

Castro foe sought change

A longtime Castro dissident, Gustavo Arcos Bergnes fought for reforms in Cuba and became a symbol of honor and wisdom.

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Gustavo Arcos Bergnes, a former Fidel Castro loyalist who broke with the regime in the early years of the revolution, spent years behind bars and ultimately became a symbol of honor and wisdom for the opposition movement, died Tuesday in Havana. He was 79.

The exact cause of death was not immediately known, but relatives said he had been in and out of the hospital for the past week for respiratory and kidney problems.

Once a fervent revolutionary who grew disillusioned with Castro and his communist ideals, Arcos grew frail with age but remained a powerful voice in the struggle for democratic reform in Cuba.

"He always had a clear sense of what was right and what was wrong," said Sebastian Arcos, a nephew who lives in Miami. "Everyone looked up to Gustavo. He had a very strong sense of duty and integrity."

For more than half a century, Arcos walked with a limp from a bullet wound to the hip he received during Castro's failed Moncada army barracks attack in 1953. He was jailed on charges of opposing the government - the same charges Castro later used to jail him, after assuming power in 1959.

Arcos and his younger brother, Sebastian, became involved in the Cuban Committee for Human Rights, formed in 1978 as the first dissident group under Castro. In 1981, the Arcos brothers and three other members of the family were caught trying to flee Cuba illegally. Arcos, Sebastian and his son, also Sebastian, shared a jail cell for one year.

The elder Sebastian Arcos, who also became a leading human rights activist, died from cancer in 1997.

Gustavo Arcos was remembered as a modest man who served as a unifying force by always being willing to listen and discuss.

"He was a symbol not only of rebellion but honesty," said Raúl Rivero, a dissident poet and writer now living in Spain. "He emitted strength and serenity. It is a great loss for the peaceful opposition."

Born in 1926 in the small central Cuban town of Caibarien, Arcos was studying diplomatic law at the University of Havana when he met Castro. He was among the survivors of the Moncada attack who were arrested and later freed under a pardon.

He traveled with the group to Mexico and became the group's money man, traveling around the hemisphere to raise funds and munitions for the movement. Once Castro took control, he was appointed ambassador to Belgium.

By the time he returned to Cuba in the mid-1960s, Castro had declared himself a socialist. Arcos expressed his discontent and soon was accused of being a counterrevolutionary and jailed. He served three years behind bars and was jailed twice more in subsequent years.

"It's a sad irony that after spending his entire life fighting for true democracy in Cuba, my uncle dies without seeing what appears will be the beginning of the end," said Sebastian Arcos.

Arcos is survived by his wife, Teresa, a son from a previous relationship, two granddaughters, four sisters and a brother.