

Cuba since COVID: Communist Party represses social unrest

Category: Civil Liberties/Repression

written by Dan Fischer | June 24, 2024



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The last major protest in Cuba was on 17 March 2024. The government's public response was to ease the situation by granting the protestors some of the demands they were making. They were not explicitly political. In the eastern part of the country, a food shortage was being aggravated by an electricity cut lasting from over 10 hours to even more than half of the day in small towns. Several days after the service was re-established and supplies delivered, police had detained up to 41 people according to Prisoners Defenders. Since 2020, there's been more than 900 people jailed for various acts of dissent. The peak was reached during the demonstrations of July 11th 2021 when the Cuban state shut the door to any possible dialogue between the common people and the rulers. [Learn more about July 11th 2021]

Many intellectuals found this to be a turning point. "For a time, I trusted with my good faith that the current Cuban political system could be reformed by its own initiative but then I got convinced that it won't" says Alina Bárbara López, a professor and historian with a PhD. in History of Cuban Thought from *Central University Marta Abreu of Las Villas*. Since March 2023, she has been carrying out an act of civic protest on the 18th of every month. "Mechanisms of social pressure must be used to generate transformations". As a prestigious scholar, her presence has been constant in the Cuban alternative media since 2017 when she started as a writer in *La Joven Cuba* and where she acted as a coordinator from January 2021 to January 2023. She also had appearances in *Cuba Próxima*, *Cuba Posible* and *El Toque*. Since July 24th of last year, she has been building up and co-directing "CubaXCuba - Civic Thought Laboratory".

What are her demands? **In the first place, a democratically elected Constitutional Assembly to redact a new constitution that would be effective in all its parts.** Right now, the Cuban constitution is full of contradictions. Though it recognizes all fundamental rights, they get subordinated to the interests of the Single Party and the so called "Socialism" without a clear separation of powers. A leaked video of the main figure of the Judicial Branch, Rubén Remigio, Presidente of the Popular Supreme Court, clearly stated it. He declared, as he gave instructions to his subordinates, that the Cuban judges act to favor the Party. The Criminal Code blatantly shows this. There's a criminalization of every possible way of dissent under the guise of "mercenarism".

This does not imply that dissidents are receiving a payment in exchange of their political actions or declarations, but simply that their dissent is favorable to a foreign power. Even posting on social media could be subject to criminal prosecution. The application of the Law -which sometimes isn't applied- corresponds to the "National Interest". Which means the ruling class' interest, not the Constitution's interest itself. A clear example was *Archipiélago's** call for a march. Even though that protest is a political right, and that the legal procedure was respected by the organizers, authorities denied its authorization and waged instead a campaign to discredit the most visible figures, who ended up exiled in order to avoid prison.

The **second demand** directly appeals to the legacy of the Cuban Revolution. **The state should not ignore the situation of the elderly, retired, pensioners and families in extreme poverty.** Raúl Castro promised that "no Cuban would go helpless" when he announced the economic reforms. Since the COVID crisis, this has become empty words because the economy rests on tourism. In the summer of 2021, COVID reached its peak leading to the collapse of the Health System with a shortage of food and medical supplies. The results were the protests of 11, 12 and 13 of July. The biggest since 1959. Hurricane Ian's devastation led to more protests as the whole country's electrical system went into a blackout. That's not to mention the persistent shortage of food, of medical supplies and oil. It's been that way for the last couple of years. The Cuban state blames it on the embargo, on the financial persecution and on information campaigns. The truth is that they keep investing in hotels while putting almost no money into hospitals, transportation, production of food or in fixing the always broken thermo-electrics. During April of last year, eleven ships were unable to unload their food cargo due to the Government's lack of funds to pay them. Another cargo fled to another country after several days of sailing around the island. It was carrying oil that would have helped to lessen the electrical blackouts.

The Cuban Communist Party instigated a dollarization of the economy through privatization. License is needed for private imports which has become the principal food supply for the population. At the same time, inflation is growing. If some make a living with three dollars a month, the prices are however almost the same as in Switzerland or even higher. All of it is possible assuming they have access to very cheap markets such as Brazil, Mexico, Canada, Panama or even the USA (which allows trade with private companies).

The **third demand is the liberation of all political prisoners without mandatory exile.** As it's been said already, the number of people incarcerated for political reasons has increased dramatically in the last four years. The allegations of conspiracy are proven wrong by the evidence used by the state. None of the many videos from July 11th show what could be called an organized protest without internal crowd security. Most protestors are unarmed, unmasked and highly dispersed. Yet many of them were accused of sedition. Several people were even condemned to the harshest penalty, up to 25 years in jail. Last April, a 21-year-old girl from Camagüey was sentenced to 15 years in prison. Her crime? Her Facebook Live stream of the August 2022 protest, was considered "enemy propaganda" and "sedition". For many dissidents, the alternative to prison is fleeing. Many are encouraged by the State Security Department to abandon the country and others are not allowed to come back. Some are notified when they are about to board their plane, but a few pass the security control and are forced to return to where they came, without being able to land.

The **fourth demand is to put an end to the police harassment of those using their freedom of speech and protest.** The last couple of years have been a testimony for Alina of how State Security treats Cuban dissent. She's suffered a limitation of movement that goes from a police guard outside her house not allowing her to go out, to a non-legal detention in the check point outside Matanzas, where she lives, while she was heading to Havana on last April 18th. A video shows her held inside a police car under the sun. The air conditioner was off and she was forced and beaten inside which left a sprain on her shoulder. Her cell signal or internet were blocked. Her trial, where

she was convicted of disobedience, could have led her to jail. She was fined instead, but she refused to pay. The State decided to seize the money from her personal accounts in a very foggy procedure since getting her to jail would create a scandal. [Edit: *this article was written on June 17th 2024. The following day the author learned that Alina Bárbara was beaten again by the police. Her testimony is available below in the Youtube video*]

“The conditions in Cuba are tough for those dissenting” she says. “If one dissident is an intellectual, they will be excluded in every possible way and pushed to accept exile. I have refused to flee Cuba and that strengthens the pressure on me. Nevertheless, I believe it is possible to get involved even in this limited way. It would be important if we all coordinate our citizenship since we are isolated from each other. That would be a new challenge and most likely also create an increase of repression.”

**Archipelago was an attempt to create a civic movement through Facebook*