

## **Third Trip Report**

Period

November 17, 2008 – December 1, 2008

Asociatia Pro Democratia

The third trip to Cuba took place from November 17 to December 1 2008 and continued the work of network establishing for APD, focusing on getting more dissidents acquainted to the material on transition APD had prepared for Cubans.

During their third trip, the members of the team encountered the following people:

**Yoani Sanchez and Reinaldo Arenas** are a couple of young dissidents, living in Havana.

Yoani Sanchez is truly a peculiar figure in the landscape of Cuban dissidence. Although she made a few interesting comments about the possible political scenarios in the years to come (including a prediction about the transformation of the Communist Party into a „Fidelista“ Party at the next Congress, which would take place in December 2009), she is not very interested in discussing the classical dissidence topics: the road to democracy, the problem of human rights, the economic disaster in Cuba etc. This does not mean that these things don't matter to her. She has friends which are or have been in jail as political prisoners and she often writes on her blog about the everyday economic problems of ordinary people. She is just not a politician and does not intend to become one in the future, but tries to follow her path as an independent blogger. She said that, after the fall of communism, Cuba will need not only political leaders, but also citizens who can speak their mind.

She thinks that changes in the regime, or even a change of regime, are inevitable. As her father ironically put it, the Cuban regime is becoming impotent in the face of the „development of the productive forces“. The best example for this is the soft treatment received until now by independent bloggers, a new species of dissidents which are hard to suppress, given that any hostile action against them leads to a geometrical increase in their blog stats.

Yoani herself said she was sure of being surveilled, but she preferred not to think about it: „I never look over my shoulder, because I don't want this thing to paralyze me and push me into the circle of victimization“. Until now, she has had no direct contact with the police or the Security, but her husband had been taken two times for a „discussion“ with the authorities. Her explanation for this is that, on the one side, Cuba is a „machista“ society and people find it awkward to treat a young woman and

mother as a peril to the regime, and on the other side, the authorities don't know how to approach the relatively new problem of independent bloggers.

Yoani and her husband have two income sources: the foreign aid and their private activity as guides and Spanish teachers for German-speaking tourists. The cost of everything related to her blogging is very high, from the internet access to the blank disks she uses to distribute off-line her blog articles.

**Rene Gomez Manzano** is an independent journalist and activist from Cuba. Mr. Gomez cannot express an exact opinion on the political orientation of the Cuban people. The general attitude of the population is that the present situation is very bad and it can't go on for much time. Most young people look with admiration and hope to the United States.

If emigration was permitted, the vast majority of young Cubans would leave for USA. Mr. Gomez said that the European Union's attitude of relative opening toward Castro's regime had not produced yet any particular reaction among the anti-communist opposition. There is hope that EU will put pressure on the Cuban government for the democratization of the country. A certain effect of the EU's intervention could be the release of political prisoners. If this thing happened, then the EU's pressures would have proved successful, said Mr. Gomez.

Mr. Gomez said that there was information according to which the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party was to meet in a few months. This meeting is a special event because the committee hasn't functioned for a long time, as Fidel Castro was the only leader to have actual decision power. At the same time, there is official information that, in December 2009, a Party Congress will take place, ten years after the last congress.

About Fidel Castro, Mr. Gomez says that he is suspected of having suffered a disorder of the mental faculties. Raul Castro is thought to have drinking problems (in the hurricane days, a joke circulated among the population, that Raul couldn't be present in the destroyed areas as he had not waken up from his drunkenness.) Mr. Gomez sees two possible scenarios for the future: that a reformist group will take the power inside the Communist Party (although there are no clear data of the existence of such group), or else social unrest and riots immediately after the death of Fidel.

Mr. Gomez does not think that any reforms will be decided at the party congress in 2009. Mr. Gomez said that the Castro regime was looking for support from Russia, offering at the same time its support for Russia's military actions. Economically speaking, the regime is supported by Venezuela, which delivers oil to Cuba at a price much lower than on the international markets, and tries to obtain the support of China and Russia. The Cuban communist regime is doing great efforts to remain a significant actor in the politics of Central America. Thus, according to Mr. Gomez, Cuba offers, on a free basis, mobile hospitals fully equipped and modernized to Bolivia and Uruguay, while the Cuban health system is in collapse.

He explained that the generalized prostitution visible in Cuba's tourist areas was caused by the poverty of the population. The quantity of food available to the average Cuban, on the basis of food-cards, is only sufficient for ten days of the month. Cubans have to provide their families with the rest of the necessary food by means of various activities, be they legal (selling agricultural products, tourism etc.) or illegal (prostitution, product trafficking etc.). Those who practice prostitution or illegal commercial activities must always be in contact with members of the police or of secret services, so that they should be allowed to practice those activities in exchange of certain sums of money.

Mr. Gomez said that the foreign currency obtained from tourism was being used by the regime to maintain a subsistence level for the population. Cuba has to import various aliments of immediate necessity and oil. If Cuba didn't have the revenues from tourism, then the regime would collapse in very short time. Mr. Gomez said the communist nomenklatura and the members of secret services have many privileges and access to the main state resources. For example, there are luxury residential areas in Havana inhabited by these privileged people, who can own modern automobiles, electronic devices and other commodities are not available to the majority of the population. Mr. Gomez was expelled in 1995 from the national bureau of lawyers in which he had activated until then, the reason being his public reaction against the treatment received by a fellow magistrate, who had been marginalized for pressing charges against a communist official. Since 1995, the authorities have prohibited him any legal job. His only income is constituted by the financial aid he receives from human rights organizations and American publications, where he publishes articles on the situation in Cuba.

Mr. Gomez said that it was highly probable that his home was being constantly surveilled. In 2008, the Cuban Security twice called Mr. Gomez's brother for discussions on the situation of Mr. Gomez. Through these discussions, the authorities tried to put pressure on Mr. Gomez so that he would give up his opposition to the regime. The authorities have not taken any other actions against him in 2008.

**Elizardo Sanchez** is an important opposition politician from the Cuban opposition. Mr. Sanchez offered a general presentation (with historical references) of the present situation of the anti-communist opposition in Cuba. He is considered a preeminent figure of the opposition and can provide many useful information on the anti-communist activity in Cuba. According to his declarations, 20 years ago, there were thousands of political prisoners in Cuba, and only a few dozen of visible dissidents. Nowadays, the number of political prisoners is about 200 (among which 60 persons have been recognized by Amnesty International as „prisoners of consciousness“), and there are thousands of active and visible dissidents.

In 1959, there were 14 prisons in Cuba and approx. 5000 detainees (political and common-law). In the present, there are approx. 200 prisons in Cuba and over 100.000 detainees (political and common-law), a number which places Cuba very high in comparison to other countries, regarding the relative number of prisons.

According to Mr. Sanchez, Cuban opposition is not divided, but has only multiplied in the last years, with many new independent organizations having been constituted. The main alliance of opposition organizations is „Agenda para la transicion“, lead by Marta Beatriz Roque and Vladimiro Roca; this alliance has a committee formed of 25 representatives of the member-organizations, who are also regional coordinators.

Mr. Sanchez's group, „Todos unidos“, also activates in this alliance. The organization „Movimiento cristiano-democrata“, led by Oswaldo Paya, which is supported by European christian-democratic parties, was invited to join the alliance, but has not given an answer until now. There are also organizations which have not been invited to join the alliance, such as an organization of „socialist democrats“, supported by leftist parties from the E.U. (the Spanish Socialist Party, the Italian Democratic Party); the reason for this is that these organizations have not directly condemned the repression in Cuba.

Mr. Sanchez said that the alliance was not constituted on an ideological basis or around a political program, but around some common goals: immediate stop of any repression; immediate release of every political prisoner; destruction of the totalitarian apparatus; the instauration of the rule of law. The leaders of the alliance made a pact so that none of them was to leave Cuba. Mr. Sanchez considers that the European Union is the only external political entity that tries to put diplomatic pressure on the Castro regime, in order for the repression to stop and the political prisoners to be released. Mr. Sanchez sees three possible scenarios after the death of Fidel Castro (and eventually after the death of Raul Castro): the instauration of a Castrisim without Fidel; transition to democracy; the instauration of a military junta.

**Nestor Rodriguez Lobaina** is a Cuban released prisoner and activist. Mr. Rodriguez said that among the Cuban people there is a state of deep discontent regarding the economic and political conditions in the country. At the first level of the Communist Party, there is a group of conservative leaders, surrounding Fidel Castro, that don't want to adopt any reforms. At the second level of the Party, there are some younger leaders, with certain reformist views, who are not allowed to speak up. Some of them have already been marginalized by the conservatives (one example is Carlos Laje; Carlos Laje has also been mentioned in the discussions with Rene Gomez and Elizardo Sanchez). Another group is formed by generals of the Cuban Army, controlled by Raul Castro. Mr. Rodriguez said that Raul Castro had the intelligence of offering those generals certain economic privileges, obtaining in change their loyalty.

Mr. Rodriguez said that, as a consequence of the dialogue that the European Union launched with the Castro regime, repression against the dissidents has intensified. The EU has offered to the Castros a moral advantage over the Cuban population and the opposition. The negotiations started by the EU have provoked a great disappointment among the dissidents, which felt betrayed and left aside by the EU, said Mr. Rodriguez. Mr. Rodriguez said that he and his organization (Movimiento Cubano Jovenes por la Democracia – The Cuban Movement of Youth for Democracy) are considered very dangerous for the Castro regime. Repression against Mr. Rodriguez and his fellow activists is constant and very violent.

Two weeks before our visit, two members of his organization had been convicted to one year in jail for political reasons. One week before this visit, Mr. Rodriguez and

four political prisoners (these four men being still in detention in Guantanamo prison: Yordis Garcia Fournier, Julian Antonio Mones Borrero, Abel Lopez Perez, Orlando Zapata Tamayo) went into hunger strike, asking for improvement of terrible detention conditions. Mr Rodriguez lives in terrible conditions, in a small and degraded apartment. He was beaten, as well as the detainee Yordis Garcia Fournier, who is in a very bad medical condition in prison (and his family is not allowed to travel in order to visit him). In July 2008, Mr. Rodriguez was attacked by several Security agents in his home in Baracoa.

**Guillermo Fariñas Hernandez** is a 75 year old released prisoner and independent journalist. One month and a half before our visit, Mr. Fariñas published, on a website of Cuban dissidents, an article (“The Gulag to Come”) in which he reported the content of the discussions held by leaders of the Communist Party, in a board meeting of the Party’s Superior School. In this meeting, the president of the School proposed the creation of twenty-one “captive villages”, where all the dissidents in Cuba should be sent. Mr. Fariñas was repeatedly called at the Security after publishing this article and he was interrogated about the source that revealed to him the content of these discussions. Mr. Fariñas said that, within the Ideological Commission of the Communist Party, a Counter-Intelligence Unit was recently created. The Ideological Commission treated until now only the problems of “ideological purity” of the people. This new unit represents a further step in the intensifying of repression.

In general, the Cuban opposition is united, says Mr. Fariñas. There are some tensions, mostly personal, within the opposition: the Christian-Democratic Movement lead by Oswaldo Paya has not accepted to join the “Agenda para la transicion”; the group “Corriente Agramantista”, lead by Rene Gomez, has withdrawn from the “Agenda”, after the public scandal related to the display of private e-mail conversations between Mr. Gomez and Mrs. Marta Beatriz Roque on national television.

Mr. Fariñas has executed until now three sentences of political imprisonment, the last one being suspended in 2004, because of his very bad state of health (he was in hunger strike for 14 months). He is now released in a regime of “licencia extrapenal”, the same as Mrs. Marta Beatriz Roque. Mr. Fariñas doesn’t have an official job and lives in a degraded house with his wife, his mother and his niece.

**Omar Moises Ruiz Hernandez**, married to Barbara Rojo Arias, is a 75 year old prisoner, held in Sanctu Spiritus prison. Omar Ruiz is gravely ill (chronical gastritis and heart problems). Although very seldom, he receives medical attention in prison. The visiting schedule is as follows: every 45 days for family visits and every 60 days for marital visits. Mrs. Rojo delivers to her husband a voluminous package, consisting in large quantities of food and clothing and has to rent a car in order to transport the „jaba“ to the prison.

Barbara Rojo Arias had to give up her activity as a Dama de Blanco, in order to obtain an improvement of the detention conditions of her husband. She is still under surveillance by the Security. Mrs. Rojo does not have a job. Six months after her husband was sent to jail, she was forced to resign from her hob as an economist for the National Bank of Cuba.

### **Corriente Agramontista**

Corriente Agramontista (CA) is a group of independent lawyers (who were expelled from office by the Cuban regime), who offer private counseling to persons accused of „state crimes“.

CA has 12 members that meet on a regular basis. The organization publishes an informative bulletin on the acts of repression of the regime. This bulletin is distributed among opposition members, in a printed version, and to American and European organizations by internet.

Mr. Gomez tried to officially register the organization, under the title of cultural organization. The procedure stipulated in the Cuban law requires that the initiators of any organization demand from a specialized office a certificate according to which they haven't registered any other organizations with the same goals. Mr. Gomez hasn't received any answer to his request. He says he sent a letter to the Minister of Justice, but he didn't receive any answer from him either. His efforts to officially register the organization stopped in the moment when he was expelled from the lawyers' office. Corriente Agramontista is not officially registered and functions outside the law. CA is in contact with the protest movement of the wives of political prisoners „Damas de Blanco“, providing them with legal counseling.

## **Comision Cubana de Derechos Humanos y Reconciliacion Nacional**

Comision Cubana de Derechos Humanos y Reconciliacion Nacional (CCDHRN), founded in 1967 was the first independent organization (although it has no official status) to choose the pacific way in opposing the regime. The goals of the organization are not political, but of protecting fundamental human rights.

CCDHRN militates for the release of political prisoners and other kinds of people incarcerated without a specific guilt (Mr. Sanchez estimates that in Cuba there are thousands of innocent people in jail). CCDHRN publishes two yearly reports on the situation of political prisoners and repression in Cuba. These reports are not printed on paper, for legal and safety reasons, but are distributed by electronic means (e-mail, CDs, etc.).

CCDHRN made an official complaint against some journalists of the Cuban national television and an attorney, for violating the secret of correspondence in the case of Marta Beatriz Roque (personal messages from Mrs. Roque's e-mail account were presented on national television, in the talk-show „Mesa redonda“, without her acceptance and by illegally breaking her password and account). The General Attorney has not issued an official response, so that they made a new complaint, against the very General Attorney, for abuse in office. They haven't received a response to their second complaint either, but members of CCDHRN take it to be a significant fact that their complaint has passed through all the official procedures. Guillermo Fariñas, released political prisoner and independent journalist, who assisted to the discussion with Mr. Sanchez, said that five years ago, such a legal action was unthinkable and those who initiated it would have been convicted to at least one year in prison.

CCDHRN performs a constant activity of providing juridical information and education of the Cuban people, by which they try to prove that the Cuban regime breaks it's own Constitution and laws. CCDHRN encourages all the citizens that were victims of abuses by the regime to defend their rights.

CCDHRN collaborates with the Cuban Juridical Association, as well as with Rene Gomez's group („Corriente Agramontista“).

## **Movimiento Cubano Jovenes por la Democracia – Cuban Movement of Youth for Democracy**

The main program of MCJD is called Universitarios sin Fronteras and has the main goal the autonomy of universities from the central government.

MCJD, although without official status, has over 400 active members and managed to obtain over 5000 signatures from Cuban students in support of their projects.

MCJD operates two projects:

- Universitarios sin fronteras: autonomy for the universities and all the civil rights and liberties implied by this autonomy for the people studying or working in the academic environment: free speech, free association, free access to information and unrestricted use of internet, the right to elaborate their own academic programs;
- The reopening of the Catholic University Santo Tomas de Villanueva; Mr Rodriguez said that they didn't receive any support for this project from the leaders of the Catholic Church in Cuba.

The organization lead by Mr. Rodriguez is a member of the alliance „Agenda para la transicion“, the biggest alliance of independent organizations in Cuba.

Mr. Rodriguez has been convicted for three times and has executed a total of ten years in jail for political reasons. He was released in 2006, after six years in prison. He was recognized by Amnesty International as a prisoner of consciousness. He doesn't consider he achieved any significant change or democratic reform in Cuba, but he is determined to continue this fight.

## **Damas de Blanco**

Damas de Blanco are surveilled by at least three agents of the Cuban Security. These agents are not dressed in uniforms, but they are very visible, their ostentative presence meaning, probably, to discourage any actions of the Damas or of other people. One of the agents takes photos of the group when they leave the church.

During the *mesa*, the catholic priest has directly referred to the group of women (using the expression „the second group of persons on the left“), reminding the listeners that these women are „oppressed and suffering“, and called for the people to help their brothers and sisters in need, „people who suffer from hunger, thirst, who are ill in prison“ and who are right next to them. The priest repeatedly referred to the group of women in his sermon, though without using the very name of the group.

### **Coalicion Central Opositora**

Coalicion Central Opositora is an opposition alliance that has no ideological orientation, functioning on the basis of three directions of action: immediate release of all the political prisoners; immediate stop of any repression; the instauration of a pluralist political system. Mr. Fariñas, one of the founders of the organization, said that Coalicion Central Opositora has over 700 members in the central part of Cuba. He also said that this alliance made the first steps for the creation of “Agenda para la transicion”.

In the week after our visit, a board meeting of the „Agenda“ was scheduled, in order to adopt the general Code of the organization. In 2009, „Agenda para la transicion“ intends to create a national web of branches, which should comprise over 140 municipal branches (Cuba has 169 towns). A General Assembly of the „Agenda“ is expected for 2010.