

Toward Cuba's Reconciliation

By SUSANA BARCIELA
Editorial Board member

Envisioning a tyranny-free Cuba may seem odd today as the Cuban regime terrorizes its own people with summary executions and a savage crackdown on dissidents. Yet this is precisely the time for laying the groundwork for a future Cuba where such horrors will not be repeated.

How will Cuban society eventually come to terms with the long list of human-rights abuses committed during four decades of totalitarian rule? And how might it avoid the pitfalls that have led to political thuggery instead of democratic dialogue?

These are only some of the difficult questions bravely tackled by the Task Force on Memory, Truth and Justice, led by FIU professor Marifeli Pérez-Stable. "Cuban National Reconciliation," the resulting report, offers a timely meditation on the democracy that Cuba could become and valuable advice for those inside Cuba who will lead the transition -- sooner, it is hoped, rather than later.

BREAK THE CYCLE

Inhuman violence breeds more violence, and the experiences of numerous new democracies show how difficult it is to break the cycle. Holding multiparty elections doesn't automatically prevent disagreements from being settled with guns and individuals from wanting to settle old scores.

Learning from countries that have struggled through such issues -- from Argentina to South Africa -- and from international human-rights norms, "Cuban National Reconciliation" makes a strong case for basic ground rules as a starting point. Recovering memories that have been twisted, establishing the truth of what happened and seeking justice for victims are critical to reconciling a terrible past.

Further, to live together in peace, Cubans must build a democratic society with a rule of law that protects individuals' right to dissent. That will require putting aside, once and for all, the old Cuban political culture -- used by the Cuban regime to this day -- that squelches differences by force. The task force rightly notes that the ends, no matter how noble, don't justify immoral means.

Thus, the report proposes that "Cubans adopt an ethics of means: an inalienable commitment to human rights based on inclusion and respect for and among all citizens." Toward that end and a truly worthwhile reconciliation, the group makes two recommendations summarized by Ms. Pérez-Stable: "First, that a dialogue -- among all Cubans and with those interested in Cuba -- be held regarding the Cuban civic reunion.

"And, second, that Cubans seek the means to recover our historical memory as a central element of that reunion, which must necessarily be peaceful, inclusive and democratic."

CIVIC RENEWAL

That's a tall order for any group, more difficult still for people victimized by years of official lies, suffocating repression and family separation. Yet the task force itself has provided evidence that civic renewal can take place.

Ms. Pérez-Stable's group of 26 people included 16 Cuban exiles from several countries and 10 people of other nationalities, all with diverse political views and experiences. Ford Foundation and Open Society Institute funding allowed them to meet, debate, and consult with Cubans on the island for more than two years.

The 138-page report is proof that Cubans can compromise, reach consensus and respectfully disagree. Indeed, reconciliation already has begun individually, within families and among Cubans in the diaspora. Political reconciliation will have to wait until a democracy emerges in Cuba.

© 2003 The Miami Herald and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved.

<http://www.miami.com>