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## Cuban blogger Yoani Sánchez to speak at Miami's Freedom Tower

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ADALBERTO ROQUE / AFP/Getty Images

Cuban blogger Yoani Sanchez waves goodbye to her family upon departing from Havana's airport on February 17, 2013.

Dissident Cuban blogger Yoani Sánchez, who is on a world tour after 10 years of being barred from leaving her homeland, plans to visit Miami April 1 and speak at the iconic Freedom Tower.

"It is such an honor to not only have Yoani speak at what we affectionately call Democracy's College, but also at the Freedom Tower. I can think of no better venue for this historic conversation in Miami," said Dr. Eduardo J. Padrón, president of Miami Dade College., in an email Tuesday night.

The Freedom Tower, which is located on the MDC campus, was the old headquarters of The Miami News but went on to a second life as a center for processing and offering services to Cuban refugees who fled the Castro regime in the 1960s.

The federal government sold the Mediterranean Revival style building in the 1970s and after changing hands a few times, it was donated to Miami Dade College.

Sánchez will take part in what is billed as a special conversation with community leaders and students at 2 p.m. on April 1. The conversation will be live-streamed from the tower.

The Cuban blogger, who began an international tour this week that will stretch to nearly three months, will receive the Miami Dade College Presidential Medal for championing human rights.

Past honorees have included President Bill Clinton; Lech Walesa, former Polish president and leader of the Solidarity Movement, and Mikhail Gorbachev, who brought economic and political change to the Soviet Union..

"I think it's wonderful that she's coming," said Andy Gomez, a senior fellow at the University of Miami's Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies.

"It will give her the opportunity to see how embracing the Cuban-American people are to Cubans on the island and how much we care about them. I hope she will go back and tell this to the Cuban people."

More importantly, he said, it will give people here and at the other venues Sánchez plans to visit the ability to see Cuba from the point of view of a journalist, "a simple blogger" and help them understand the hardships of daily life in Cuba.

"We need to listen to their voices; a lot of times the voices on the island are different but they are so important in building bridges between here and there," Gomez said.

But he added, "I think too much pressure is being put on the shoulders of Yoani. She's not a politician; she's not an academic; she's not a public figure by design and people abroad have made her into a public figure.

"She's one of the many — many dissidents on the island. I hope she doesn't burn out," said Gomez.

But during her first stop in Brazil this week, Sánchez proved resilient in the face of pro-Cuba hecklers who disrupted the screening of a film about press freedom in which she appears. On her arrival in the Brazilian state of Bahia, protesters also threw fake dollar bills at her and accused her of being financed by the CIA.

But during a news conference Tuesday, Sánchez, 37, said, "I've found something here like what Cuba could be in 20 years in terms of diversity of opinion."

Asked about her future role in Cuba, she said she hoped to work in a Cuban newsroom free of censorship.

"I have a dream of founding a media outlet in my country because I believe in the power of journalism as a regenerative force," said Sánchez.

Her critical blog posts, tweets and columns are followed by hundreds of thousands of people around the world, although because Internet access is so limited in Cuba, she is not well-known on the island.

Through the years, Sánchez has had to turn down many invitations to visit abroad because the Cuban government wouldn't give her an exit visa.

But under a travel and migration reform last month, Cubans are no longer required to obtain the so-called *tarjeta blanca* to leave the island. And they are allowed to stay outside the country for extended periods without losing their Cuban citizenship rights.

Sánchez requested her passport soon after the reform went into effect and began planning an itinerary that includes several stops in the United States, an appearance at an Inter American Press Association meeting in Mexico, and visits to a number of European nations.

Sánchez, who also plans to visit her sister while in South Florida, appeared at the 2011 Miami Book Fair International — but via a phone call and a pre-recorded video message. Earlier this month she participated in the live program *Avanza Cuba* — a collaboration of MDC and TV Marti, via phone.

The Associated Press contributed to this report

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