A Dissident Speaks Out

Elizardo Sánchez Santacrúz

Elizardo Sánchez Santacrúz is an unusual figure in the Cuban political scene—a social democrat who calls for fundamental changes in the political system but who does so from within Cuba and who denounces right-wing exile activities and the U.S. embargo of Cuba. He is the founder of the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation, and he is frequently sought out by foreigners as the voice of dissidence inside Cuba. Although he has been jailed in Cuba, he continues to be a vocal spokesperson for a perspective that probably attracts more sympathy from non-Cubans than from Cubans either on the island or in exile.

Like people everywhere, Cubans yearn for peace, prosperity, and freedom. Our challenge is to make our existing totalitarian state, which is obsolete and inefficient, evolve into a more open system that is better attuned to the global economy and the world around us. The Cuban people fervently want that change, but they insist that it occur peacefully.

Peaceful transformation can only be achieved through a process of national reconciliation in which all political voices are included—even those of the leaders of the present government. The transformation, after all, must begin under them. How could it be bloodless if the ouster of the regime is a precondition?

Some will argue that the Castro government will not permit change. To speak of reconciliation, says the Cuban exile leadership in Miami, is treasonous. The pressures against Cuba must be maintained—even though those pressures haven’t produced anything in more than thirty-three years.

I have spent more than nine years in Fidel Castro’s prisons, yet I am convinced that a hard-line approach against his government is based on false assumptions. True, some top officials do not want to change anything. But they do not have that luxury: Cuba, now without Soviet help, is poverty stricken. To recover, it must change.

Modern economies depend on access to information, on having people think for themselves, on the abilities of tens of thousands of managers to make instant decisions. The centralized economy and strait-jacketed political culture we now have simply cannot be competitive. I believe that the large majority of Cubans understand this fact and want change. I believe that even the overwhelming majority of Cuban officials understand it as well and that the top leadership is sufficiently pragmatic to move with the times.

Unfortunately, American policy impedes the transformation we seek. Efforts to pressure and isolate Cuba simply give the leaders pretext to continue their repression and allow them to divert attention from their failures.

The vast majority of us on the island who oppose the government believe that a dialogue and a relaxation of tensions between the United States and Cuba would better facilitate a transformation. Unfortunately, the Helms-Burton Act, which among other things mandates sanctions against foreign companies that do business in Cuba, makes it very difficult for the United States to take part in such a dialogue.

Still, even with the Helms-Burton Act in place, the United States can play a less obstructive role. At the very least it should allow Europe, Canada, and Latin American countries to encourage economic and political liberalization in Cuba. It should also drop its objections to Cuba’s reintegration into hemispheric affairs and its eventual reentry into the Organization of American States.

Washington should also lift all restrictions on travel to Cuba by Americans. Is not the United States committed under the Helsinki agreements to the free flow of people and ideas across borders? And how can one sincerely argue that the cause of a more open Cuba would not be advanced by having as many Americans as possible in the streets of Havana? (Critics will say that Cuba, too, has travel controls. Well of course it does: it is a totalitarian state. That is no reason for the United States to make the same mistake.)

Finally, America should lift its embargo on sales of food and medicine to Cuba, a prohibition that violates international law and hurts the people, not the regime. Denying medicine to innocent citizens is an odd way of demonstrating support for human rights.

The basic responsibility for Cuba’s future rests with the Cubans themselves. We must begin reforms that offer hope to all. But less rigidity on the part of the United States would do a lot to help that change begin.