

Cuba Hunger Strikes Stir Ire; Protests Bring International Criticism of Island; Ally Brazil Also in Spotlight

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SÃO PAULO, Brazil—**Back-to-back hunger strikes by Cuban dissidents have brought international condemnation to the island's communist government and stirred political turmoil for some leaders friendly to Cuba.**

Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, whose government is becoming a major investor in Cuba, has faced an avalanche of criticism at home and abroad after defending Cuba's right to imprison political opponents and appearing to dismiss the plight of the protesters.

On Thursday, the European Parliament voted to condemn Cuba for the "avoidable and cruel" death of Orlando Zapata, a 42-year-old laborer who died Feb. 23 after an 86-day strike for better jail conditions. The statement also decried the "alarming state" of Guillermo Fariñas, a dissident journalist who stopped eating after Mr. Zapata's death, to press for the release of 26 ill political prisoners.

Mr. Fariñas passed out on Thursday and was rushed to a hospital where he was given intravenous fluids, the Associated Press reported.

Spain's Socialist Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, a proponent of European engagement of Cuba, has also come under criticism in the wake of the strikes, though Spain denounced the Cuban government's handling of Mr. Zapata's hunger strike.

Cuban leaders Fidel and Raúl Castro have weathered international criticisms over executions and other human-rights abuses in the past, and are unlikely to be moved by the EU condemnation, analysts say. But the strikes may lead to further economic isolation for Cuba by creating political trouble for its international advocates.

A case in point could be Mr. da Silva, a former union leader who rose to Brazil's presidency from poverty and who enjoys a global image as a champion of the common man.

Mr. da Silva was in Cuba on the day Mr. Zapata was buried. "I don't think a hunger strike can be used as a pretext for human rights to free people. Imagine if all the criminals in Sao Paulo entered into hunger strikes to demand freedom," Mr. da Silva told the Associated Press when asked about the protester's death.

Mr. Fariñas, the dissident journalist, said in a newspaper interview that the Brazilian president's comment shows his "commitment to the tyranny of Castro, and his contempt for the political prisoners and their families."

Mr. da Silva himself staged a hunger strike during a month-long stint in jail during Brazil's military dictatorship in the late 1970s.

Brazilian officials have sought to explain Mr. da Silva's comments by framing it as affection for the Castro brothers formed decades ago, when Mr. da Silva was leading union strikes against Brazil's military government, as well as Brazil's stated policy of not intervening in the internal affairs of other nations.

Critics, however, say the president may finally be reaching the limits of a political policy that seeks to position the rising economic giant as a friendly interlocutor with all nations—especially poor ones—as part of a self-described "south-south" strategy.

Mr. da Silva has embraced both U.S. leaders and fierce critics of the U.S., such as Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Mr. da Silva's bid to forge ties that bridge global rivalries has attracted criticism before. He was among the first to congratulate Mr. Ahmadinejad for his victory in a contested election that led to a deadly crackdown on protests. Likening the protesters to sore losers at a soccer match, Mr. da Silva later welcomed Mr. Ahmadinejad to Brazil.

"We are active supporters of the regimes with total disregard for democracy," said Roberto Abdenur, a frequent critic who was also once Mr. da Silva's ambassador to the U.S. "Our credibility is going to be very seriously affected in the region and elsewhere by the excesses they have endorsed."

"Brazil doesn't see human rights as universal rights, but rather as local issues, domestic policy issues," said José Miguel Vivanco, director of the Americas division at Washington-based Human Rights Watch. Mr. Vivanco has criticized Brazil for abstaining on U.N. resolutions dealing with human-rights issues in countries such as North Korea and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Hunger strikes are rare in Cuba. Cuba Archive, a human-rights organization that researches alleged state crimes in Cuba, has documented ten other cases in which prisoners lost their lives due to hunger strikes, the majority of which date to the first two decades of the Castro regime. With the exception of Pedro Luis Boitel, an anti-Castro student leader who died in 1972 after a 52-day hunger strike, the other hunger strikers went largely unnoticed by the outside world.

Mr. Fariñas, a veteran of Cuba's military campaign in Angola, has previously gone on hunger strikes to protest the lack of freedom in Cuba. In 2006, he went on a seven-month hunger strike to protest the lack of Internet access.

Analysts say the hunger strikes in Cuba reflect despair with deteriorating conditions, especially in its prisons, along with disillusionment with President Raúl Castro, who had awakened hopes that he would implement gradual reforms.

Two years after he officially replaced older brother Fidel at the helm, those hopes have faded. "They are desperate. They thought Raúl would make changes, but Raúl is not making changes, they thought they could pressure the Cuban government, but it doesn't care," says Jaime Suchlicki, a Cuba analyst at the University of Miami.

Analysts say it represents the first big test for Mr. Castro who, unlike his older brother, isn't known for his political skills. But it is unlikely, analysts say, that Mr. Castro will give in to Mr. Fariñas's demands he free the ailing political prisoners.

"Raúl will not let them go free," says Jorge Castañeda, a former Mexican foreign minister who knows Cuba well. "Things are so precarious in Cuba that he can't show any weakness because of fear that things will get out of hand."

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