

Fariñas: A Fight to the Death

As these lines are being written, psychologist and independent journalist Guillermo Fariñas is entering the third month of his hunger strike; he is demanding the release of 26 political prisoners who the Cuban government has unjustly incarcerated, despite the deteriorated state of their health. Not unexpectedly, the regime has placed the blame for this on “unpatriotic, foreign diplomats and the mass media that is manipulating him.” This is a fight to the death between Fariñas, who is defending the right to freedom, and the island’s leaders, who insist on inflexibility, just like their main battle horse—despite the fact they are violating their own legislation (which includes provisions for the conditional release of prisoners if they are very ill).

Fariñas is a Cuban of African descent who is certain that his death will serve “to show the world that political assassination has been institutionalized” in Cuba. He is challenging a heretofore impenetrable barrier: the Cuban government’s presupposition that giving in to the demands of a dissident is akin to the first step towards losing its power—even if the demands are indeed just and humanitarian. Instead, it opts to once again resist change.

It is just a matter of time before there is another death within the island’s dissident community or prison population. As they say in Cuba, Fariñas, or any of the other 26 prisoners of conscience for whose conditional release he is enduring his hunger strike, and whose already bad health will further deteriorate in prison, will provide the dead body. Orlando Zapata Tamayo has already succumbed, after an 86-day hunger strike, and now another peaceful dissident is about to heroically follow him. Meanwhile, the world stands by and watches in disbelief, and the Castro regime throws caution to the wind. Fariñas is willing to give his life, for which reason he cannot be intimidated or threatened or blackmailed. In facing a man who is willing to die, the regime cannot employ on him its favorite instrument of persuasion: fear. The question now is how many martyrs Cuban civil society will have to give up before an inevitable process of democratization begins?



A Brief Biography of Guillermo Fariñas* Psychologist and Journalist Santa Clara, Cuba

I was born in January 1962, in Santa Clara, a historic province in Las Villas (Cuba). Till fourth grade, I went to José Antonio

Echevarría Elementary School, on the corner of Juan Bruno Zayas Street and Callejón de las Flores. I completed fifth and six grades at



Guillermo Fariñas and Laura Pollán (Lady in White)

Orestes de la Torre School (on the corner of Serafin Sánchez and Paseo de la Paz), and high school at the José Antonio Echevarría Institute (on Independence and Juan Bruno Zayas). Upon finishing ninth grade, I continued my studies at the Camilo Cienfuegos Military Academy, which at that time was on Kilometer 7 of the highway from Santa Clara to Camajuani.

I used to play basketball and participated in the “National Youth Games” as a guard and forward for the 11-12 year-old and 15-16 year-old teams. I once even substituted for stellar Cuba basketball player Leonardo “Maravilla” Pérez. Upon completing 12th grade, in 1980, I was moved to Havana as a pre-cadet, so I could study Intelligence and Counter-Intelligence for Special Troops, under the MINFAR (the Revolutionary Armed Forces Ministry).

I was stationed at the Barbosa military unit (at the Autopista del Mediodía), which is

now the Captain Eliseo Reyes Police Academy. There I was a member of the Support Troops that guarded the Peruvian embassy, the Personal Security Battalion and the battalion responsible for security at diplomatic headquarters. I guarded the FAR’s Casa Central (currently the Comodoro Hotel) and a cock-fighting arena in Managua, on the outskirts of Havana, that belonged to Revolutionary Commander Guillermo García Frías. Many of the Castro government’s most powerful men frequented it.

I went to the El Cachao Special Troops training grounds (in Pinar del Río) to train with Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese trainers. In November of 1980, I was sent to Angola; I was stationed in the southern part, at Piñeiro, near the city of Huambo. My commander was Colonel Antonio Enrique Lussón Batlle, who commanded five battalions of Anti-Guerrilla Warfare Special Troops.

I was assigned to this unit as part of a group called the Demolition, Penetration and Sabotage Commandos; we were directly under the FAR's Ministry. I participated as part of UNITA's rear guard in eleven incursions; for this I was awarded 5 medals and 11 certificates, all of which were taken from me by State Security when I was first arrested in 1995. I was twice injured by gunfire in those incursions, first in the left leg, and later in the spine (objects in my backpack actually kept me from being more seriously wounded than I was). I returned to Cuba in 1981 and had a three-month vacation. Then in August 1981, I departed for the Soviet Union, where I was a cadet at the Air Force Academy at Tambov, 280 kilometers from Moscow, where I trained with Vietnamese, Koreans, Chinese as well as Russians. While involved in a particular exercise, I was exposed to nerve gas, and as a result developed epilepsy. The accident was due to negligence on the part of our higher ups. I was evacuated to Moscow and then shortly after to the Naval Hospital in Havana, where I remained for several months while undergoing clinical tests. Then I was eventually given a military discharge due to my condition (which would not allow me to continue living this sort of life).

In September 1983, I enrolled at the School of Psychology at the Universidad Central de las Villas; I also headed the sport organization, the FEU (Federation of University Students). I was almost expelled in 1986 because State Security identified me as a member of a pro-Sigmund Freud group that also supported *perestroika* and *glasnost*.

I graduated in 1988, but as punishment, they sent me to fulfill my Social Service duty in the province of Las Tunas, despite the fact I had already done my Military Service. Yet, because the place to which I was sent had no money with which to pay a psychologist, they sent me

back to my own province. There, I competed for and won a position as a professor of psychology at the Felix Varela Preparatory Institute, but was not allowed to actually teach because I was not considered "politically" trustworthy. So, I became a practicing clinical psychologist in the Octavio de la Concepción y de la Pedraja Community Polyclinic (in Camajuani). While there, I was General Secretary of the Union of Communist Youth (UJC), but was expelled, in 1989, for opposing the execution of Division General Arnaldo Ochoa Sánchez. Then, I was transferred to the José Martí Pediatric Hospital (in Sancti Spiritus), where I created a Mental Health Division and the Adolescent Clinic. However, in 1991, the Provincial Health Authority notified me that I would not be assigned a home in which to live—despite my scientific accomplishments—because I was not "politically" trustworthy.

I then moved to Havana and began to work at the Pedro Borrás Pediatric Hospital. In 1993, and before the foreign press, I publicly called upon Chief Commandant Fidel Castro Ruz to make good on a promise he made to workers to reopen, in six months, a hospital that was being reconstructed. Castro may have become enraged, but my fellow workers elected me Secretary General of the Union.

In 1995, I denounced the hospital director's corruption; she was a member of the Central Committee and was taking for herself donations destined for the hospital arriving from the European Union. I denounced her at the police station on the corner of L Street and Malecón, from which I was promptly sent to the Valle Grande prison. I spent a year and eight months there; among the baseless charges against me was that I was in Possession of Illegal Weapons. They sentenced me to three years. In 1997, I supported the Andrei Sakharov's organization's hunger strikers in

Santa Clara, for which I was sentenced to 18 months, and during which time I refused to eat any solid food. After that, I carried out a few more hunger strikes, for a number of different reasons. In 2002, State Security agent “Félix” attacked me. Then, I was sentenced to seven years, so I went on another 14-month hunger strike at the Carlos J. Finlay Military Hospital, and was eventually given a conditional release because of the serious state of my health.

I co-founded Cubanacán Press, an independent press agency, which was always headquartered at my house. By 2005, its Director went into exile, so I took his place. That same year, I went on a hunger strike for an undetermined period of time, until all Cubans had free access to the Internet, because State Security blocked the Cyber Café in Santa Café. I contin-

ued with it from January 31st to August 31st, 2006. I then received the Annual Reporters Without Borders prize and the Weimar International Prize for Human Rights for these actions. I gave the prize money from the second—5,000 Euros—to the political prisoners. In May 2009, I started a blog with colleagues from the Cubanacán Press Forum, in which to publish news, satire, jokes, opinion pieces and photographs about Cuba’s central region. The United Anti-Totalitarian Forum, a political organization, was founded on December 10th, 2009; I was designated its General Coordinator.

* Shortened version of autobiography