

'Hot Corner' tests free speech in Cuba

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HAVANA --

Miguel is in mid-sentence when his face darkens and his eyes dart to the ground. His mouth is still open, but no words come out.

He has been talking about what it must be like to live in a country where the government doesn't control all radio and television. What he says is hardly incendiary, but when a policeman saunters by, he freezes.

"That's Cuba," he says after the officer has moved away. "They are always listening."

Saying the wrong thing too loudly in this country can cost you your job. Insulting Fidel Castro or other leaders in public can mean jail.

Still, freedom of speech in Cuba is more nuanced than may appear. The government tolerates criticism in a few accepted spaces, and many people do express themselves in public, sometimes even loudly and bitterly - and more so, some say, since Castro fell ill last year and his brother Raul took over.

One such relatively free space is the enclave of benches and shade trees of Havana's Central Park where Miguel was sounding off. It's called the Esquina Caliente, or "Hot Corner," from baseball lingo for third base. Here Cuban men both young and old, black and white, some with gold chains and sneakers, others in threadbare tank tops and dusty sandals - argue sports all day, every day.

But debate sometimes spills into other areas: women, ration cards, clothes and cars. Illegal TV hookups, water shortages, booze and last night's neighborhood Communist Party meeting.

Cuba has no free press, Internet access is restricted and phones are assumed bugged. State security agents follow government critics and foreigners, while nearly every block has its "Revolutionary Defense Committee" keeping tabs on the neighbors.

So at the Hot Corner, those who deviate from sports tend to do so quietly. Miguel asked that his last name not appear in print for fear of government repercussions.

Dissident Miriam Leiva is well known enough not to mind her surname being published. She says people are encouraged to blow off steam by complaining at communist meetings - but then officials ignore what they say.

"For people to feel they are free to talk and complain, it relieves stress and allows an outlet for people to relax a bit," said Leiva, an independent journalist whose work is published on Web sites and in magazines outside Cuba. "But they express themselves because they have to, because they are suffering. Then nothing changes."

A more public forum for complaining is Juventud Rebelde, the Communist Party youth newspaper.

Saily Cordero, a 23-year-old housewife, wrote saying she was being denied her entitlement to free powdered milk as a woman five months pregnant. Within hours, the neighborhood councilwoman and a host of top communists appeared at her door.

"People I had never seen around here were everywhere," Cordero said.

They checked her story and determined she was not owed free milk until her sixth month of pregnancy. But Cordero said the fast response left her feeling empowered.

"I just want what's mine," she said. "If I don't get it, I will complain and complain. Whoever gets in trouble, I don't care."

In 1961, Castro famously defined free speech for Cubans: "Within the Revolution, everything; outside the Revolution, nothing."

"There was no other choice. It was, 'you're with us or you're against us' and you can imagine what happens if you're against us," Leiva said. "That's the way things are still."

Leiva's husband, Oscar Espinosa Chepe, is a state-trained economist who became an anti-communist. He was one of 75 dissidents arrested in a roundup of government critics in March 2003.

Though he was released for health reasons, Leiva and other women dress in white and march silently down Havana's busy Fifth Avenue every Sunday after Mass, wearing buttons with photos of relatives still in jail.

Their every move is watched by security officials and sometimes they are openly harassed by government supporters, but the march by the "Women in White" is largely tolerated.

"We are very peaceful, we are defenseless," Leiva said. "We are in their hands. They can do to us anything they want."

Sometimes their ranks swell to dozens, but on a recent Sunday only Leiva and four others marched, holding white umbrellas against the scorching noonday sun.

Joggers padded past on the sidewalk. A few cars honked and flashed their headlights in support.

At the end of the march, the women locked arms, prayed silently and cried "Libertad!" - Freedom.

"We're not afraid," said Berta de Los Angeles Soler, 43, whose activist husband, Angel Moya, is serving 20 years in prison. "How can we be afraid they will put us in prison if our husbands and relatives are already there?"

Soler added that "the people see us in the street and they accept us and support us," but not all. As she spoke, a passer-by muttered obscenities while avoiding eye contact.

"It's hard," Soler said. "But if you don't work and go get something, you have nothing. Especially in Cuba."

Leiva said ordinary Cubans have been less afraid to speak openly in public since 80-year-old Castro had emergency intestinal surgery and ceded power last July 31. The "Maximum Leader" has not been seen in public since, though he writes several essays a week that appear in state media.

"I think most people are losing fear," Leiva said. "There has been a change after Fidel Castro's illness. He's not there. He used to be everywhere. It was like you breathed, and you were breathing him in, almost."

Back at the Hot Corner, lots of Cubans complain - and some even admit to breaking the law for small freedoms - even though the place is said to be full of plainclothes government agents.

More obvious are the uniformed policemen. Once, while a reporter was visiting, an officer listened to the conversation and checked the IDs of all Cubans participating. Another time, a policeman with a German shepherd watched in silence.

One Friday, a man named Lorenzo said he watches TV using a hidden antenna that illegally captures signals from Florida. That started an argument about how to best stash antennas during government raids.

The talk then went from what caused a power outage in Central Havana to who would be the U.S. Democratic nominee for president.

Lorenzo, a Hot Corner regular in his 70s who is old enough to remember Cuba and its heavy American presence before Castro's 1959 revolution, said he is keeping up with the U.S. presidential race.

"I'm a Republican," he said. "But for me, Bill Clinton was the best president in U.S. history. The economy was strong. They threw Monica Lewinsky at him, and he just kept going. That will help his wife."