

Cuban Blogger Battles Castro Regime With Wit

BY JUAN O. TAMAYO
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MIAMI — When a hostile questioner pushed Yoani Sanchez in New York last month to explain how she dared criticize a Castro government that provides free health, education and welfare services, Sanchez compared Cubans to birds in a cage.

“Yes, the food and water are free,” the Cuban blogger and journalist replied calmly. “But those things are not worth more than our freedom.”

It’s that kind of lacerating yet cool language, and the simple yet powerful ideas it delivers, that have made Sanchez the spearhead of a burgeoning digital dissident “blogostroika” in Cuba and won her international fame and prizes.

The 37-year-old, who jokingly describes herself as merely an “impertinent little girl,” has in fact become a powerful player in the binary guerrilla struggle against Cuba’s communist rule.

Her Generacion Y blog gets well over 15 million hits a month and is translated into 20 languages. Her Twitter account has nearly 500,000 followers, and Fidel Castro as well as Raul Castro’s daughter, Mariela, both took the time to criticize her.

Sanchez has been in Miami this week for a string of public appearances and a family reunion during a stop in her whirlwind tour of a dozen countries in South and North America and Europe that started Feb. 17 and is expected to last about three months.

It’s the first time Cuban authorities have allowed her to leave the island since 2004, when she returned from a two-year stay in Switzerland and began launching a string of digital publications.

Sanchez’s digital sword regularly skewers Fidel and Raul as well as their policies and acolytes. And her Tweets — at times fierce, funny or mocking — are like 140-character thumbs-in-the-eye to the government.

Her power lies in “language that cuts through the hypocrisy and myths that have clouded the truth about Cuba for so many years,” said Ted Henken, a Baruch College professor who studies social media in Cuba and has written several articles about her.

She describes herself as a political “free electron” that gravitates toward conservatives or liberals depending on the issue and does not insult the other side. Her husband, journalist Reinaldo Escobar, 65, says that’s part of the secret of her success.

“Yoani writes from a point of moderation, a middle point that many people can agree with,” said Escobar, who was fired from the newspaper Juventud Rebelde in 1988 for criticizing the government and now works as an elevator repairman.

She opposes the U.S. embargo, Escobar said, because the Castro brothers use it as an excuse for all their failures. And since she favors unlimited travel abroad for Cubans, he added, she also favors unrestricted U.S. travel to the island.

Havana calls her a “mercenary”



Cuban blogger Yoani Sanchez spoke at Miami, Florida's Freedom Tower during an interview on Monday, April 1, 2013.

paid by Washington, and Castro supporters threw fake dollars at her in Brazil in February. She denies accepting improper money, and Escobar says they live off their work for foreign newspapers. Sanchez is the Cuba correspondent for Spain’s El Pais newspaper.

Ironically, a number of moderate exiles and U.S. journalists say they wonder if she’s too good to be true — perhaps allowed a long leash by the Castros and spared the police repression that other dissidents suffer in return for her criticisms of U.S. policies.

Sanchez argues that her fame is her shield from repression. And while she steadfastly attacks the government, she has not joined any dissident organization and calls herself an “independent” or “alternative” journalist.

Cuban officials argue that Sanchez is virtually unknown on the island, but her supporters point out that the government blocked access to her blog until recently and that the state’s news media monopoly treats her as a Soviet-era non-person.

“A baseball player here can be well-known, but the question is how important are his home runs to the future of Cuba,” Escobar said in a phone interview from Havana.

Sanchez can look a bit like a hippie at times, favoring loose cotton blouses, longish skirts and dark hair down to her hips. She speaks softly and mostly slowly. But even relatives paint her as fiercely headstrong since the age of 5, said Henken.

Mary Jo Porter, the Seattle engineer who founded the volunteer network that translates Generacion Y and other Cuba blogs, said part of Sanchez’s appeal is the

juxtaposition of her fragility, her small and slight physical form, with the iron strength so apparent in her voice, her life and her work.”

But, Porter added, “put food in front of her and she eats like a lumberjack” and in private she’s even more cheerful and funny. “There’s no ‘behind-the-scenes-Yoani’ ... what you see is the real her,” the translator added.

Born in 1975, Yoani Maria Sanchez Cordero is part of what she dubbed Generation Y — Cubans whose names are often spelled with odd Ys because of Moscow’s influence over the island at the time. But she came of age as the Soviet Union collapsed, cut off its huge subsidies to Cuba and plunged it into its worst economic crisis of the 20th century.

The daughter of a modest family — her father, William, is a retired train engineer who now fixes flat car and bicycle tires, and her mother, Maria Eumelia, works as a taxi dispatcher — she studied IberoAmerican literature at the University of Havana.

Her graduation thesis was titled “Words under Pressure: A study on the literature of dictatorship in Latin America” and was partly based on a novel by Peru’s Mario Vargas Llosa about the assassination of Dominican Republic dictator Rafael Trujillo in 1961.

Escobar said they met in 1993 when she borrowed his copy of another Vargas Llosa novel, and their son Teo is 17 year old. The couple later taught Spanish, mostly to German visitors, and guided them around Havana, while at the same time learning German.

Sanchez moved to Switzerland to work in a bookstore in 2002 in what was planned as the first step

of the family’s departure, Escobar said. Teo followed a year later, but a string of factors, including her father’s illness, led them to return in 2004.

Having lost their Cuba residence by staying abroad for more than 11 months, they bought round-trip tickets to Havana for a “family visit” and tore up their passports after landing to avoid being returned to Europe. They lived in legal limbo until the government agreed to recognize their residences again.

Sanchez, who had put together her first computer in 1994 from used bits and pieces — Escobar said she also fixes the fridge in their Havana apartment — and experienced the Internet while in Zurich, returned with a new career: digital journalist.

In 2004 she began launching a string of Internet publications such as Consenso, Contodos and Convivencia, and later became the webmaster for Desde Cuba, a Web portal that today hosts 45 blogs, almost all critical of the Castro governments.

Three years later she launched Generacion Y — the first anti-gov-

ernment blog from inside the island and not anonymous — declaring that she had tried yoga but still needed to somehow exorcize the demonic frustrations of life in Cuba.

With the government blocking access to her blog, Sanchez passed herself off as a German to use Internet cafes in tourist-only hotels and email her columns to supporters abroad who translated and posted them. She once donned a blonde wig to slip into an academic seminar on blogging limited to government supporters.

But prestigious awards poured in for her posts. She won Colombia University’s Maria Moors Cabot prize and Spain’s Ortega y Gasset award. The Prince Claus award from the Netherlands brought her \$40,000. Time magazine put her on its list of 100 most influential people in 2008. And President Barack Obama answered her written questions in 2009.

The government unblocked access to Generacion Y and about 40 other blogs in 2011, implicitly admitting that it could not really control what Communications Minister Ramiro Valdes called the “wild pony” of the Internet.

Millions of Web pages now circulate in the island on CDs, DVDs, flash drivers and Bluetooth-capable cellphones. In a scene she compared to a Wild West gunfight, Sanchez wrote that people were meeting in a park, pointing their phones at each other and exchanging data without even nearby police knowing what was happening.

In more recent years she has founded a bloggers’ academy, Tweeted alerts on police arrests or harassments of other dissidents and grown more directly political in some of her comments and blog posts.

Raul Castro’s meek reforms are not enough to rescue the economy from its quagmire, Sanchez has declared, and once he leaves power — he has promised to retire in 2018 — it will be difficult for his successors to maintain control.

Cuba’s ruling system is like Old Havana buildings that are dilapidated yet survive even hurricanes, she told McClatchy Newspapers correspondent Tim Johnson during a February interview in Mexico.

“But one day, they want to fix the door,” Sanchez said. “They take out screws, and the house collapses.”



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