


miami.com

Posted on Thu, Sep. 26, 2002

MARIFELI PEREZ-STABLE

The power of the powerless

In June the Cuban government put on a political performance of surreal proportions: Millions of citizens were mobilized to sign a petition seeking a change in the constitution that would declare socialism "irrevocable." With 99 percent in agreement, the constitution was modified.

Such was the official response to the Varela Project.

Oswaldo Payá Sardiñas, other project organizers and the 35,000 citizens who have signed it are prime examples of "the power of the powerless." The government leaders' response was of such magnitude, it's only reasonable to ask: What are they afraid of? They are afraid of the power of the powerless, because the ideas of the Varela Project can take in the sunshine; theirs cannot. In their minds, consciences and hearts, the Varelistas and other Cuban dissidents are free men and women.

People sometimes worry about the influence that Cuban Miami might have in a democratic Cuba. Few, however, talk about the healthy influence that the opposition on the island already has on us here. It is the first opposition against a dictatorship in Cuban history to renounce violence and embrace human rights, which is the heart of democracy.

So whatever influence Cuban Miami might have in a future Cuba, the opposition on the island already has influenced us, without question to make us better, an influence that has contributed to making our community more open and inclusive.

If what happened in Cuba in June weren't so tragic, it'd be laughable. No human community agrees 99 percent on anything, let alone 11 million Cubans. But because our goal is a free Cuba, we need to think about the reverse: 99 percent of Cubans are not against the government.

Why some Cubans still honestly support the government, and why many more cling to the revolutionary ideals of their youth while decrying what Cuba has become is unimportant. What is important is to imagine a democratic Cuba, where all peaceful opponents will have the right to speak, organize, demonstrate, compete in elections and serve if elected.

We should look forward to seeing how the Communist Party does in the opposition tomorrow, how it does in the sunshine. Its members will have it easy because they won't be harassed, intimidated, imprisoned, killed or forced to leave Cuba. A democratic Cuba will not do unto them what they did unto the opposition over decades.

If only Vaclav Havel could have included Havana in this his farewell trip to our side of the Atlantic as president of the Czech Republic. If only he could have spoken to us instead about the difficulties of consolidating democracy. Nobody has explained the nature of communist ideology and language like Havel has.

In Cuba's case, however, we also have to think about something else: The polarization and divisions that

we suffer today have Cuban roots -- to be sure intensified to unprecedented heights by communism, the Cold War, but Cuban nonetheless. Within our own rhetoric and history, there are undemocratic seeds, and we must be cognizant of them.

TAKE CARE OF CUBAN MIAMI

Havel is here because Cuban Miami is closest in every sense to Cuba and because it is the place where Cubans can be free. That is why we are compelled to take care of Cuban Miami as the apple of our eyes. We are living a preview of Cuban democracy, thus we have a sacred responsibility to make it ever stronger, more inclusive, more open.

Let us continue to learn from the opposition in Cuba as we draw even broader links of solidarity with them, as we bring together our minds, consciences and hearts for a democratic Cuba that will thrive on our diversity.

Marifeli Pérez-Stable is a professor of sociology at Florida International University. These are excerpts of her remarks on Monday during Czech President Vaclav Havel's visit to FIU.

© 2001 miamiherald and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.miami.com>