

# Cuba and the Number of “Political Prisoners”

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The question of the number of “political prisoners” in Cuba is subject to controversy. According to the Cuban government, there are no political prisoners in Cuba, rather they are people convicted of crimes listed in the penal code, particularly the act of receiving funding from a foreign power. In its 2010 report, Amnesty International (AI) describes “55 prisoners of conscience”<sup>1</sup>, of whom 20 were released in July 2010, followed by another six on August 15, 2010 after mediation by the Catholic Church and Spain, and later another two.<sup>2</sup> Thus, according to AI, there are currently 27 “political prisoners” in Cuba. Finally, the Cuban opposition and, more precisely, Elizardo Sánchez of the Commission on Human Rights and National Reconciliation (CDHRN) put the number at 147 political prisoners, minus the 6 recently freed, in other words, 141.<sup>3</sup> The Western media favor this latter list.

First, before raising the question of the exact number of “political prisoners” in Cuba, it is worth clarifying one aspect of this issue, i.e., the existence or non-existence of financing of the Cuban opposition by the United States.

This policy, carried out clandestinely from 1959 to 1991, is now public and confirmed by many sources. Indeed, Washington has acknowledged this fact in various documents and official statements. The 1992 Torricelli law, in particular section 1705, states that “the United States Government may provide assistance, through appropriate nongovernmental organizations, for the support of individuals and organizations to promote nonviolent democratic change in Cuba.”<sup>4</sup> The Helms-Burton Act of 1996 provides in Section 109 that “the President [of the United States] is authorized to furnish assistance and provide other support for individuals and independent nongovernmental organizations to support democracy-building efforts for Cuba.”<sup>5</sup> The first report of the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba proposed the development of a “solid support program that promotes Cuban civil society.”<sup>6</sup> Among the measures envisaged was funding, totaling \$36 million dollars, destined to “supporting the democratic opposition and strengthening an emerging civil society.” The second report of the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba proposed a budget of \$31 million to further finance the internal opposition.<sup>7</sup> The plan also provided for “the training and equipping of independent print, radio, and TV journalists in Cuba.”<sup>8</sup>

The U.S. diplomatic mission in Havana – the U.S. Interests Section (USINT) – has confirmed this in a statement: “The U.S. policy has long been to provide humanitarian assistance to

the Cuban people, specifically to families of political prisoners. We also allow private organizations to do the same.” 9

Laura Pollán, of the dissident group “Ladies in White”, admits receiving money from the U.S.<sup>10</sup>: “We accept help, support, from the extreme right to the left, without conditions.”<sup>11</sup> The opposition leader Vladimiro Roca admits that Cuban dissidents are subsidized by Washington, claiming that the financial assistance received is “totally and completely legal.” For the dissident René Gómez, financial support from the United States “is not something that has to be hidden nor that we have to be ashamed of.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly, government opponent Elizardo Sánchez confirmed the existence of U.S. financing: “The key point is not who sent the aid, but what is done with the aid.” <sup>13</sup>

The Western press admits this reality. *Agence France-Presse* reported that “the dissidents, for their part, appeal for and accept such financial assistance.<sup>14</sup> The Spanish news agency *EFE* refers to “opponents paid by the United States.”<sup>15</sup> According to the British press agency *Reuters*, “the US government openly provides federally-funded support for dissident activities, which Cuba considers an illegal act.”<sup>16</sup> The U.S. newsgathering agency *Associated Press* says that the policy of manufacturing and financing internal opposition is not new: “Over the years, the U.S. government has spent many millions of dollars to support Cuba’s opposition”.<sup>17</sup> It states, “Part of the funding comes directly from the U.S. government, whose laws promote the overthrow of the Cuban government.” <sup>18</sup>

Wayne S. Smith is a former diplomat who was head of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana from 1979 to 1982. According to him, it is completely “illegal and unwise to send money to the Cuban dissidents”.<sup>19</sup> He added that, “No one should give money to the dissidents, much less for the purpose of overthrowing the Cuban government” since “when the US declares its objective is to overthrow the government of Cuba and later admits that one of the means of achieving that goal is to provide funds to the Cuban dissidents, these dissidents find themselves de facto in the position of agents paid by a foreign power to overthrow their own government.” <sup>20</sup>

Let’s recall now the position of Amnesty International. The organization speaks of 27 “political prisoners” in Cuba as of August 15, 2010. Nevertheless, at the same time AI recognizes that these individuals were charged for having “received funds and/or materials from the United States government in order to engage in activities the authorities perceived as subversive and damaging to Cuba”.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the organization found itself in a contradiction, in that international law considers the financing of the internal opposition in another sovereign nation to be illegal. Every country in the world has a judicial arsenal establishing the illegality of such conduct. U.S. and European laws, among others, strongly sanction the act of receiving funds from a foreign power.

The list put together by Elizardo Sánchez is longer and includes all sorts of individuals. Among the 141 names, ten were freed due to health, leaving a total of 131 people. With regard to these 10 individuals, Sánchez explained that he keeps them on the list because they could be jailed again in the future. Another four individuals served their sentences and

left prison. Thus 127 people remain. Another 27 people are to be released prior to October, according to the agreement signed between Havana, Spain, and the Catholic Church.

Of the 100 remaining individuals, about half were imprisoned for violent crimes. Some carried out armed incursions into Cuba and at least two of them, Humberto Eladio Real Suárez and Ernesto Cruz León, are responsible for the deaths of various civilians in 1994 and 1997 respectively.<sup>22</sup>

Ricardo Alarcón, the president of the Cuban Parliament, emphasized these contradictions, “Curiously, our critics talk about a list... Why don’t they explain that they are asking for freedom for the person who murdered Fabio di Celmo?” <sup>23</sup>

The *Associated Press* (AP) also emphasized the dubious nature of Sánchez’s list and indicates that “some of those would not normally be seen as political prisoners.” “But a closer look will find bombers, hijackers and intelligence agents.” The AP points out that among the 100 people, “about half were convicted of terrorism, hijacking or other violent crimes, and four are former military or intelligence agents convicted of espionage or revealing state secrets.” <sup>24</sup>

For its part, Amnesty International confirms that it can not consider the people on Sanchez’s list to be “prisoners of conscience” because it includes “people brought to trial for terrorism, espionage and those who tried, or actually succeeded, in blowing up hotels”, according to the organization. “We certainly would not call for their release or describe them as prisoners of conscience.” <sup>25</sup>

Miguel Moratinos, the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, who played a pivotal role in the agreement for the liberation of the 52 prisoners, also has called into question the validity of Sánchez’s list and has underscored its imprecise character: “They don’t say that 300 must be freed, because there are not 300. The Cuban Human Rights Commission’s own list, a week before I arrived there, spoke of there being 202. The day before I arrived in Cuba, the Commission said there were 167.” <sup>26</sup>

After the freeing of the other 27 persons included in the June 2010 agreement, there remained only one “political prisoner” in Cuba, Rolando Jiménez Pozada, according to Amnesty International. The *Associated Press* for its part points out that in fact this individual is “jailed on charges of disobedience and revealing state secrets.” <sup>27</sup>

Curiously, the list developed by Sánchez, which is the least reliable of the lists and which has been criticized from all sides due to the inclusion of individuals convicted of grave acts of terrorism, is favored by the western press.

The Cuban government has made a notable gesture by proceeding to free prisoners considered to be “political prisoners” by the U.S. and some organizations, such as Amnesty International. The primary obstacle to the normalization of relations between Washington and Havana – from the point of view of the Obama government – no longer exists. That being the case, it is up to the White House to make a reciprocal gesture and put an end to the anachronistic and ineffective economic sanctions against the Cuban people.

Article in french : [Cuba et le nombre de « prisonniers politiques »](#), August 16th 2010.

*Translated by David Brookbank*

## Notes

1 *Amnesty International*, «Rapport 2010. La situation des droits humains dans le monde», May 2010. [http://thereport.amnesty.org/sites/default/files/AIR2010\\_AZ\\_FR.pdf](http://thereport.amnesty.org/sites/default/files/AIR2010_AZ_FR.pdf) (website consulted June 7, 2010), pp. 87-88.

2 *EFE*, «Damas piden a España acoger a más presos políticos», 25 de julio de 2010; Carlos Batista, «Disidencia deplora 'destierro' de ex presos», *El Nuevo Herald*, August 15, 2010.

3 *EFE*, «Damas piden a España acoger a más presos políticos», July 25, 2010.

4 *Cuban Democracy Act*, Title XVII, Section 1705, 1992.

5 *Helms-Burton Act*, Title I, Section 109, 1996.

6 Colin L. Powell, *Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba*, (Washington: United States Department of State, May 2004). [www.state.gov/documents/organization/32334.pdf](http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/32334.pdf) (website consulted May 7, 2004), pp. 16, 22.

7 Condolezza Rice & Carlos Gutierrez, *Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba*, (Washington: United States Department of State, July 2006). [www.caafc.gov/documents/organization/68166.pdf](http://www.caafc.gov/documents/organization/68166.pdf) (website consulted July 12, 2006), p. 20.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

9 *Associated Press/El Nuevo Herald*, «Cuba: EEUU debe tomar 'medidas' contra diplomáticos», May 19, 2008.

10 *Associated Press*, "Cuban Dissident Confirms She Received Cash from Private US Anti-Castro Group", May 20, 2008.

11 *El Nuevo Herald*, «Disidente cubana teme que pueda ser encarcelada», May 21, 2008.

12 Patrick Bèle, «Cuba accuse Washington de payer les dissidents», *Le Figaro*, May 21, 2008.

13 *Agence France-Presse*, «Prensa estatal cubana hace inusual entrevista callejera a disidentes», May 22, 2008.

14 *Agence France-Presse*, «Financement de la dissidence: Cuba 'somme' Washington de s'expliquer», May 22, 2008.

15 *EFE*, «Un diputado cubano propone nuevos castigos a opositores pagados por EE UU», May 28, 2008.

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17 Ben Feller, "Bush Touts Cuban Life after Castro", *Associated Press*, October 24, 2007.

18 Will Weissert, «Activistas cubanos dependen del financiamiento extranjero», *Associated Press*, August 15, 2008.

19 *Radio Habana Cuba*, "Former Chief of US Interests Section in Havana Wayne Smith Says Sending Money to Mercenaries in Cuba is Illegal", May 21, 2008.

20 Wayne S. Smith, "New Cuba Commission Report: Formula for Continued Failure", *Center for International Policy*, July 10, 2006.

21 *Amnesty International*, Cuba: Five years too many, new government must release jailed

dissidents, March 18, 2008.  
<http://www.amnesty.org/en/for-media/press-releases/cuba-five-years-too-many-new-government-must-release-jailed-dissidents-2> (website consulted April 23, 2008).

22 Juan O. Tamayo, «¿Cuántos presos políticos hay en la isla?», *El Nuevo Herald*, July 22, 2010.

23 José Luis Fraga, «Alarcón: presos liberados pueden quedarse en Cuba y podrían ser más de 52», *Agence France-Presse*, July 20, 2010.

24 Paul Haven, “Number of Political Prisoners in Cuba Still Murky”, *Associated Press*, July 23, 2010.

25 *Ibid.*

26 *EFE*, “España pide a UE renovar relación con Cuba”, July 27, 2010.

27 Paul Haven, “Number of Political Prisoners in Cuba Still Murky”, *op. cit.*

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*[http://www.amazon.fr/Cuba-Medias-Vous-Diront-Jamais/dp/2953128417/ref=pd\\_rhf\\_p\\_t\\_1](http://www.amazon.fr/Cuba-Medias-Vous-Diront-Jamais/dp/2953128417/ref=pd_rhf_p_t_1)*

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