
Exchange

THE CZECH PAST
AND THE CUBAN FUTURE

Oswaldo Payá/Václav Havel

Oswaldo Payá is founder of the Varela Project, a Cuban prodemocracy movement, and the 2002 recipient of the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. His letter was translated from the Spanish by Fernando Ruiz. Václav Havel is former president of Czechoslovakia and later the Czech Republic, prior to which he was a prominent dissident in communist Czechoslovakia. David Heyrovsky translated his letter from the Czech.

From Oswaldo Payá to Václav Havel
(Havana, 31 October 2003)

Dear Friend,

It is with great emotion that I remember those short days spent in Prague when I received the Sakharov Award—the meeting we had—and our conversation about Cuba. At the time, according to what people told me, you were very concerned because the process of electing the new Czech president had been delayed. Among the many contrasts with my past experience I then witnessed, this was another: a president worried that he could not abandon his post, since there was as yet no agreement among those charged with electing his successor. In my country, by contrast, as in all countries that have been dominated by communism, the term of such a post appears to be lifelong, and “socialist democracy” always guarantees unanimous reelection.

As you know, real democracy has “complications,” such as free elections and a choice among various candidates, that real socialism does away with. In Cuba, there are no such problems. The Cuban electoral law allows only one candidate per assembly seat, and the candidates are previously proposed by candidacy commissions that are formed by “organizations of the masses.” But what is most striking is that voters can only vote yes; a no vote does not count. In the end, the affirmative votes

are totaled up, and as you know, the solo candidates are always “elected.” In turn, they always elect the same person [Fidel Castro] to the presidency of the Council of State. I believe that in North Korea, just as in Albania previously, there is a similar system, much less complicated than the one that the Czechs and Slovaks adopted after November 1989.

I have not forgotten either the Czech friends who welcomed me, including Miloslav Cardinal Vlk and Bishop Václav Malý. During the communist era, both of those men suffered discrimination because they were not sympathetic to the regime. Afterward, Bishop Malý, who was your partner during the shining time of Charter 77, came to visit Cuba. He brought support to the relatives of the “Prisoners of Cuba’s Spring,” jailed since March of this year. Here he was able to relive his time as a priest discriminated against for expressing his solidarity with the persecuted.

During my short stay in Prague, I told my friends there that the experience was like traveling in a time machine. It was like that for me because I still live in an environment formed by the culture of fear that the communist regime generates throughout society, whereas in Prague I encountered Czechs and Slovaks who had suffered this same experience and are now free. It was like traveling to the future and finding proof that liberation is possible. I do not mean to say that we wish to copy the Czech model of transition, but its faith and determination are an inspiration for us.

My friend Bishop Malý time-traveled in the opposite direction, toward the past, from liberty to a world of totalitarianism and slavery. He was not here as a tourist. He did not come with the odious desire of feeling superior here, where Cubans are discriminated against and humiliated in their own land and foreigners come to enjoy privilege. He did not come to have fun or to abuse a disadvantaged people who live under a regime that respects none of their rights.

We always thought that the European peoples who had been subjected to communism, including the Russians, would understand our situation and, once liberated, would start movements of solidarity with Cuba. Sadly, however, many East Europeans seem to have suffered memory loss or to have plunged so rapidly into the freedom of the market that they have no time for their outcast Cuban brothers and sisters, who share a plight that was once the East Europeans’ own. That is why I value Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians, Poles, and others with sound memories and generous hearts who have extended their solidarity to us over the years.

No one could better understand and interpret our reality than you, President Havel, because you lived it. You greatly help Europe and the rest of the world to grasp the reality of Cuba. I am grateful for the open letter that you, along with Poland’s former president Lech Wałęsa and Hungary’s former president Árpád Göncz, published on September 19,

demanding the liberation of our brothers, the “Prisoners of Cuba’s Spring,” and supporting the Varela Project’s civic campaign.* Your “Cuban Democratic Fund” initiative is very positive and will be very useful to the Cuban people during the period of transition. But we shall reach that stage through our continuing peaceful civic movement, which has already begun. It is a movement made up of thousands of Cubans struggling on in spite of discrimination, persecution, poverty, the harassment of their families, and a lack of resources with which to continue their peaceful work. It is a movement that needs help now, but prejudice and the regime’s propaganda make initiatives in support of it few and far between. Nonetheless, we will continue this fight using our principal resources: our faith, our love for our people, and our determination to achieve liberation.

Let us go back to the subject of “transition.” In the Latin American context, this term can be interpreted as the path toward models that have achieved nothing for some peoples, resulting only in an increase in poverty for the majority, corruption, and nagging doubts about the legitimacy of formal democracy. That is not our goal. The Cuban regime’s propaganda and its systematic disinformation have adjusted themselves since the fall of the myth of the invincible Soviet empire. The aim now is to scare the Cuban people. This has been done with some efficiency. The population has been frightened with an image of the chaos and misery that have supposedly resulted from the transitions in the European countries once dominated by communism. (Note that there has never been a communist Europe, just as there is not a communist Cuba.) I believe that this fraud may have confused many people.

Allow me to explain: Communism is an exclusionary regime. This is not theory. It is the living experience of these regimes from the moment of their inception to their demise. When communism comes to an end, it leaves a dispossessed majority without property, money, resources, labor unions, parties, or social organizations capable of protecting anyone. It leaves behind a corrupt legal system that negates the basic principles of the rule of law, it kills off the work ethic, and it institutionalizes corruption, turning the economy into a hybrid of a collectivist concentration camp and savage capitalism. This is “savage communism.” To describe it fully would take too long, but let us note that in the European countries where communism once held sway, it has left behind a few big capitalists who, until just the day before, had been officeholders or otherwise very powerful figures within the communist regime. These “new rich” had previously been the “only rich,” as under communism there can be only one of everything: one party, one doctrine, one opinion, one union, and one governing individual. In Cuba, where people are told “Socialism or death,” these powerful regime figures will also become the “only” capi-

*For more on the Varela Project, see the excerpts from its petition to the Cuban government on pp. 186–87 of the July 2002 issue of the *Journal of Democracy*.

talists, the future business class. Part of the conversation about transition should revolve around the legacy of cultural and human genocide perpetrated by the Soviet empire. It scarred entire societies, which are still suffering its consequences and paying with the pain and blood of whole peoples and nations. This is not widely discussed nor a preferred topic of conversation, since the dictatorship of lies still holds sway in many places.

When communism comes to an end, it leaves a dispossessed majority without property, money, resources, labor unions, parties, or social organizations capable of protecting anyone.

The fraud lies in presenting the destructive and abhorrent fruit of communism and its consequences as evils of the nascent democracies. It is like telling a recently liberated slave, "Look at what freedom has done to you! It would have been better to have remained as you once were."

It will be clear to you that my interpretation of the transition in the part of Europe once dominated by communism is far from the image portrayed by the regime's official propaganda. But I also believe there is a danger that, as communism ends, some may say to the mass of former slaves, "The market economy is here, you too can be an entrepreneur."

Here, if I may return to the topic of Cuba, is a ready-made irony, for most Cubans have neither money, property, resources, nor training. We have nothing. The businesspeople of the future can only be the rich individuals of the present. Only they have or can have anything now. Under a so-called market economy, they would remain in charge and the majority would remain powerless. By this I mean to say that change in Cuba cannot become a prolongation of the disadvantages of the majority, because a new society cannot be built on the basis of these disadvantages. And in a totalitarian state, the majority of the population is totally disadvantaged. So, although we do not reject the concept of transition, we remember that the process which Cubans have initiated is one of liberation. In this we are radicals. We are radically peaceful because we do not accept violence as a means of achieving change, because we are motivated not by hate but rather by love for our Cuban brothers. The phase of Cuban history now coming to an end has been very complex in human terms, and another of the bitter fruits of this regime would be to continue pitting Cubans against one another over what has happened up to now. We would thus continue submitting ourselves to the hate and injustice that totalitarianism has sown. Forgiveness and reconciliation are vital in this process of liberation, and that is why peaceful struggle is not only our method but our aim. We want to put violence, hatred, and insults behind us once and for all. We

believe this to be possible because most Cubans harbor the same feelings that we have. Even those who are part of the power structure are trapped by a system that does not respect their own rights, although it grants them privilege.

We must prepare—and are preparing—the transition for Cuba. This will be a transition toward democracy, social justice, development, and peace.

I keep thinking about today's Czech Republic. You have achieved change and liberation. You have done it and, most importantly, done it on your own terms. We will achieve this in Cuba. We are already doing it, among Cubans, among everyone, those of us who live on the inside, and those who live in exile and are an inseparable part of our nation.

The Varela Project is already a citizens' movement for peaceful change. It goes forward thanks to the courage of those who take the step of personal liberation and overcome fear. But it is also a step toward solidarity with their own people, since they demand respect for the rights of all. Therein lies the fundamental change that we seek—the participation of citizens in the political, economic, and cultural life of the country as free people. This is the first step in the Varela Project, but it is not the only one. We must prepare—and are preparing—the transition for Cuba. This will be a transition toward democracy, social justice, development, and peace. The human person, family, and community will be most important, above and beyond any general model of how society ought to be organized.

Poverty and disparities in Cuba are the result of the dearth of rights. Given this situation, the transition process will liberate the potential of Cubans for creative work. Economic freedom means the right to operate business enterprises and to enter freely into contracts. Yet as I have tried to explain, this right cannot be fully exercised without a democratization of the economy, which will open up opportunities and possibilities for all. During this phase, we do not intend to privatize basic health care and educational services. We want to make them more efficient. Citizens should receive these services as a right, not as a concession from those in power, who demand unconditional political support in exchange. What they do not tell us is that those services are supported by the work and contributions of the citizens themselves.

I believe there is a consensus in Cuba that the transition must not only throw open the doors of economic freedom to the now-excluded majority, but also be able to maintain and transform free social services into highly efficient systems. This is a great challenge for our society, but we are sure that Cubans, as free men and women, will make the transition and build a future where democracy, social justice, and the free exercise of rights are a reality.

Cubans never chose to live under this regime that denies their rights. The “Prisoners of Cuba’s Spring” are currently serving jail terms of up to 26 years for peacefully defending the rights of all Cubans. Most of those imprisoned belong to the Varela Project’s citizens’ committees. Others are independent journalists and leaders of civic associations. They are jailed in cages 1.6 meters wide and 3 meters long, many with boarded doors, full of insects and rats, and they must endure concentration-camp rations, the restriction of visits to no more than once every three months, and frequent bouts of humiliating treatment. Nevertheless, the regime has been unable to break their spirits, and they continue to illuminate us with their words of encouragement from prison. We hope that people around the world will speak out for their liberation. These “Prisoners of Cuba’s Spring” bear witness to the “power of the powerless.”

I know that you understand very well the times of danger and hope through which we Cubans are now living. The Cuban people are in need of solidarity—solidarity with the civic campaign for peaceful change that has expressed itself in the Varela Project and that continues to spread in the midst of repression, which is no longer able to paralyze us.

My dear friend Václav, I would like you to transmit to the Czech people our greetings of solidarity and our gratitude to all those who support our peaceful fight with their voices and their work.

Thank you for the support you have given to me by nominating me for the Nobel Peace Prize. Many Cubans welcomed it as a show of support for the cause of Cuba’s freedom, which is also the cause of peace.

Receive my fraternal embrace,

Oswaldo José Payá Sardiñas

From Václav Havel to Oswaldo Payá
(Prague, 17 November 2003)

Dear Friend,

I was delighted to read your letter and to find in it some observations that hit very close to home.

These days, even I am wandering through a “time machine,” as you put it in your letter. But I have the indisputable advantage of doing so only in my memory and in my thoughts. Your letter actually arrived just before the anniversary of November 17—the day on which Czechs and Slovaks commemorate the beginning of the overthrow of the communist totalitarian regime. This occasion always inspires me to a deeper

reflection on the experiences of those days and a contemplation of what turned out well—and what did not.

A Czech journalist recently asked me why I am so particularly interested in Cuba rather than, for example, North Korea. I answered that I felt a deeper connection with Cuba. I have had the opportunity to meet and talk with you and other opposition activists, and my views are well known in Cuba, because much of my work has been translated into Spanish and I know that it is imported or published in samizdat form. The main reason for my interest in Cuba, though, lies in the fact that, of all the remaining totalitarian regimes, the one in Cuba is probably closest to my own experience. The number of parallels is the highest, and the advanced state of collapse there is similar to that of our country in the years prior to 1989.

My friends from the dissident movement and I have numerous experiences which—God willing—we can offer you; we may even be able to give you advice on various issues, so that you may avoid repeating at least some of our mistakes. Although Cuba's path to freedom, shaped by its own unique conditions, is and will be distinctive, there are stages and patterns of behavior that one sees unfailingly repeated during regime changes the world over. In this context, I take the liberty of offering you a few observations, considering in turn the currently ending totalitarian era, the transfer of power, and finally the formation of a democratic society. Each of these stages requires special attention, and even though all of them share a common ethos, each also calls for a different series of practical steps.

In this letter, let me discuss the first period—the end of the totalitarian era of the communist regime.

The end of the totalitarian era in the former Czechoslovakia was marked by an extreme nervousness on the part of the regime. Those who had long thought they would hold their posts in perpetuity began to lose their footing. Some of them probably had already started to sense that they would have to plan, if not for political survival, then at least for responding to societal change. The handful of previously scorned dissidents started to be taken seriously when a growing number of citizens began publicly displaying sympathy toward them. Even the totalitarian regime had already stopped pretending that these dissidents were merely a few fanatics supported by foreign intelligence; and in the two years before its collapse, the regime had to intervene with brute force against a growing number of citizens during demonstrations linked to the anniversaries of significant political events. The citizens of Czechoslovakia thus saw in the streets, for the first time in twenty years, armored police cars together with emergency squads armed to the teeth.

In these moments, everyone perceived the totalitarian reality of everyday life. The propaganda in the media still managed to keep everything under wraps for some time, because the first demonstrations were concentrated mainly in the capital. Nevertheless, the spirit of the

citizens grew more radical and their self-confidence increased. The regime responded with various restrictions, but these only elicited ever bolder steps on the part of my fellow citizens. I recall, for instance, the

Democratic countries should make their relations with the totalitarian political leadership conditional on the release of prisoners of conscience and on the relaxation of inhibitions on free nationwide discussion.

important decision by many artists, including the world-famous Czech Philharmonic, to refuse to perform for domestic media unless those media provided scope for people with dissenting political opinions. Several months before the collapse of the regime (which we obviously did not expect at the time), we wrote up a petition called “Several Sentences,” calling on the country’s political leadership to initiate a dialogue with the opposition. Tens of thousands of people signed the petition without hesitation. I also remember the important role of a Voice of America

announcer, a friend of mine, who every day in his broadcast to Czechoslovakia read out the names of those public figures who had added their signatures to the petition. The regime had no problems dealing with a handful of dissidents in its prisons, but it was taken by surprise at the new numbers of publicly declared opponents. Until then, it had tolerated different opinions expressed in private, but it had brooked no public opposition. In the new situation, however, more and more fellow citizens gathered the courage to step out of anonymity. The regime had a hard time responding in its usual way—by imposing bans and criminalizing its opponents. Citizens’ confidence grew, and the previously concealed confrontation became omnipresent. In addition, there emerged a generational confrontation, as children stood up against their parents’ world of empty phrases.

The behavior of totalitarian regimes has been described many times—even I have attempted to do so. I recall these well-known facts here only because I see Cuban society, notwithstanding its distinctive features, as being precisely in this period of totalitarianism’s final years. The Varela Project that you embody takes its inspiration from our Charter 77 movement. Even though the Varela Project originally involved only a small number of oppositionists, it has recently gained in power. I was delighted to hear that a few weeks ago you handed over fourteen thousand more signatures on your petition calling on the regime to observe the civil rights granted by the Cuban Constitution. This is a remarkable accomplishment. It is well known that a totalitarian regime characteristically has nothing but disrespect for law. Insisting that it adhere to the legal standards it has itself adopted can drive a totalitarian government mad.

What can be done in such a situation?

Based on my experience, international solidarity is important at this time. Such solidarity should be expressed by free governments as well as by individuals. Democratic countries should make their relations

Each democrat who opposes a totalitarian regime should behave today as if power were to be handed over tomorrow.

with the totalitarian political leadership conditional on the release of prisoners of conscience and on the relaxation of inhibitions on free nationwide discussion. Democratic countries should consider as their partners all democratically minded people, irrespective of whether or not they hold any political offices. In this context, I expect a lot from the founding of the International Committee for Democracy in Cuba,

which is preparing for its inaugural meeting.

In addition, there must be economic solidarity. For that purpose I recently suggested the establishment of a Cuba Fund for supporting families afflicted by repression, as well as other activities of the democratic opposition. I strongly believe that the European Union will come to a general agreement on steps to give practical support to Cuba's democrats. I hope that there is no need to assure you that I will do whatever I can—in part, to pay back the debt that I feel to those democrats who helped me and my friends for many years, or who expressed their solidarity in various ways during their visits to communist Czechoslovakia.

I would like to draw your attention to an observation of mine: Whatever your merits, however brave and respectable as dissidents you may be, even though you may have spent years in prison or written clever books—in spite of all that, pragmatic politicians in the democratic world may suspect that you are mere grumblers, inveterate complainers, slightly crazy and constantly carping. Such a suspicion might lead to the following opinion: We may support them symbolically, but from the point of view of realistic politics there is no need to rely on them; they are not the right partners for us. And yet the opposite is true. It is important to convince politicians in democratic countries about this, which I have been trying to do for many years.

Let me add a few more comments. Please accept them as the product of hard-earned experience. You and your friends will surely know how to make use of them and whether or not they will be applicable under Cuban conditions.

As you know, the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia caught us dissidents totally unprepared to take over power from the hands of the regime, which collapsed within a couple of weeks. If I would emphasize one thing in particular, it is this:

Each democrat who opposes a totalitarian regime should behave today as if power were to be handed over tomorrow!

We were caught by surprise at how fast the exhausted communist system collapsed, and we were not prepared for an immediate takeover of power. We were thus forced to make all essential decisions, under pressure of circumstances, in a matter of days—sometimes even hours. But it was precisely the first moments in the transfer of power that were the most important. At that time, decisions were made that would affect the fate of the country for years to come. Whatever we did not deal with at the beginning we had to catch up on later, with much greater difficulty. We ran up against the fact that we had not prepared a shadow cabinet, and that we had not selected competent people who could be presented to the public as credible replacements for the old dysfunctional parliament. It turned out that, for the most part, we had not prepared the basic legislation for nascent democratic structures and for securing the country's economy during the coming months. Without clear laws, the quickest to come to the fore were the kind of people you mentioned in your letter—those for whom any system serves merely as a veil for their own ambitions, crooks capable of anything and who have economic advantages based on the functions they previously held. Last but not least, it is also worth considering who among the current politicians would make the best negotiating partners if the occasion for a handover of power should arise.

The proximity of the United States of America is surely perceived as a threat by many Cubans. The regime's propaganda is very active in this respect. Yet there is no need to worry too much about such a world power—provided it remains democratic. One has to be apprehensive primarily about totalitarian states, whether near or far. Of course, a superpower like the United States exerts the sort of natural gravitation that will always greatly influence smaller neighboring countries. I believe that I can understand these worries, being from a small Central European nation myself. The main thing, however, is for Cubans to be able to decide for themselves about their future—with whom and under what conditions they do or do not want to cooperate. This must be an unmanipulated decision made by Cubans alone. No country has the right to impose anything on you or to restrict your choices.

Dear friend, I think that, in spite of all the difficulties, it is worth treading this path. I firmly believe that, despite the communist state's propaganda, a majority of Cubans realize that the countries of Central Europe started off in the right direction 14 years ago, and that it would be good to follow their example.

Yours sincerely,

Václav Havel