

# Dissidents find 'Cuba outside Cuba' in Miami

By CHRISTINE ARMARIO, Associated Press

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MIAMI (AP) — When Cuban hunger striker Guillermo Farinas arrived in Miami, he said he was prepared to face rejection from radical members of the Cuban-American community who do not believe in pacific opposition.

The reaction has been far different. When he went to the Versailles restaurant, a traditional gathering spot for older exiles in the city's Little Havana neighborhood, he was embraced. During an event at Miami's iconic Freedom Tower, he was applauded.

"The love the exiles in Miami have shown us makes us discard what the government, over 54 years, has planted in our minds," he said.

It's still too early to know what, if any impact, the travels by Cuba's most prominent dissidents will have back on the communist-run island. Since January, when Cuban leaders stopped requiring all citizens to obtain "exit permits," the dissidents have met not only with exiles, but also with U.S., European and Latin American leaders. In the past, the exit permit was routinely denied to "counterrevolutionaries." Some dissidents are still not allowed to leave.

At the very least, though, in Miami, the dissidents have stirred up a conversation about Cuba's opposition and the misperceptions each side has formed about the other during the five decades of divisive policy and rhetoric that have followed Fidel Castro's 1959 revolution.

Farinas and others have remarked about the exile community they were raised to imagine: A "Miami mafia" that wanted to return to the island and take back the houses they left behind.

"There are many people who are afraid," acknowledged Berta Soler, a leader of the Ladies in White dissident group, in a talk before a group of exiles Monday. "We are here to be able to go there and tell those people they are wrong, not to listen to what the Cuban government says, because those in exile are going to rebuild Cuba, not take away land or homes from anyone."

The changed viewpoints are reflective of an evolving exile community, one that now resoundingly believes change must come from within Cuba, not outside it.

Members of the community have largely assimilated to life in the U.S., rising to some of the highest positions in business and politics. And yet they have preserved their roots: Walk down any street in Miami, and Cuban coffee, food and the Spanish language are still in abundance.

As dissident blogger Yoani Sanchez put it after arriving in Miami last month, she discovered a "Cuba outside Cuba."

It is not the same Cuba as the one she and other dissidents live in today.

"For them, it's not so much nostalgic as something they don't know," said Alejandro Barreras, who runs a blog in Miami called On Two Shores. "A side of the country they never knew."

Sanchez and other dissidents have emphasized the similarities between Cubans on both sides of the Florida Straits and called for unity. But after several generations of immigration and life in the U.S., ideas about Cuban identity and culture are considerably more diverse.

Barreras is six years older than Sanchez and said when he came to the U.S. he discovered many Cuban things he never knew on the island.

"There are dishes in Cuban restaurants that you don't find in Cuba," Barreras said. "In Cuba, everything has evolved. In Miami, it's sort of stuck behind. When you come here and see that, it's very interesting."

The old Cuba was very much on display at the annual Cuba Nostalgia event, a three-day expo that celebrates Cuban food, music and culture, with an emphasis on how the island was before the revolution. It includes a life-size display of the El Encanto department store, destroyed in a 1961 fire, and the malecon, Havana's famous seaside boulevard.

The event happened to coincide with the visits of Farinas and Soler. Both were surrounded by admirers as they made their way through the exhibits.

"It was very emotional for us to have them," said event co-founder Leslie Pantin.

Jorge Mas Santos, chairman of the Cuban American National Foundation, which has helped organize and finance Farinas' and Soler's trips, said their U.S. visits and the reaction they have generated were "probably unthinkable" a decade ago. He said in the past, people in the exile community got caught up the ideological and political positions of Cuban opposition leaders.

"Those things are irrelevant," Santos said.

Farinas has staged more than 20 hunger strikes, including one that lasted 134 days in 2010 to draw attention to the plight of dissidents in Cuban jails. Doctors said the strike brought him close to death. In his visit to Miami, he still looked noticeably thin. He has been jailed on charges of public disorder and disrespecting authority on numerous occasions.

Soler is one of the founders of the Ladies in White, a group of women that began marching peacefully after the arrests of their sons and husbands in a 2003 crackdown on dissidents. They have faced detention and violence from pro-government mobs.

The dissidents' visit to this "Cuba outside Cuba" has not been one-sided. The exile community has remarked on how the encounters with their former countrymen have changed their view of those who still live on the island, too.

"The Cuban-American community has realized there are people on the island like these three brave women that are fighting for freedom," said Andy Gomez, a Cuba expert and senior policy adviser with the law firm Poblete Tamargo.

He was referring to Sanchez, Soler and Rosa Maria Paya, the daughter of Oswaldo Paya, a Cuban opposition leader who was killed last year in a car crash. Rosa Maria Paya has been fighting for an international investigation into her father's death.

Lydia Fuentes, 66, left Cuba in 1960 and hasn't returned since. She went to a talk with Soler organized by Miami Dade College because she was so impressed by what she'd heard from the dissidents, who countered her previous notion of apathetic Cubans on the island.

"They realize that's not life," she said. "I take my hat off to them."

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