

Political Prisoners Remain Behind Bars as Obama's Term Nears End

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In the last full week of Barack Obama's eight year tenure as President of the United States of America, [dozens of political prisoners](#) still sit in cages across the nation's prisons, rotting away as Obama consciously chooses not to exercise the power to simply free them with the stroke of a pen. Many activists for Puerto Rican independence, Native American and African American rights, and other causes were targeted by the political police's illegal COINTELPRO program and convicted in sham trials. Now elderly, some in poor health, they may effectively be facing death sentences unless Obama's decides within the next two weeks to grant their appeals for clemency.

Among the most well known political prisoners are [Oscar López Rivera](#), [Leonard Peltier](#) and [Mumia Abu-Jamal](#), who have all been locked up for at least three and a half decades. Many [others](#) including [The Move 9](#) and [The Holy Land Five](#) have spent years or decades in jail for their political action and views. Many, like Chelsea Manning and Jeffrey Sterling, have been denied their freedom for exposing government crimes and misdeeds. But you won't ever hear this in the mainstream media. The corporate media hypocrisy is best demonstrated by the debate regarding political prisoners during Obama's trip to Cuba in March 2016.

The U.S. government pretends that it always promotes human rights around the world and opposes human rights violations by other countries it considers adversaries. Hence, part of the propaganda narrative on Cuba is that it unjustly holds political prisoners as part of its campaign to repress the Cuban people – something that would never occur in the United States itself.

During a joint press conference with Obama and Cuban President Raúl Castro, CNN's Jim Acosta asked Castro why the Cuban government held political prisoners and whether he would release them. Castro responded by asking for the names of people Acosta was referring to, and said that if he was given a list, they would be free by that evening. Acosta did not name anyone. [CNN](#) declared that Castro "[skirts](#) question on political prisoners." The press coverage treated it as self-evident that only the Cuban government should have to defend itself against allegations of human rights abuses. It was taken for granted that the U.S. President would not have to answer the same question.

By the time the meeting between Obama and Castro took place, all detainees in Cuba considered by Amnesty International prisoners of conscience had already been [released](#). Meanwhile, Amnesty has directly called on Obama to [free Leonard Peltier](#). They have produced multiple [reports](#) on his [case](#). However, no news organization questioned why an American reporter who covers the U.S. President every day had never bothered asking Obama – before or during the press conference in Cuba – about U.S. political prisoners.

When I asked Acosta via [Twitter](#) why he was silent about U.S. political prisoners and whether he would call on Obama to free Peltier, he did not respond. In the following months, he has [not responded](#) to multiple inquiries about his refusal to ask the same questions of his own President that he does of leaders of foreign countries.

Many journalists working in the American mainstream media see themselves as being on the same team as their own government, safely staying on the side of U.S. power by acting as a mouthpiece to promote the government's own narrative and only opposing those countries and leaders that the U.S. government declares adversaries.

As the corporate press refuses to acknowledge that the U.S. has political prisoners, it is left to grassroots groups to demand justice. Recently, separate petitions calling for clemency for López Rivera and Peltier were created through the White House's We the People web site, where citizen petitions that receive 100,000 signatures receive a response from the White House.

Both petitions exceeded the threshold and received the same [dismissive response](#), which passed the buck to the Department of Justice's Pardon Attorney and refused to comment on the individual cases:

"The President takes his constitutional power to grant clemency very seriously, and recommendations from the Department of Justice are carefully considered before decisions are made. The White House does not comment, however, on individual pardon applications. In accordance with this policy and the We the People Terms of Participation - which explain that the White House may sometimes choose not to respond to petitions addressing certain matters - the White House declines to comment on the specific case addressed in this petition."

Translation: The President doesn't actually respect citizens' right to participate in decision making, and feels free to ignore them whenever he chooses. The We the People web site is merely a propaganda tool to give the illusion that the president is accountable to the citizens he purportedly serves.

Indeed, Obama has closed his eyes and ears and shut out the voices of millions of people who have spent his entire presidency calling on him to show basic human decency and stop the perpetration of historic injustices against López, Peltier, Abu-Jamal and many other political prisoners.

Throughout his term, Obama has been [called on](#) by fellow Nobel Peace Prize laureates, foreign leaders, Puerto Rican politicians and others to free López Rivera. The case has become perhaps the most important political issue on the island, as well as among Puerto Ricans and allies in the diaspora.

Former President Jimmy Carter, who [commuted](#) the prison sentences of four Puerto Rican nationalists, including Lolita Lebron and Rafael Cancel Miranda, who participated in attacks on the Blair House and the U.S. House of Representatives in the early 1950s, recently asked Obama to free López Rivera, as he himself had done for Puerto Rican prisoners convicted of more serious charges. (Carter's Dec. 13 letter to Obama was not reported in any American mainstream outlet, only in Puerto Rican press such as [El Nuevo Dia](#).)

Puerto Ricans who are denied their right to self-determination and relegated to second-class citizenship have been unrelenting in continuing to demand that Obama grant López Rivera his freedom, despite years of being ignored by Washington.

Massive rallies have been held annually in San Juan and across the island on the anniversary of López Rivera's incarceration each May. The group 35 Mujeres por Oscar (35 Women for Oscar) holds regular gatherings, the most recent on Jan. 6 for López's [birthday](#). A branch of the group in New York City does the same.

A demonstration in October in front of the White House was attended by nearly 1,000 people – many who took buses from Philadelphia and New York City – who rallied for López Rivera. Puerto Rican recording artist René Pérez (AKA Residente of the band Calle 13), said that the government of the United States should be seeking forgiveness from Oscar López Rivera and the people of Puerto Rico, rather than the other way around. His speech is worth quoting at length:

“We’re here in the United States of America, in front of the government that has enslaved us for more than 100 years. The government that in exchange for a passport took our families to its wars. The government that experimented with our people, since they came implanting its language by force. The government that performed medical experiments on our grandparents injecting them with cancerous cells. The government that experimented with anticonceptive pills on our island. We, who understand [López Rivera’s] fight, are here to tell this government – the only government in the history of humanity to fire atomic bombs – that they have in prison a hero much braver than Washington. That this hero has been imprisoned longer than Mandela. That this hero became a hero without hoping for anything in return. We, who understand the fight of Oscar López are in front of the White House to tell this government that every additional second Oscar López spends in prison converts him in a hero much bigger than any of the heroes the United States has had. We are here to tell this government that even though the history books don’t tell us the real history that includes heroes like Oscar López, we will take charge of telling it. We, who understand the fight of Oscar López, are here to tell this government that we will never ask forgiveness for defending our right to be free. So we don’t ask them to forgive Oscar, but that they recognize the true history of the world, that they recognize the history of Puerto Rico, and maybe some day, after they free Oscar, we will forgive them.”

Obama has chosen to ignore the massive injustice committed against political prisoners in American gulags while [lecturing](#) others that people shouldn’t be imprisoned for their political beliefs. He either refuses to acknowledge or refuses to care that the government he leads can – and often does – use the legal system punitively to silence those whose political views and actions threaten its perpetuation of the status quo, and to intimidate others into abandoning resistance. As Pérez said, perhaps someday people will forgive him.

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