

Storming the Cuban Bastille

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Jorge Luis García Pérez Antúnez, a young black Cuban, has been imprisoned since 1990 (when he was 22 years old) simply because he announced in his town's public square that he would like perestroika and glasnost in Cuba. Yet this young man has not calmly accepted being a victim of dictatorship and in prison has become a leader of the resistance, spending fourteen years in continuous protests and hunger strikes. Today his voice is the voice of all humble Cubans who want change, of all those who long for freedom.

Cubans on the island as well as abroad are convinced that international solidarity, as demonstrated by the creation of the International Committee for Democracy in Cuba, is the result of the heroic and persistent struggle of brave Cubans who have taken the risks and make the necessary self-sacrifices in order to guarantee that another generation of Cubans do not have to grow up under oppression. This is also the struggle of those exiles who have not forgotten their roots or duty. Jorge Luis García Pérez Antúnez is one such brave Cuban. International solidarity encourages and strengthens the fight of the Cuban nation for freedom. Out of respect for the dignity of this struggle and the transparency of international solidarity, we must be very precise and objective in the initiatives we recommend to the International Committee.

The Castro dictatorship will never hand over power. Therefore, any changes in Cuba will only occur if inhabitants of Cuba mobilize in demanding their rights. The mobilization will have to take the form of non-violent civic resistance and shall avoid the pitfalls of violence and animosity mounted by the Castro dictatorship. This is the message of people such as Oscar Elías Biset, Librado Linares, the Ferrer brothers and Diodado Marrero who is in prison for his love for Cuba and for inciting non-violent resistance. The specific aim of the repression on 18 March, 2003 was to prevent the continued mobilization of the civic movement. Different projects and activities, such as the Varela project, which has been the most refined expression of the civic movement in strategic terms, are the expression of this mobilization.

Since 1997 we have been documenting the actions of civic resistance in Cuba in the annual Steps to Freedom reports. Forty four civic resistance activities took place in 1997. Since then, the number has been gradually increasing until in 2003 it reached 1328. However, despite the fact that the civic movement has enhanced its activity, after the 2003 repression the Castro dictatorship has achieved a reduction in the number of events in the streets and has forced dissidents to return to their homes. A large number of activities have stopped or have been limited to homes, with one significant exception being the public demonstrations of wives and mothers of the political prisoners known as "las Damas de Blanco" (Ladies in White).

It is necessary for the international community to implement a set of key measures to help the Cuban nation to continue with their civic mobilization. The measures should be focused on consolidating the achievements of the opposition movement and weakening the repression. First of all I recommend unity, since the current fragmentation of the Cuban opposition leadership in Cuba and abroad does not provide the best context for intensive civic activity. The International Committee should act as mediator in order to achieve ideological and strategic agreement among the Cuban opposition. Martin Palouš, the Czech Ambassador to the US, has been a pioneer in this sense. Only such international intervention can create the necessary conditions for Cubans to overcome the manipulation of the political police and their own shortcomings and limits.

Our second recommendation is recognition and legitimacy. The Castro regime interprets and manipulates even the slightest international recognition, and uses it as evidence of universal acceptance of the island's status quo. If the international community recognizes Cuban civic leaders, those leaders will be able to prove to the Cuban population that there is a national alternative in the country. It is necessary that Latin America as a whole opens

its doors to the civic movement on the island as was the case with the Embassies of the European Union, Canada and the US. It is essential that the international community supports the open letter to the civic movement, signed by six former presidents of Costa Rica and more than three hundred Latin American statesmen, which asks the Embassies of Latin America to open their doors to contact with the opposition in Havana. The third initiative we ask for is that during the following year, each of the four hundred political prisoners is “adopted” by either an activist, intellectual or politician.

The last initiative we request should focus on stopping the repression. Historical experience has proved that in a totalitarian society, all those in positions of power become the tools of repression and are consequently accountable for that repression. Therefore the anonymity of these officials is a perfect shelter for those who violate human rights. The moment has come to end the anonymity in Cuba. The International Committee, in cooperation with human rights activists in Cuba and abroad, with the families of the political prisoners and with the political prisoners themselves must make a list of Cuban officials that violate human rights. We consequently urge the world democracies to prohibit entry to their countries for those people that violate human rights in Cuba. I truly believe that the freedom of Cuba can be achieved by the efforts of the people themselves as there are Cubans fighting daily to achieve this as soon as possible. Cubans are and will be able to establish a just and free system that respects human dignity. May the support demonstrated by international meetings and summits transmit to the island messages of unity, recognition and the end of repression.