



CIVIL COURAGE PRIZE

Acceptance Speech

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me begin by saying what an honor it is to be here with all of you today. I say this both as a man and as a Cuban. As you may know, I am from a small island which was once the world's top producer of sugar, where the land was so fertile sugar could be harvested up to three times a year. Today, my friends, the sugar industry is nothing like it used to be and the Cuban government now is faced with the impossible task of providing its citizens with enough food to survive. This is a result of the Cuban government's inefficiency and complete control over the majority of cultivable land in Cuba.

Prior to the current government, Cuba, despite its social problems and government corruption, had a very healthy economy. Cuba was the third strongest economy in the hemisphere, only topped by the United States and Argentina. Today, it is with regret to inform you that Cuba is now one of the poorest nations in the hemisphere. This is a result of the current government's change from an efficient economic policy to one that is completely inefficient and controlled entirely by the government.

It is important to note that corruption has not been eliminated entirely, but to the contrary, it has infiltrated all aspects of Cuba's current economy, politics, and society.

The Cuban constitution recognizes the right to own property, but Cubans do not have the right to freely sell their homes, cars, nor land without the authorization of the government. While the laws prohibit any type of discrimination in Cuba, only foreigners, not Cubans, but foreigners, are allowed to invest in Cuba. Cubans are not allowed to invest money in their own country.

The Cuban constitution also recognizes the right for the common Cuban to take advantage of the beautiful beaches and other popular tourist spots my country has to offer, but, ladies and gentlemen, Cubans are not allowed to visit Varadero, the tourist hot spot of Cuba. Yes, Varadero is part of Cuba, but the common Cuban cannot visit unless they obtain special permission.

While all this is true, it would not be prudent for me to deny that the current government has made relative progress in certain areas like health care, education, national security, and professional sports -- but, all these "successes" are starting to disappear due to lack of financial funding and the current government's inefficiency and inability to put the economy and society on the right track. The totalitarian system of government in Cuba has turned the country into a social laboratory where the government maintains complete control over all aspects of daily life, resulting in very, very few benefits for the common Cuban but a lot of hardship for most on the island.

The current government of Cuba has maintained power longer than any other regime in the world. There is no doubt about it -- this government prevents and outlaws freedom of expression, freedom for the common Cuban to state his thoughts on a particular national issue or to criticize the government for its actions that continue to make life for the common Cuban harder and harder. I am living proof of this practice -- because I criticized the government, I was sentenced to five years in prison, after going through a trial none of you would consider "normal." I spent five years for peacefully expressing my critical views of my government -- something that many of you may do all the time. The government considered me a rebel, when, in reality, all I did was write a document with three other opposition members, titled, My Homeland Belongs to Everyone. In this document, we critically analyzed a document that was released by the Cuban Communist Party to celebrate its Fifth Congress. We also asked the Cuban people to use the right granted by the Cuban constitution to vote freely (or decide not to vote at all) in the presence of the foreign press accredited to Cuba.

All of us were judged without any due process. We were judged without an independent or impartial jury. We were judged, ladies and gentlemen, by dependent judges from the Cuban Government's Central Authority that had already predetermined our guilt and sentence. The "trial," if you would even call it that, was not open to any member of the public, nor the international press, nor any member of the foreign diplomatic core. The judges did not allow any witnesses requested by the defense. Believe it or not, my own lawyer did not have the right to cross-examine or even question any of the claims brought forth by the prosecution.

I spent my sentence in the provincial prison of Cienfuegos in the town of Ariza, about 125 miles from my home in Havana. My prison life in Cuba consisted of danger, mistreatment, and the fact that my own wife had to travel 125 miles to just see me. She had to endure the harassment carried out by government security officials. It was almost as if my family was "sentenced" like I was.

When I speak of a prison, I do not refer to one with the possibility to talk on the phone every day or have access to the internet or have a bathroom facility with a sink and a mirror. In Cuba, I was confined to a 7-foot by 6-foot sleeping cell, with a hole in the ground to use as a toilet and a small table that I used as a bed. There was a water pipe (not a sink) where water would run only three times a day for twenty to thirty minutes.

Words cannot describe the sanitary conditions of a Cuban prison. The acute level of humidity in the air affects your lungs and bones. Prisoners live with all types of rodents, including bugs, scorpions, bedbugs, cockroaches, mosquitoes, rats, fleas, and ticks. Prisoners cannot exercise or participate in any sport activity -- all of this is forbidden by the government.

The Cuban prison system does not distinguish between a political prisoner and any other prisoner. In other words, the prisoners who committed what many of you would consider a real crime were ordered by the government to harass the political prisoners.

I began to oppose the government only when I understood that it could no longer maintain a double standard -- in other words, when I clearly realized that this government's economic system would destroy all the riches of my country, I affirmed to myself that I would not continue to have any contact with organizations that went against my own beliefs. It was not until 1990 that I went public with my views in my job -- I was employed by the State Committee of Economic Collaboration. I was fired in January 1992, after having recognized and supported a project aimed to create a democratic socialist

Cuba. Since my firing, I have not been ever able to work again, even despite my education and work experience. I am considered "not trustworthy" by the only employer in my country -- the Cuban government.

I remember the state-ordered harassment of any person like me who criticized the government. The harassment took many forms, including severe verbal and personal attacks. Opposition members and dissidents all over the island understand what I mean. These acts were widespread and involve the harassment of hundreds, maybe more. Police security continues to monitor the homes and movements of anyone and everyone who they deem is against the revolution and against the government. Many times, the harassment turns violent, often resulting in stone throwing, screams, insults, and property damage.

Currently I am the Chairman of the Social Democratic Political Party of Cuba, founded in 1996, but not recognized by the Cuban Government.

To change all this "bad" in my country, I continue to peacefully fight for gradual change towards a democratic Cuba, a free Cuba, and to promote respect for the human rights of all Cubans, even those who peacefully disagree with the practices of the government, as is outlined by the universal declaration of human rights and other United Nations documents.

I am convinced that changes in Cuba will come in the short or medium term -- they have even already begun to take place, and soon, my country will be aligned with all the other democratic countries of the world, like the United States.

With all sincerity, I thank you all from the bottom of my heart for the 2002 Civil Courage Prize. I promise I will never let you down as I continue to fight for the change in Cuba that Cubans and citizens around the world want.

Thank you very, very much.