

**Freedom or Farce?**
Examining The Varela Project

By Netfa Freeman & Shawn Sukumar
July 29, 2003

Observers may view “The Varela Project” as a popular challenge of the Cuban people against their government. The Varela Project, named after the Cuban priest, Felix Varela, is a petition initiative started in 1997 by Oswaldo Paya and other members of the Christian Liberation Movement in Cuba. The petition is said to call for greater democratic freedoms in Cuba, release of political prisoners, allowing alternative political parties, and free enterprise. The Project is being presented around the world as part of a peoples’ movement for democracy in Cuba. Proponents of The Project allege that the petition is in compliance with Article 88g of the Cuban constitution, which grants citizens who collect at least 10,000 signatures the right to present to the appropriate commission of the Cuban National Assembly legislative proposals for consideration by the Assembly as a whole. But there is much more to The Varela Project than meets this poorly informed analysis.

Because of irrefutable evidence that the US government has been manufacturing and nurturing an opposition movement in Cuba since the triumph of the revolution, it is naïve to ever take for granted the origins and foundations of any political campaign such as the Varela Project. In fact, the terms “intervention” and “illegal” substantially understate the nature of US government aggression against Cuba. There have been outright military invasions and years of US sponsored terrorism against Cuba. The allegiance of Cuban citizens to opposition movements such as the Varela Project has been obtained through bribery. False accusations have been leveled against the Cuban government (i.e. Cuba manufactures chemical weapons and has state sponsored child prostitution.). Biochemical warfare has been waged against the Cuban people and trade between Cuba and other sovereign nations has been severely blocked. The totality of these acts of illegal intervention adds up to a diabolical and immoral aggression; more than an embargo they qualify instead as a “cruel and unusual economic punishment”. More accurately these are acts of a protracted war offensive, defined as a blockade. It is important not to diminish the severity of such aggressions, so that one won’t be duped by “Cuban initiatives” that are actually operations of the US government’s Cuban Program.

In fact, it is not at all clear that Cubans started the Varela Project. It has been well documented that the US government spends hundreds of millions of US tax payer’s dollars to create a movement in Cuba that is far from independent, primarily supported by the US government and orchestrated by the most fascist elements in the Cuban-American community. The Project is clearly endorsed and supported by some
of these elements. The seeds of such US policies can take on a life of their own, germinating initiatives that may be Cuban in origin but ultimately serve foreign interests. These things considered exception should be taken with the notion that The Varela Project is clearly a movement started and run by Cuban citizens. Reasonably there is nothing “clear” about this. In fact, there are many things that remain unclear about The Project Varela.

Misinformation has perpetuated the myth that the 11,000 signatories of the Project are an indication that the Cuban people would like what the petition calls for. But how can 11,000 signatures out of a population of over 11 million \(^4\) \((0.1\% \text{ of the population})\) indicate the will of the Cuban people? Something of note but seldom, if ever, mentioned is that in June 2002 (subsequent to the submission of the Project petition) nearly 8.2 million Cuban citizens over the age of 16 \((\text{more than } 99\% \text{ of the voting population})\) in a popular plebiscite, voted in favor of a referendum to make socialism an “irrevocable” feature of the Cuban system.

"Socialism and the revolutionary political and social system established in the Constitution and proven through years of heroic resistance to aggression of all kinds and economic warfare waged by the successive administrations of the most powerful country that has ever existed, and having demonstrated their capacity to transform the country and create an entirely new and just society, are irrevocable; and Cuba will never again return to capitalism."\(^5\)

When this fact is mentioned in mainstream media it is always accompanied by the absurd notion that the Cuban people were somehow forced into voting for this referendum. The international community is expected to believe that a country without the modus operandi of brutal dictatorships—that is, it has no death squads, no disappeared or tortured citizens, and has never attacked a demonstration in the streets—has somehow instilled a “culture of fear” into the hearts and minds of Cuban citizens. History teaches us that wherever there is mass oppression and repression people respond with mass civil unrest no matter what the consequences. History teaches us that there is no such thing as a level of repression that can force over 99\% of a population to passively endorse something to which they are opposed or to constantly acquiesce to a government that they do not want. Mainstream media would not fail to report if there was ever a mass resistance to the government of Cuba. If the ruthless violence of Apartheid South Africa or the brutal Israeli occupation in Palestine can’t stop the masses, including children, from standing up to tanks, machine guns and rocket launchers using only stones and sticks, how can anyone think the Cuban people, with their courageous history of resistance, would submit to a 44 year dictatorship whose enemy is the biggest political and military power on the earth? Dictatorships only last when they are supported and kept in power by forces such as the US. Because revolutionary Cuba has never enjoyed this special treatment, the only way the government could have remained in power this long is by being a popular government. It is fitting to add here that the Cuban Constitution of 1976 was also adopted by a popular referendum of more than 90\% of the voters.
The details in the Varela petition are presented in such a way that they are impossible to honor. The text is a hodgepodge of legislative proposals conflictingly integrated with constitutional amendments, which is incoherent by any legal standard. The Varela Project proponents consistently imply that the 11,000 signatures on their petition obligate the Cuban government to implement a constitutional referendum. However, the Cuban Constitution suggests no such obligation. Furthermore, such a thing would be ridiculous since that many signatures could never be relied on to reflect the will of the Cuban masses and would allow anyone who could garner 10,000 signatures to insist on a referendum. Under the Cuban constitution what the right to present a petition does do is obligate the appropriate commission (equivalent to congressional committees in the US) to debate, consider amendments, and vote on whether or not to introduce the proposal to the entire National Assembly. This process is much like the legislative process of the US congress and is really incongruent with anything that qualifies as a dictatorship. In fact the one difference between this and the US system is that Cuba applies this process to national referenda and initiatives, preceded by informed nationwide discussions from the level of grassroots assemblies to their national legislative body. The US system, on the other hand has never permitted such an exercise, even though it is raised as ‘the’ example of freedom and democracy for the world. Individual citizens in only some individual states such as California and Oregon possess this right, but there is no nationwide authority, which allows US citizens a say on issues such as the death penalty, going to war, or abortion. For Cubans to possess this right contradicts the assertion that Cuba is a dictatorship.

Proponents of The Project also fail to mention that the Cuban government has issued an official response to the petition. They consistently allege that the petition was ignored, not to mention that they neglect to scrutinize the response of the government when going around the world to garner support for their “movement”. Project associates admit that Mr. Paya intentionally avoided receiving the government’s response so as not to “legitimize” the process. The law regarding petitions also stipulates that there must be 10,000 ‘notarized’ signatures and it was reported that the Varela Project signatures were never notarized.

Hierarchical conflict within the Cuban Catholic Church should also be taken into serious consideration when evaluating the legitimacy of the Varela Project. While The Project is noted as the brainchild of the Christian Liberation Movement and claims to be advocated by the Church, it has resulted in a split between a portion of the organized lay Catholics and the Catholic hierarchy.

At the heart of this split are Oswaldo Payá and Dagoberto Valdés, who had been engaging only in indirect ideological combat with the Cuban state through several organizations under the umbrella of the Catholic Church. Valdés began working with Payá in order to create a more proactive political stance among the Cuban lay Catholics and the Cuban Church in general, a task that developed into Varela Project. This took place in blatant opposition to the Church’s official apolitical position, and therefore produced major tension between the laity and the clergy. Not only did the clergy believe that this tension was created intentionally by Payá in an attempt to
contradict Church authority, their opposition to The Project stemmed from their assertion The Project has serious constitutional and legal flaws that would result in its invalidity. While Payá’s people leaked inaccurate information to the international community stating that the Commission on Culture, Justice and Peace within the Catholic Church favors The Project, the actual arguments made by the Church denouncing the project rarely receive any publicity. Therefore, not only is the assertion that the Cuban Church is overwhelmingly supportive of the Varela Project completely untrue, Payá’s fervent attempts to undermine the Catholic clergy also suggest that the Varela Project is actually a result of power struggles within the Cuban Catholic Church between the laity and the clergy, rather than a serious democratization movement.11

In summary, no matter what the origins of the Varela Project and no matter how genuine its original intent may have been, it currently only serves as a propaganda ploy favoring the foreign and illegitimate interests of those who seek to revert Cuba back to its pre-revolutionary subservience.

---

2 This conclusion is detailed by Mary Murray’s Cruel & Unusual Punishment: The US Blockade Against Cuba. (New York: Ocean Press, 1993).
3 The US government facilitates political intervention in Cuba via the USAID, see http://www.usaid.gov/regions/lac/cu
4 http://www.worldatlas.com/webimage/countrys/namerica/caribb/cu.htm
5 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/low/world/americas/2069057.stm
9 Answer made by the Commission for Constitutional and Judicial Affairs of the National Assembly that was given to Osvaldo Paya about his project date 18 November 2002 sent afterwards by mail on 26 November of the same year.
10 This was verbally admitted by Francisco De Armas, International Representative for the Citizen’s Committee for the Promotion of the Varela Project at a public forum about the Project hosted by Amnesty International, Wednesday, July 16, 2003 in Washington DC.
11 Valdés, Nelson P. “The Varela Project and the Clash Within the Catholic Church in Cuba.” July 25, 2002