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Cuba: President Raul Castro Confronts Internal Opposition And U.S. In Death Of Political Prisoner

by Daniel Vasquez

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The government of Raul Castro is again pitting itself against the internal opposition and the US, blaming them for the death of Orlando Zapata Tamayo on Feb. 23 in Havana. Tamayo died after an 85-day hunger strike to demand that the Cuban government recognize him as a prisoner of conscience and to denounce the mistreatment he said he suffered in prison. The death of the poor 42-year-old black bricklayer and plumber sounded another alarm to the international community regarding human rights violations in Cuban prisons, gave more visibility to various opposition groups demanding the release of some 200 political prisoners, and again showed Castro's intransigence despite the island's increasing economic deterioration.

The Zapata case

Zapata was detained in 2003 and sentenced to three years in prison for disorderly conduct and contempt. Despite his opposition activities and participation in hunger strikes, he was not among the group of 75 dissidents arrested that spring and given harsh sentences on charges of conspiring with the US against Cuba. Opposition historian Manuel Cuesta Morua said Zapata's role was downplayed by the government simply because he was black, and it did not give him the same importance as the white and professional dissidents detained at the same time. Later Zapata was tried in jail and his sentence increased to 32 years for aggressive conduct in the maximum-security prisons where he was held. Among his demands was that he not have to wear the regulation prison uniform and that he be treated as a prisoner of conscience, a category recognized by Amnesty International (AI). Zapata was among those opposing an exchange of political prisoners for the five Cubans imprisoned in the US on espionage charges, whom Havana considers "anti-terrorism fighters." Zapata began his hunger strike on Dec. 3, 2009, at the provincial prison in Holguin in eastern Cuba, to complain, among other things, about the beatings by his jailers. He was later taken to another prison in the neighboring province of Camaguey and on Feb. 17 was transferred to a Havana hospital, where he died. "There are no tortured prisoners, there have been no tortured prisoners, there was no execution. That happens at the base at Guantanamo," said Raul Castro the day after Zapata died, referring to prisoners at the US military base at the easternmost tip of the island. Zapata "is a victim of the confrontation that we have with the US." These statements continue the logic of Havana in blaming its northern neighbor for domestic problems and considering the leaders and internal opposition groups mercenaries in the pay of Washington. The official newspaper Granma, which waited four days before mentioning Zapata's death, said that it was a direct consequence of the US's "murderous policy" against Cuba that encourages illegal emigration, disobedience, and the violation of laws and established order.

Granma, the official newspaper of the Partido Comunista, argued that the prisoner was a common criminal who "adopted a political profile when he already had a lengthy criminal record" because he was interested in the "material advantages of a 'membership' fostered by foreign embassies."

"He was not a terrorist, or a conspirator, nor did he use violence," said the leader of the Movimiento Cristiano Liberacion Oswaldo Paya, 2002 winner of the European Parliament's 2002 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. Zapata's relatives and opposition groups reacted strongly to what they considered murder. The prisoner's health was deteriorating without his fast being stopped despite public calls of alarm. Zapata died despite receiving attention at the best hospitals, according to Raul Castro. However, the local health system has been deteriorating for years so much so that the opposition complained in January that at least 26 elderly patients died from the cold in just one night at the Hospital Psiquiatrico Nacional. Reina Tamayo, mother of the deceased, refused to accept Castro's public message of condolence. "My son's death was premeditated murder," she said. Tamayo said the political police "repressed" the family and pressured it to quickly have the burial, carried out under heavy security in the town of Banes, 830 km east of Havana, on the morning of Feb. 25. This is the second death in Cuba of a political prisoner from a hunger strike. In 1972, the poet and student leader Pedro Luis Boitel died while on a hunger strike. He opposed dictator Fulgencio Batista and later Fidel Castro.

The policies of Havana and international reaction

The death of a member of the political opposition under the gaze of his guards underscores the government's harsher attitude toward opposition demands and signals to the international community that Cuba continues to disregard any questioning of its human rights policies. The incident occurred after US President Barack Obama loosened US restrictions regarding Cuba in 2009 and as Spain, which holds the presidency of the European Union (EU), tries to steer the bloc's policy toward negotiating with Castro. Before Zapata's death, The Washington Post said that, in recent months, proponents of lifting US and international sanctions against Cuba have been gaining momentum with the argument that the strategy of isolating the Castro regime has failed. "The thaw they advocate is well underway: Cuba's suspension from the Organization of American States (OAS) has been lifted, and the [President Barack] Obama administration has removed some restrictions on travel and remittances" from Cubans in the US to their families on the island, said the paper, asking whether this US policy shift toward Cuban was really working. A day after Zapata's death, Raul Castro conditioned dialogue with the US to there being "absolute equality," adding that Washington can "ask about everything, but we also want to ask about all the problems of the US." On the same day, the Cuban government unleashed a wave of repression that the opposition said resulted in some 20 detentions and more than 30 dissidents' being forced to remain in their homes so they could not attend the funeral. These incidents brought immediate reaction from the White House and the EU. Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, whom the Spanish opposition accuses of having an accommodating attitude toward the Caribbean regime, demanded that Castro "release the prisoners of conscience and respect human rights." The New York-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) asked Washington and the EU to employ "policies of effective international pressure" and develop a strategy of "multilateral pressure" to help the political prisoners and win their release. "The embargo is a totally inept policy....It has caused so much hardship to so many Cubans and has not achieved anything. And the EU's Common Position has also been ineffective because it does not impose conditions," said HRW assistant director Daniel Wilkinson. Nevertheless, Raul Castro appears to dismiss the negative headlines in the international press and is counting more on economic aid from allies such as Presidents Hugo Chavez of Cuba and Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva of Brazil. It was Lula who traveled to Cuba to sign economic agreements just hours after Zapata's death (SourceMex, March 03, 2010). The many photos of Lula smiling and embracing the Castro brothers

could not overshadow the incident. Zapata's death was downplayed by Latin American presidents. Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa said, "Cuba has to change many things," but emphasized that the US embargo against the island is the principal obstacle to such a transformation.

A new stage for the opposition

"This is a turning point, the government has misjudged the situation," and those who support Cuba "now have to re-evaluate their policy," said Elizardo Sanchez, who heads the illegal Comision Cubana de Derechos Humanos y Reconciliacion Nacional. As a way of honoring Zapata, other opposition members have begun fasts, among them the psychologist and journalist Guillermo Farinas, who has carried out 24 fasts in the past as a form of peaceful protest. In 2006, his hunger strike demanding unrestricted Internet access for all Cubans received wide international coverage. Most Cubans remain largely unaware of the vicissitudes of the opposition because of the government's totalitarian control of the press and the mass media. However, what happened to Zapata and his family and the government's repressive measures became known on the island thanks to the growing use of cell phones and clandestine satellite antennas. Zapata's relatives and members of the opposition expressed their hope that his death will help unite the groups opposed to the Castro government in the same way that they came together to bid farewell to Zapata and to denounce the intensified police harassment.

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