

Unyielding democrat

IN MEMORIAM: MARIO CHANES DEDICATED TO THE CAUSE OF A FREE CUBA

Opinion
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Mario Chanes de Armas fought for democracy in Cuba, and paid dearly for it. He served 30 years of hard time as the longest-serving political prisoner of the Castro regime. Yet he never renounced his principles. Mr. Chanes died in Miami on Saturday. He was 80 and died of a heart attack.

Mr. Chanes joined Fidel Castro early on in the quest to topple Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista. Mr. Chanes participated in key events of the revolution, among them the 1953 attack on the Moncada Barracks and the founding of the July 26 movement. He believed Castro's talk of restoring democracy. Within months of the revolution's triumph in 1959, Mr. Chanes grew disillusioned with Castro's totalitarian turn and went to work as a security guard. "We didn't fight one dictatorship to get another," he once explained.

In 1961, Castro rewarded him with trumped-up charges, a kangaroo-court trial and a 30-year prison term. Mr. Chanes served that term to the bitter end as a *plantado*, an "unyielding" political prisoner who refused to bow to the regime in order to be released. His son was born and died while he was in jail. He saw prisoners arbitrarily beaten, tortured and shot. Heaven knows the abuse he endured.

Yet in exile Mr. Chanes took the high road. With other former *plantados*, he supported the democratic opposition and peaceful change on the island. "I lost everything in prison, but I am the enemy of rancor and vengeance," he said late in life. "A future reconciliation of the Cuban family must be sought at all costs."

Sadly, Mr. Chanes didn't live to see a free Cuba. But his commitment should inspire all who believe in human rights and a future democratic Cuba.