

There are no free elections if there are no free women or men.

We are on the cusp of new elections in Cuba, which reminds me that the first law issued in the Sierra Maestra during the insurrection against Batista, leading up to the 1958 election, was a law about firing squads, a law condemning those who participated in the election to death. **But it also condemned those who voted,**¹ because elections were corrupt. We, the Christian Liberation Movement, and the opposition do not kill, sabotage, or exclude anyone. Everyone knows that, so there is no need to clarify. Our slogan is Liberty and Life. We do not seek power for ourselves; we want peace and rights for all, because where there are no rights there is no justice.

If there is a form of power that we seek, it is power for the people, popular sovereignty, the same sought by Martin Luther King. Remember? Power to the people!

We denounce institutionalized corruption. The corruption of those who, from their power—not the people’s power—call us the enemy and refuse to compete with the opposition, instead condemning and defaming them with annihilating words.

In 1954, there was an amnesty campaign in Cuba led by some who claimed that there could be no free elections as long as there were political prisoners. The current regime does not acknowledge the opposition and it does not respect the people’s, the Cuban people’s, right to disagree politically. This disagreement should not be mistaken for those disagreements, however deep-rooted they may be, between the opposition and the government in a democracy, even an imperfect one. The very driver behind the conflict between the opposition and the government in Cuba is the fact that Cuba is not a democracy, and the Cuban government does not respect the political rights of its citizens. This is more than a conflict; this is a clash between a people and a totalitarian system. Note that we do not say it is a clash with the people who govern or with those who identify with the government for some reason or another. We do not call them worms or treat them with hatred, but we do proclaim that neither they nor we nor anyone in Cuba is free under this system.

There are no free elections if there are no free men, women, people, or citizens.

Are they going to claim that the Party and other parts of the government do not painstakingly prepare the lists of candidates and those who could be, or certainly will be, elected the representative of each district? They should tell that to the protagonists of their pre-election conspiracies.

In 1992, when Aldana, before Robaina, before Lage, and before Pérez Roque, said opposition candidates could run in the election, I said I would run. What did they do? The police came looking for me at my home and took me to the local office of the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR) for Zaragoza and Carmen in El Cerro. There, they had prepared a circus, some sort of court presided over by the same CDR official who had taken charge during the assault and raid on my home on July 11, 1991, and who later died in the United States, but his involvement did not keep him from receiving a visa to reunite with his children. That is another thing that the Cuban government has denied my family for years, but that is another story. At that circus, State Security, uniformed officers, several “combatants,” and a woman from the Party told me that, if I was truly a Christian and if I did not want blood to be shed, I had better not show up at the nomination assembly causing a nuisance. This intimidation was for the sake of the public, so they would know what supporting me meant. Everyone got the message, but even so, the day of the nomination assembly the agents they had placed throughout the neighborhood, many of whom were visibly armed beneath their shirts, went around saying, “we’re waiting to see if that Payá fellow decides to show up.”

There was a similar lurid spectacle on July 6, 2006. That time, that exact phrase from Ramonet’s book about an interview with Fidel Castro, “in a besieged fortress, all dissidence is treason” was graffitied on a wall a few meters from my home. Who do they want to intimidate, me? Like any other human being, I have felt and do feel fear, but, and this is not to boast, I do not let fear dominate me. I am still a dissident. Though I have never been part of the oppressive regime in any sense, I do identify with that term, and it gives me great honor

¹ ..." another law proclaimed that all those who took part in Batista's elections (...), would be condemned to thirty years in prison or death".

because that is the term used for the family of those of us who fight for democracy. We have a right to dissent, but the Cuban government claims that it is treason, as Chávez does in Venezuela. This is an ongoing attack against the rights of citizens. There are no free elections in these conditions or under this law.

Without legal recognition, that is to say, without our right to exist and work in society free from persecution, without the right of political parties to express their ideas, without pluralism, there are no elections. I respect all choices, even the choice to participate and run for office. You see, we would never make a firing squad law, and we do not take umbrage at anyone for their choices, but we are denouncing the fact that the people know they cannot decide. The people are not free, so it makes no sense to participate in any capacity in elections that fly in the face of democracy. I believe this election is a stalling tactic, a detour, and part of the denial of the true change that Cuba wants and needs. Because the lack of freedom of association, freedom of expression, and free elections is precisely the obstacle preventing the people from participating in the political process. Cubans who do engage in politics are victims of political exclusion and therefore victims of other injustices.

The peaceful, logical, and just solution that can calmly lead Cubans to change and to true dialogue is to recognize those rights. Enough of those reactionary excuses that claim the people are not ready and that they want the current system. Do you think that fifty-four years without rights and without freedoms is not long enough? Along the same lines, others claim that the Cuban people do not want rights. How insulting! Others might say that many Cubans want this government. I doubt it, but even so: under these conditions, laws, and system, neither those Cubans nor any other Cubans are able to make a decision regarding who they want to govern or what system we should have. What we are demanding is rights for everyone. Because everyone knows, and I say this with no hatred and no intention to offend but in all fairness, that not even the National Assembly of People's Power is free to decide. They too receive their orders. When they are elected by the people, they will be able to answer to the people alone.

This is our challenge and our call, for we will never stop calling on all Cubans, regardless of their opinions or experience, to proceed with the initial steps of the solution, the changes, which only the people can do: Why don't we have rights? Why all this presumed elitism, all those philosophies and theologies, when what is oppressing us is fear, intolerance, and one powerful group's determination to keep its absolute grip on power? Let us stop pretending already. Let us embark on the path of the people: democracy.

On behalf of the Christian Liberation Movement.

Oswaldo J. Payá Sardiñas

July 20, 2012

Note: Just two days later, on July 22, the National Coordinator of our movement, Oswaldo Payá, and our brother Harold Cepero died tragically in suspicious circumstances that have yet to be clarified. We have released this message to the public because of how important it is for our nation at this time and as a posthumous tribute to them, as a sign that their example and legacy live on in each of us and will continue to guide the Cuban people, whom they loved so much, along the road to winning their rights.

Coordinating Council of the Christian Liberation Movement.

October 17, 2012

Ofelia Acevedo Maura

Narviel Hernández Moya

Juan Felipe Medina

Eduardo Cardet Concepción

Ernesto Martini Fonseca

Andrés Adolis Chacón Aroche

Translated by Ashley Caja