



Cuba Cracks Down on Dissidents after Fidel Castro's Death

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December 19, 2016

After the death of Fidel Castro, reports show government officials are arresting scores of dissidents as well as an American human rights lawyer.

José Daniel Ferrer, leader of the Patriotic Union of Cuba, **told a news agency** that he was arrested for "facilitating public disorder, disobedience and espionage." On December 18, a protest calling for the release of political prisoners led by Ferrer was broken up by Cuban police.

Ferrer along with his wife were detained and afterwards released. "They threatened me and told me that this demonstration was abetting crimes of public disorder, attacks, disobedience and espionage," **Ferrer commented.** "They searched four homes, and so far we have 42 reported arrests — 20 in Santiago, 12 in Palma and 10 in Havana."

After re-establishing diplomatic relations with the United States, and in the wake of Castro's death, it was widely expected that Cuba would liberalize and modernize. According to critics of the Cuban government, however, there are no plans to liberalize under Raúl Castro.

Juan Carlos Hidalgo of the Cato Institute doesn't have high hopes for Cuba. "Castro's death doesn't imply a green light for liberalization in Cuba, either economic or political," **he remarked.** "If anything, we should expect an increase in repression against dissidents in the short term as the regime tries to control the repercussions of the death announcement."

On December 16, prominent U.S. human rights lawyer Kimberley Motley was arrested in Havana. Motley was in Cuba trying to gain the release of artist Danilo Maldonado, known as "El Sexto."

Maldonado was arrested on November 26 for having shouted "Down with Fidel, Down with Raúl" and for spray-painting "He's Gone" on the side of a Havana hotel. She was arrested after trying to hold a press conference in front of Havana's National Capitol Building, along with artist Gorki Águila and activist Luis Alberto Mariño.

Águila had collaborated with El Sexto, and Mariño is affiliated with Cuba Decide, a group advocating for free elections in Cuba.

Thor Halvorssen, president of the Human Rights Foundation, **condemned the arrests**. "This outrageous abuse is the sad reality of Cuba's ongoing totalitarianism," Halvorssen commented. "They first arrest pro-democracy activist El Sexto for criticizing and mocking the deceased dictator, and now they arrest the lawyer that has traveled to Cuba to defend him."

After the arrest of El Sexto, **Halvorssen said**, "El Sexto has become a prominent target of the Cuban regime because his graffiti art is one of the elite's most feared methods of protest as it exposes their true nature. El Sexto's art unmasks the tyranny in ways white papers and press accounts cannot."

Once Motley was in Cuba, she attempted to interview Maldonado, but government officials didn't let her complete the interview. During the course of her detainment, she was interrogated three times.

After she missed her initial flight back home, Cuban authorities threatened her with jail time if she didn't leave the next day. Motley **hasn't given** on the case of El Sexto. "[T]he arrest of Danilo Maldonado has no legal or moral basis," she claims.

After the death of Fidel Castro, the Ladies in White called off its weekly protest for the first time in 13 years. The Ladies in White are a collection of mothers, sisters, wives and daughters of political prisoners in Cuba who attend Mass on Sunday and then walk silently through the streets in protest dressed in white.

In June 2015, a Catholic church in Cienfuegos banned female relatives of political prisoners from attending Mass unless they stopped wearing white. The **pastor said**, "I had told them that the way things are could not continue to be. I cannot allow our community to be further fractured." He also accused the women of being "disrespectful."

In response, one of the women who attended the parish remarked, "We do not only go to church because we are Ladies in White, but because we believe in God. We sing, we pray, we participate, we do nothing wrong."

According to critics of Cuban political leadership, the decision by the pastor was politically motivated to appease the Cuban government. In spite of Catholicism being officially allowed on the island nation, the Cuban government heavily supervises and polices the Catholic Church. **In May 2015**, out of 641 politically motivated arrests, 219 of them occurred during Mass or outside of a church.

When Fidel Castro came to power in Cuba, Catholics were freely practicing the Faith. However, "Castro changed all this, closing Catholic schools and facilities, deporting priests and nuns of foreign nationality, and defaming Church leaders to curtail their influence," **said Msgr. Owen Campion**. Although Castro was hostile to the Catholic Church, he never broke diplomatic relations with Rome.

In spite of frosty relations, the relationship between the Catholic Church and Cuba is gradually thawing after decades of strained relations. Since Castro's ascendancy, there has been a Cuban ambassador at the Vatican and a papal representative in Havana.