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## Cuba's Patient Patriot

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IN ANY tyranny, the expected thing, the natural thing, is to go along. To risk imprisonment and torture, impoverishment and quarantine; even more, to subject loved ones to those risks -- ordinary people do not behave in this way. And yet, in every tyranny, a few people do stand up, exposing themselves and their families on behalf of the many who also covet freedom but dare not say so. These dissidents, on any continent, tend to share certain traits: courage and clear-headedness, but also stubbornness, and an ability not to overcome fear and loneliness but to live with them. "There are times when no one visits your home," says Oswaldo Payá Sardiñas. "When other kids won't play with your children."

Mr. Payá, a 50-year-old Cuban, is the leader of the Varela project, an amazing exercise in peaceful resistance to dictatorship that won some publicity when former president Jimmy Carter cited it during his recent visit to the island. The genius of the project is to accept as written Fidel Castro's constitution, which holds that any petition that gathers 10,000 signatures shall be considered by the National Assembly, or parliament. Mr. Payá and his associates, patiently and during a period of several years, gathered more than 11,000 signatures in support of free speech, free association and free enterprise and, in May, submitted them to the Assembly. Mr. Castro's panicked reaction was to organize, in a kind of parody of socialist mobilization, a forced signature campaign that purported to collect 9 million signatures in two days in support of never changing the current system. Mr. Payá and his associates simply continued on their way; by now some 35,000 Cubans have signed their petition, they say.

Now Mr. Payá has applied for permission to visit the United States to accept an award that the National Democratic Institute plans to bestow at the end of this month. His supporters include Czech President Vaclav Havel, who knows something about courage under pressure, and Spanish Prime Minister José Maria Aznar. It's not clear whether Mr. Castro will let him travel to Washington for the occasion. One gets the feeling that, either way, it won't bother Mr. Payá all that much. As a boy, he refused to join the Pioneer Movement, the first step toward Communist Party indoctrination. At 17, he was sentenced to a labor camp for criticizing the regime. In 1980, during the Mariel boatlift, his relatives in Florida arranged for him to join them; he refused to leave Cuba. "It would be terrible to live without Cuba," he says. That's another common trait of dissidents: patriotism, of a genuine sort.

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