

Writers in prison - The other side of paradise

The Back Half

Joan Smith & Adolfo Fernández Saínz
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Last March, Fidel Castro had 75 Cuban dissidents arrested. Among them were many writers and journalists, as Joan Smith, chair of the English Writers in Prison Committee, reports. Opposite, in an article smuggled out of jail at great personal risk, Adolfo Fernández Saínz speaks out against the regime that has sentenced him to 15 years' imprisonment for his political views

Adolfo Fernández Saínz is a Cuban journalist. He was among 75 dissidents arrested in March, during Fidel Castro's biggest crackdown in many years on opponents and human rights activists. The defendants, who include 34 writers, journalists and librarians, are currently serving a combined total of 1,454 years in prison. Saínz, who was dismissed from his first job as an interpreter in 1994 because of his political views, was convicted under Cuban Law No 88, which prohibits passing information to foreign organisations or media. It is known as Cuba's "gagging" law, and contravenes Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Saínz is serving a 15-year jail sentence in Holguín, in the eastern part of the main island, 730 kilometres from his home in Havana. According to his wife, Julia Nunez Pacheco, he is being held in a minuscule cell without any running water, electricity or the most basic hygiene facilities. He went on hunger strike in June, demanding more contact with his family, but his wife was not allowed to see him when a group of relatives made the arduous journey to the prison from Havana last autumn.

Even so, Saínz has managed to write an article and smuggle it out of jail. The regime tries to prevent contact with the outside world by insisting that personal computers and modems be registered with the authorities, but total control of the internet is impossible. His article reached the Writers in Prison Committee of English PEN, which I chair, and immediately presented us with a dilemma.

The Castro regime is vindictive, and may take punitive measures against him and his family. As the British Foreign Office noted in its latest human rights report: "State security subjects peaceful opponents of the regime to surveillance, detention, house arrest, bureaucratic harassment and loss of employment, housing and other benefits." Anxious discussions at International PEN's annual congress in Mexico City, involving English PEN and human rights activists, followed the arrival of the article. The decision we have taken - and I still do not know whether it is correct - is that we should respect Saínz's own wish for

publication.

He is likely to be denounced not just by his own government but by people on the left, including Labour MPs and former ministers whose nostalgia for the Cuban revolution makes them wilfully blind to the abuses committed by this dinosaur Stalinist regime. They will claim that Saínz and his fellow prisoners, such as the economist Marta Beatríz Roque Cabello (currently serving 20 years), are traitors and spies working for the Bush administration.

In the past year, it has been business as usual for the regime's apologists, who have continued to parrot Castro's rhetoric and deny the existence of a peaceful, democratic opposition movement in Cuba. Some of them, to their everlasting shame, have even defended the execution by firing squad in April of three men who tried to hijack a ferry in Havana harbour. (As Saínz himself remarks, some Cubans are so desperate to leave Fidel's island paradise that they will risk anything, including the death penalty, in order to escape.)

Human rights activists cannot employ such blatant double standards. Castro's regime is one of many that have taken advantage of the sombre (some would say paranoid) atmosphere since the terrorist attacks of 9/11 to clamp down on opponents. Some have done it in the name of combating international terrorism, while others - Uzbekistan springs to mind - clearly hope that the internal repression will escape outside scrutiny if they support the "war on terror".

The result is a 20 per cent increase in the number of writers detained around the world, according to research carried out by International PEN. In country after country, existing laws have been applied more rigorously or new legislation, such as the US Patriot Act, rushed on to the statute book, curtailing basic human rights and freedom of expression. It is a classic case of the United States restricting the very rights they claim to protect, and it is a cause that the left - not just NGOs such as PEN - should be uniting to expose.

Terrible things happen when the world's attention is diverted. It is no accident that the Cuban round-up happened in March, just before the first American bombs fell on Baghdad. The Foreign Office currently describes the outlook for human rights in Cuba as "bleak", and we have recently heard that Saínz was badly beaten up early last month when he tried to prevent inmates attacking another political prisoner.

PEN has protested to the Cuban ambassador in London, and we will continue to make public whatever information we are able to glean from inside Castro's insanitary prisons and labour camps. Don't tell me to go to Havana, by the way: I can't get a visa. But you can read Saínz's own words, translated by Monique Corless.

Fidel Castro plays with the truth

There are people who would be astonished by what Europe has accomplished in regard to its standard of living and its human rights record. The European Union is now a model of prosperity, freedom and democratic coexistence for this group

of nations.

By contrast, millions of tourists who visit Cuba each year encounter a younger population that is ready to do whatever it takes, however humiliating that may be, to flee from the country - for ever, if necessary. And certain visitors benefit from this distressing situation.

Fidel Castro, however, paints quite a different picture. In his words, "Cuba will achieve what Europe was never able to." (This comes from a speech made during the anniversary of the storming of the Cuartel Moncada, on 26 July 2003.) Castro is capable of using any statistic to justify such statements.

He dares to criticise Europe for neglecting its workers, and yet Europeans receive unemployment benefit that allows them to holiday in the Caribbean. Meanwhile, Cuban civil servants who have worked for the government for 30 years or more cannot even make their pension stretch to a Sunday lunch with their children. Talk of plentiful employment is like a bad joke; here, work counts for nothing.

Castro continues to blame Europe for the backwardness of the ex-colonies - if this were true, it would all be so much easier. He criticises the EU for letting Americans "aspire to conquering the world". He blamed the EU for its support of apartheid in South Africa, which split the Cuban population into those who believed in support for that government and those who opposed it. Meanwhile, he has never condemned crimes [in Spain] by ETA, yet never misses an opportunity to denounce the Grupos Antiterroristas de Liberación, and claims that the help Cuba receives from Europe is measly and unacceptable, but has never refused it. He has never uttered a word in condemnation of the crimes of Lenin, Stalin and Mao; he supported the invasion of Czechoslovakia in accordance with the Warsaw Pact and remained silent during the invasion of Afghanistan. Nor has he ever been seen to champion the freedom and sovereignty of small third world countries.

The Cuban people are more than used to these discrepancies. We have been hearing this speech for 40 years and still, after all this time, Fidel Castro has not changed a bit, not even since the world first became fascinated by him.

If Fidel Castro has always been seen through rose-tinted glasses, then this must change. This is the same man who, for more than 30 years, did all he could to make communism a dominating force. And if he has abandoned this mission, it is only because the system has failed and the Soviet Union no longer exists.

All those who stand for freedom and democracy must condemn the Castro regime in all its forms, a regime that has imprisoned all those who have opposed it, including human rights activists and journalists. Democratic governments and non-governmental organisations, all those who in different times were once in favour, must now help those people who work towards securing a peaceful move to democracy in Cuba.

If these pages ever get into the public domain, it will be because the author has managed to get round his prison officers and someone else has succeeded in breaking Cuban law in order that they can be published abroad.