

DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT DEBATES

From Prison to Exile – Oppositional Journalists in Cuba

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Cuba is the only Latin American country that imprisons journalists for criticising the regime and routinely exiles them both internally and abroad. According to the Cuban Constitution of 1976, only the state and in some cases the Catholic Church have the right to pass information on to the people. Journalists Lamasiel Gutiérrez Romero and Néstor Rodríguez Lobaina were persecuted for defending human rights before being forced to live in exile in Europe.

Both of you were imprisoned in your homeland Cuba. Why were you put in jail?

Romero:

I was imprisoned in 2005 because in my articles I continually criticized the human rights violations committed by the Cuban regime against both criminals and the civil population. My news, features and reports showed how the minimum standards for the treatment of prisoners were being ignored in the Cuban jails. I denounced the plight of political prisoners of conscience as well as the harassment of reporters. In response to an article criticizing the causes and effects of child prostitution, which is practiced with the silent and tacit approval of the Cuban government, they arrested me. I became the only woman journalist imprisoned in Cuba, together with 26 independent journalists jailed during the so-called Wave of Repression of 2003.

Lobaina:

Actually, I have been imprisoned several times since I started criticising Cuban totalitarianism in 1991. I had founded a peaceful civic movement for democratisation and respect of human rights and paid a very high price: I spent over 10 years in jail, not to mention my 300 arbitrary detentions, part of the harassment policy carried out by agents of the Cuban military junta, forced internal exile and house arrest.

How were you treated in jail?

Romero:

Common criminals in Cuban prisons suffer beatings, hunger and malnutrition and are often subjected to sodomy by violent inmates and the prison guards. I was subjected to several beatings that inflicted moderate damage to my spine and neck. They were ordered by security officers of the state and the Director of the School of Rehabilitation, Mirurgia Torres. I had bruises all over my body. This was my punishment for defending the human rights of the ordinary prisoners who suffer daily humiliations.

Lobaina:

It would be impossible to tell you in a few lines about all the torture, the beatings and other cruel treatment that not only political prisoners, but all prisoners suffer. The Cuban regime does not meet the internationally agreed protocols and ignores the rules established for the treatment of prisoners. For more details you will have to wait until my exposé, "Between the Terror and the Shadow", written in secrecy in the Cuban jails, is published. It not only tells of my life in prison but also of the battle being waged by the most important oppositional youth movement after the Cuban "revolution".

What made you fight for human rights in the face of such repression?

Lobaina:

After the democratic transitions in many Eastern European countries, people there finally experienced the difference between totalitarianism and rule of law. In Cuba, people don't even know democracy, much less rule of law. We decided to defend those rights at the dawn of the 90s in spite of the risk we would run. The fall of the Berlin Wall was our inspiration, the democratic wave moving through the former Stalinist Empire gave us courage and was a light in the dark night of Castro communism for the Cuban civic movement.

In Cuba, the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights is considered a subversive document by the regime. Defending these rights leads to imprisonment or at least political repression and persecution. If you are not a "revolutionary" in Cuba, you have no right to anything and are considered a social pariah. You have two possibilities: Blind obedience or ostracism, jail, exile and even death, as befell our brother Orlando Zapata Tamayo. (Editor's note: Tamayo was a Cuban dissident who died in jail after an 85-day hunger strike in February 2010.)

What role do media play in the fight for human rights?

Romero:

The media play an important role in advocating human rights, because they help to disseminate the latest world and national news. This counteracts the propaganda propagated by the Communist media and gives people a chance to develop their own perspectives on Cuba and the world. This could result in an awakening of the masses, it might raise awareness that could inspire people to try to change their reality for the sake of their own well-being.

I have denounced the social crisis in and the economic policy of my country in various ways, such as through radio and international websites such as "Radio Martí", "Misceláneas de Cuba", "Cuba net" and "Nueva Prensa Cubana". The totalitarian regime does not allow alternative means of communication to coexist and exercises complete control over all publications and "official" websites. They are willing to censor everything that is published on the island. During my exile in Prague in the Czech Republic, I have worked as a correspondent for "Misceláneas de Cuba" and "Cuba Europe", a digital and a print magazine published in Prague.

What content is censored in Cuba and using what kinds of measures?

Romero:

Censorship in Cuba is accomplished by various means which include state security and the political police closing websites via electronic account lockouts, eavesdropping on phone calls and reading the emails of people of operational interest. They hack into both email accounts and accounts in social networks and cut off phone calls. The prohibition on accessing the internet by "Etecsa Cuba", Cuba's telecommunications company, is the most humiliating part of this censorship. This national company allows full internet access to foreigners, but not to their own countrymen. Furthermore, in Cuba, all books, magazines and newspapers are censored by a committee of the Communist Party of Cuba (Partido Comunista de Cuba, PCC) by express order from the regime's top leadership. This also holds true for all Cuban provinces and municipalities. None of the art produced by painters, sculptors, musicians or filmmakers can be shown in public without first being approved by the committee.

Do Cubans realize that they receive censored information? What ways do they have to access independent news?

Romero:

The vast majority of the Cuban population receives uncensored information daily. The official journal

of the PCC, Granma, is the most read, but also the most loathed. The newspaper people prefer is published by the largest movement in Cuba: Juventud Rebelde. It addresses social issues such as complaints of citizens about bureaucratic mechanisms. These complaints are edited beforehand and its editors put special emphasis on writing the complaints in a way that does not criticize the Cuban regime – complaints are only permitted against institutions, state enterprises and services. Some NGOs abroad, such as People in Need, based in Prague, and the International Society for Human Rights (Internationale Gesellschaft für Menschenrechte, IGFM) in Germany, send magazines and brochures with alternative information. They report on the repression of opponents' independent communications or the situation of political prisoners in the Cuban jails, for example. This is information to which Cuban society has no access through the state media. To circumvent censorship, friends of IGFM patiently send material with tourists and friends who visit Cuba. This material is passed hand to hand and read avidly by Cubans, who are tired of the propaganda and lies that they hear and read daily. Independent journalists also record news from the internet on DVDs, CDs or flash memory devices.

Lobaina:

Official censorship in Cuba is harsh but at the same time vulnerable. There are a lot of alternative informational materials circulating in Cuba. The pro-democracy activists clandestinely produce magazines and newsletters and find ways to promote their programmes via computer.

But this is not enough. We need international solidarity and have to join efforts to free once and for all these enslaved people who have already suffered more than half a century of oppression, lack of freedom and social prosperity. Think of what happened in South Africa to end apartheid: Thanks to international pressure, the people were freed.

You both continue to fight for human rights in your homeland. How do you try to reach the Cuban population from exile?

Romero:

I am a correspondent for "Misceláneas de Cuba" and for the digital magazine Cuba Europe and I work for the IGFM journal. In Cuba I contributed regularly to Cubanet. Together with "Misceláneas de Cuba" they are the most read magazines in Cuba. Thousands of individuals who manage to access the internet follow Cubanet magazine. IGFM circulates these journals inside the prison. There are also dozens of independent libraries in Cuba despite the repression and the confiscation of printed and electronic media; they are hidden among the Cuban people.

Lobaina:

From exile, of course, it is harder to fight for freedom and the rights of Cubans, but it is not impossible. Despite the shackles of censorship, we have learned to break this iron curtain. Even though internet access is limited, Cubans are always looking for ways to go online. Many of the calls for civic initiatives that have been successfully implemented by members of the internal peaceful resistance came from the Cuban exiles; and here the media play an important role. For example, many Cubans listen to the radio stations that broadcast on shortwave, transmitting our voices and sending messages of freedom. But I think a media movement to strengthen international solidarity would help strengthen the weak and blocked media arriving from southern Florida. The allegiance of democratic countries around the world must be on the side of those who defend democracy and respect for human rights and not behind those who support tyranny and dictatorial authoritarianism. Organizations such as the IGFM play an important role. For years the IGFM has successfully supported the human rights movement in Cuba.

How would you rate the current political situation? As Raul Castro announces more economic freedoms and the ability to travel for Cubans, journalists continue to die in prison. Has there been a real breakthrough in terms of the freedom granted the population, or is it just propaganda?

Romero:

Cuba is in deep crisis. After the layoffs of more than a million workers, the changes announced by the government are not more than cosmetic measures intended to perpetuate the regime and save time. Thousands of licenses have been approved for entrepreneurs, but there is no wholesale market where they can purchase the equipment they need to develop their businesses. Corrupt police officers and inspectors still harass and persecute independent workers. The measures were created in a hurry, as a social release valve on the pressure cooker that is Cuba right now: Hunger, misery and hopelessness are reflected on the faces of the people in Cuba more than ever before.

With regard to the lift on travel bans, it is important to note that the average salary for a Cuban is still one of the lowest in Latin America: With 250 Cuban pesos, about 10 US dollars, people have to pay for electricity, water and food. There is nothing left for travel. Furthermore, in order to travel outside of Cuba, people need a permit popularly known as the "carte blanche" and if you do not meet certain criteria such as belonging to the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution or another communist mass organisation, this permit will simply not be granted. People considered counterrevolutionaries (as the Cuban government calls dissidents or people apathetic to the common process) are constantly being prevented from leaving Cuba.

While most journalists who were imprisoned in Cuba are now out of prison and in exile in Spain or other countries, the regime continues to violate freedom of expression on the island. Short detentions, threats, beatings and other forms of harassment such as terrible acts of repudiation and threats of lynching by individual members of the rapid response brigades, which are really just paramilitary mobs, are inflicted on independent journalists opponents by the regime. In Cuba no citizen is free to think, not in the media and not in the government, or to travel freely either inside or outside of Cuba. They can't democratically elect the government they want, access internet nor are they free to found associations.

Lobaina:

The situation remains the same or even worse. The crisis deepens as does universal discontent. People don't see any other solution than a radical change to achieve freedom and economic prosperity.

The announcements made by Raul Castro before his never-changing congress (because it contains the same people as under Fidel Castro), were the greatest parody ever expressed by these kings and executioners of the Cuban nation. Saying that Cubans can travel now doesn't mean anything when the average salary is 8 € a month for the proletariat who they say was "released" in 1959.

On the other hand, they have released a handful of key oppositional leaders from jail in response to international pressure, and they met with the European Union and other countries that were concerned about the Cuban tragedy. Nevertheless, the Cuban government continues to imprison journalists and opponents of the regime. It is therefore important to maintain the EU's common position. This is the right way to build bridges of solidarity with the victims of totalitarianism and dictatorship of the Castros.