectuals and politicians who for more than four decades tirelessly celebrated, legitimated and defended the dictator. Today they start to turn away from him as even forty five years later we are still witnessing brutality and insanity. They are now having to gather, the will and opinion to support freedom and human rights by events inspired by non-violence.

The actions carried out by Latin Americans are instrumental in the fate of the regime. And therefore Latin America has been a fertile territory for the Cuban Government to sow the seeds of violent revolutions that support Castrism via the political platforms of revolutionary gangs which are based on communist ideology, which worked via organizations such as the Departamento América (Cuba's America Department). In the dispute between the US and the island, Latin America had supported, sometimes blindly, the so called brave rebels against the expansive, perverse and dominant empire, as if David against Goliath, and in the process has hidden and shielded the abuse and brutality committed against the Cuban nation. And thus we were made to forget about the embargo of Castro against the Cubans that has led to what is known today as the internal Cuban exile, a product of the isolation of the nation and its identity from the world and a product of the arbitrary suppression of the basic guarantees that should be provided to all our Cuban companions as well as any other person. Acts of solidarity that work towards democracy, freedom and human rights and the work of thousands of non-violent opponents on the island organized in Latin American countries undoubtedly affect deeply one of the pillars supporting the Castro regime in the totalitarian years.

Several times we have talked about the power of acts of solidarity carried out by politicians and legislators to support the Cuban cause. However, social mobilization to support the Cuban opposition on the island and to enhance public opinion in favour of freedom has the same impact: it is fatal for the Castro regime. There is no doubt that Latin American public opinion has been manipulated many times by the agents of the regime, and Castro himself, in order to undermine Latin American representatives and prevent them from adopting firm positions condemning the communist barbarism at international meetings and events. This involves intelligent, astute strategies using the so called principles of sovereignty, the self-determination of nations, and economic embargo. Here I would like to quote Oswaldo Payá, who in the first press conference organized by a group of Mexicans (René Bolio, José Luis Garza, Fernanda Rivera, Paya and myself) carried out in the Meliá Cohiba Hotel, Havana, responded to a question by one journalist about his opinion of the US economic embargo in the following way: "It could be that I do not agree with it but my life is not long enough to talk about the issues I must talk about: political prisoners, repression, our families, our plan of government and the future of Cuba. Let me talk about these issues please."

In this case as well as in others, civil society has an essential role. Students, leaders of civic associations, foundations, thinkers, intellectuals, trade unions and businessmen have all been involved in initiatives established by national groups in coordination and close co-operation with the International Committee for Democracy in Cuba. Furthermore, activities such as the adoption of political prisoners, the organization of non-violent civic actions in Embassies and Consulates, the influencing of Latin American press and the organizing of conferences in their countries as well as on the island are all essential. As Gutenberg Martínez said, in all democracies we should talk, discuss and communicate, especially with the defenders of freedom. A way forward would be to open gradually these small niches of freedom by organizing press conferences, as has been done by organizations, leaders, members of parliaments and many Europeans as well as Latin Americans. Nevertheless, we should not underestimate the importance of civic organizations for this strategy. All these strategic acts curb and make inoperative those traditional forms of suppression carried out by the regime.

To conclude I would like to highlight the fact that the international political strategy of solidarity with Cuba based on the stoic waiting for the death of the dictator is futile. I would like to repeat the basic concept offered by Václav Havel, in which he said that we have to care for the future, that the defeat of the dictatorship cannot be an end in itself, but must rather be seen as merely a means to achieve an end. Today there is a non-violent opposition movement on the island which has been able to overcome fear to an extent like never before, and whose presence is felt in all Cuban provinces. However there is no doubt that what is lacking is the consolidation of a convincing movement of international and especially Latin American solidarity to prevent opponents or their families being put in prison, tortured or ill-treated, to prevent their voices being silenced and to prevent the

worse, unknown work of the regime against such opponents.

The Latin American fight shall be based on love for our companions that today search for the opportunity to rebuild the Cuban nation. The best moment to do this is now. The answers concerning the future of Cuba do not lie in the death of the dictator and to him we shall say today, with a profound feeling of solidarity with Cuba as if it was our second native country, that his natural death is something he cannot avoid yet it is also something we do not care about so much since we care mainly about our brothers and sisters in Cuba. We only hope that when the day comes, Latin America will be united concerning the hope of the Cuban nation for full reconstruction and that it will be satisfied that it has fulfilled its duty in being the voice of those without voice, supporting the persecuted, sustaining the prisoners and offering moral solidarity to their families. And we will do so with a deep conviction that hate is not and cannot be the motto of any cause, particularly not considering the international consensus that love is the basis of everything.