

2-20-2003

## Cuban Oswaldo Paya Recieves Award

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

---

### Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Cuban Oswaldo Paya Recieves Award." (2003). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9056>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [amywinter@unm.edu](mailto:amywinter@unm.edu).

## Cuban Oswaldo Paya Recieves Award

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Cuba

Published: 2003-02-20

Oswaldo Paya, head of the Movimiento Cristiano Liberacion (MCL) in Cuba and chief figure in the Varela Project referendum drive, has been all over the news since he received the European Union (EU) 2002 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. Received in the Vatican, Washington, Miami, and Mexico City, Paya has called attention to a shifting US Cuba policy and angered a divided exile community.

Paya said in mid-December that he had been denied permission to leave Cuba to collect the prize and that his house had been vandalized. Finally given permission, after Spain's Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar made a personal appeal to the Cuban government, Paya went to Strasbourg, France, to receive the Sakharov Prize on Dec. 17. The award carries a US\$50,000 purse, which Paya said he would use to back the referendum project, which calls for political change in Cuba (see NotiCen, 2002-05-23). The EU parliament, however, was split on the choice of Paya. Leftist parties preferred other candidates.

EU Deputy Miguel Angel Martinez said that the parliament's Conference of Presidents had ignored the majority opinion expressed in the Foreign Affairs Committee favoring other candidates over Paya and that the choice was a breach of parliamentary custom of proceeding on the basis of broad consensus among member states. "There was an infinity of candidates much more deserving," said Martinez. "For example, thousands of fighters who risked their lives every day for the defense of human rights in numerous countries in Latin America."

Previous recipients of the Sakharov Prize include former South African President Nelson Mandela and Burmese democratic activist Aung San Suu Kyi.

### *Paya criticizes US embargo*

While in Strasbourg, Paya said the US embargo had not been effective in bringing about change in Cuba. He also criticized the US use of the Guantanamo Naval Base in southeastern Cuba to imprison alleged Al Qaida terrorists. Paya went on to attack President Fidel Castro for his "compliance," implying that Castro was an accomplice in US violations of the prisoners' rights. Paya's meeting in Washington with Secretary of State Colin Powell on Jan. 6 produced unusual results since the two men represent radically divergent views on change in Cuba.

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said Powell was happy "to hear directly from courageous people who are involved in trying to bring about peaceful democratic change in Cuba and to offer our support and encouragement." But Paya said he told Powell that he opposed "foreign pressure" to force change in Cuba and favored instead a solution without US involvement. He said the embargo was ineffective and solutions to problems in Cuba should be "de-Americanized."

Exile opinion differs on referendum Writing in the South Florida Sun-Sentinel, Vanessa Bauza said the referendum proposal "had breathed new life into the fractured Cuban dissident community." Nevertheless, while Paya gave many governments a useful symbol of democratic transformation, his celebrity helped advertise the lack of unity in Miami and contradictions in US policy. CNSNews.com quoted one Miami exile as saying Castro should not have let Paya go to Europe to criticize US policy. "Paya slams US policy while dissidents such as [Oscar] Biscet support it and rot in jail," the person was quoted as saying (see NotiCen, 2002-11-14).

Reps. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) and Lincoln Diaz-Balart (R-FL) as well as many other hard-liners said Paya and his referendum would only help Castro stay in power by giving legitimacy to his government. "If the Cuban government should accept the Varela Project and permit, for instance, dissident representatives, this would be interpreted internationally as an illusion of openness," Diaz-Balart said. Ninoska Perez said, "If you accept these baby steps, you are legitimizing the system. They are steps, but steps in the wrong direction."

Perez and a group of hard-liners bolted the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF) in 2001 and organized the Cuban Liberty Council. Their disagreement is with the CANF's shift away from its traditional intransigent policy (see NotiCen, 2001-10-25). Powell's view that the referendum could have a favorable impact on the transition to democracy in Cuba differs sharply from the views of hard-liners who used to be the preferred spokespersons for US Cuba policy. Their objections to the referendum seemed to rest on the assumption that the National Assembly could adopt all of the Varela Project's reform proposals without affecting Castro's authority or substantially altering his government. Powell now seems to reject that view.

Perez's Cuban Liberty Council and some three dozen other exile organizations issued a statement in opposition to the Varela Project. The statement said in part that the referendum was "not conducive to a genuine democratic transition." Some observers, such as Miami Herald columnist Andres Oppenheimer, see a shift within the administration from support for the exile organizations to reliance on dissidents within Cuba.

Oppenheimer wrote recently, "Increasingly, Miami exiles see their role as one of support for pro-democracy groups on the island, and not as one of 'saviors of the fatherland.'" In this apparent but unstated policy change, the administration may be simply following the CANF's policy shift, which CANF president Jorge Mas Santos has directed since the death of his father, CANF founder Jorge Mas Canosa, in 1997. Mas Santos said dissenters like Paya "will play a critical role in helping to bring about a transition to democracy in Cuba." He noted with approval that the meeting with Powell showed that the Bush administration supports Cuban dissidents. CANF's rapidly shifting orientation took another recent turn when Mas Santos proposed direct contact with Cuban officials in planning for a post-Castro transition.

In January, the Mexican daily Reforma reported that Mas Santos was willing to talk with government officials excluding Fidel and Raul Castro on the transition. He named Ricardo Alarcon, president of the National Assembly, Carlos Lage, vice president of the Council of State, and Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque as three officials with whom he was willing to discuss the future course of Cuban political life. In an interview with Reforma, Mas Santos talked of billions in investment

dollars that Cuban exiles would pour into Cuba after the disappearance of Fidel Castro. "Without the Castro brothers, we would be willing to sit down at the table with any Cubans, including socialists, communists, rightists, intransigents," he said.

The Reforma article triggered an angry response from the Cuban Liberty Council and other groups to the right of the CANF. One Cuban exile told The Miami Herald that the three named officials were simply Castro agents. "They are criminals and assassins and because of them there have been thousands of deaths in the Florida Straits." Paya gets in the middle of Mexican debate Moving on to Mexico City, Paya met Jan. 15 with President Vicente Fox and outgoing Foreign Secretary Jorge Castaneda. Castaneda had just resigned after complicating Cuba-Mexico relations with a decidedly pro-US policy. Castaneda's critics assailed him for meetings he arranged between Fox and Cuban dissidents during a trip to Havana in February 2002 (see NotiCen, 2002-002-28), his open attacks on his own ambassador in Havana, and his declaration that relations with the Cuban revolution "are over, and relations with the Republic of Cuba have begun" (see NotiCen, 2002-02-28, 2002-09-26).

Long before Paya's visit, the issue had become a matter of internal Mexican politics fiercely debated among the major parties. Even the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which was responsible for the first crack in Mexico's traditional relationship with Cuba, had reversed its position. Nevertheless, Paya stepped into the debate, telling the Associated Press that Mexico should continue to recognize "diverse sectors of Cuban society" and thanking Castaneda for his "solidarity" with the Cuban people. Paya supported Venezuela coup Despite his campaign for democracy and elections in Cuba, Paya was a supporter of the attempted coup against democratically elected Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez.

On April 13, the day of the failed coup against Chavez, Paya wrote to ex-Venezuelan President Luis Herrera Campins (1979- 1984), expressing his admiration for the coup leaders and president-for-a-day Pedro Carmona. "From Cuba, we send our deepest admiration and solidarity in these moments in which you have restored your sovereignty and your future. You have shown an impressive and truly epic demonstration of valor, steadfastness, and love of liberty." Since the April coup, Chavez's opponents have pressed for a referendum to have him removed from office. Paya and other Varela supporters used the attempted coup to argue that their referendum in Cuba would avoid the need for the kind of violence that erupted in Venezuela.

Meanwhile, toward the end of Paya's sojourn, the Varela referendum died in committee. On Jan. 23, the National Assembly's Constitution and Legal Affairs Committee tabled the Varela petition on constitutional grounds. Committee chair Jose Luis Toledo was unavailable for comment, but Pedro Alvarez, a petition spokesman, said the decision was improper. "If they think this is a response, they should publish it, but also publish the Varela Project so people can compare."

-- End --