

Freedom for the Remaining “Cuban Five”

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On December 17, 2014, simultaneous public television announcements were made by Cuban President Raúl Castro and U.S. President Barack Obama. They both indicated that steps are being taken toward the normalization of relations between the two neighbours. In this context, the two presidents announced what is known commonly, if not diplomatically, as a “prisoner swap.” This includes the liberation of Alan Gross, held in a Cuban prisoner for illegal activities that violated Cuban laws and sovereignty, and one other prisoner held on the island. For the Cuban side, the governments announced the simultaneous release of the three Cuban Five who remained in prison: Gerardo Hernández, Ramón Labañino and Antonio (Tony) Guerrero. All three prisoners were immediately repatriated to Cuba the same day.

This exchange of prisoners on humanitarian grounds is based on consensual agreements by two sovereign countries. This means that Gerardo Hernández – who had been serving two concurrent life sentences on the basis of false accusations that were never proven in court – will not die in prison. He is now free with his family and his wife, who was denied the right to visit him for the more than 16 years that he spent in U.S. jails and penitentiaries. This was the first thing that came to my mind when I heard the reports this morning. Gerardo will return to Cuba alive and not – had this swap not taken place – as a cadaver on a cold stretcher. While Ramón and Tony would eventually have been freed (on October 30, 2024 and September 18, 2017, respectively) – assuming they survived their lengthy sentences – Gerardo was in fact condemned to a tortuous and slow death within the walls of the savage jungle known as the U.S. penal system. He likely never would have seen his wife again, even under the coldest and most hostile of circumstances that constitute “visiting rights.”

The second emotion that swept over me was that Ramón and Tony are also now finally free and in the arms of their family members, who dreaded never seeing each other again. This was the case with Tony’s mother, who lived with and despaired at the thought that she would pass away without ever again freely holding her son in her arms. They are now together. Ramón’s wife will finally see the fruit of her long struggle over these many years in favour of the freedom of all members of the Cuban Five. Ramón’s daughters have finally been awarded a family atmosphere with their father back in Cuba, where he belongs.

The third thing that came to mind was the already freed Cuban Five members Fernando González and René Gonzalez. Whenever I have seen them on Cuban television, I have felt their emotions and appreciated their words: they would never feel free and in fact be free until the other three Cubans were back at home. It must have been gruelling for them to taste freedom, knowing that their brothers did not yet have it. Their cruel reality ended today.

And so, finally, the Cuban Five are free.

Special recognition must be given to the Cuban government, in addition to the millions around the world who have demanded that justice be done. The Cuban government and its foreign affairs ministry have been outstanding figures on the world scale since January 1, 1959. This tradition has been characterized, among other features, by the upholding of principles while being flexible on tactics. I have never seen the Cuban government give one inch on principle. However, they have also used flexible tactics to advance not only their cause, but also that of the peoples around the world. This prisoner swap, part of the wider context of normalization of relations between the two neighbours, will enter into the annals of Cuban foreign policy as another of its great triumphs.

However, let us make no mistake about this: the greatest heroes of this historical gain are the Cuban Five. This is so because they never gave in to U.S. pressures to have them surrender and denounce the Cuban Revolution for the sake of their own freedom. The Cuban Five thus won their personal freedom based on their own infinite courage and persistence as part of the Cuban Revolution.

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