

The World Conference Against Racism that will be held in La Ceiba, Honduras in August has raised many people's hopes. It will be a crucial moment for African descendants, and above all for the movements that represent them to have numerous discussions and deliberations about their experiences, objectives, and problems, all in their specific national contexts. However, the common denominator they all share is their desire to combat racism and intolerance. This meeting's importance is increasing because its organizers will be proposing strategies and projects "whose results will lay the groundwork for sustainable and integral development, with equity and identity for African descendant populations, in the short, mid-range, and long term."



The African descendant movement in Cuba is convinced of the importance of such events, and made public its support for the projects that have resulted from the United Nations proclamation making 2011 the International Year for African Descendants.

The combination of objectives and tasks for this year is confirmation of the African descendant movement in Cuba. Consequently, some of its members have mobilized to participate in this conference, despite the usual governmental control that has typically characterized the presence of Cubans at these sorts of events. None of Cuba's independent organizations was present at the Durban conference. On this occasion, one can only hope that complicated, official transactions and government resistance against the treatment of this problem in a situation not under its strictest control do not render their participation difficult, and they are able to attend the conference as true representatives of Afro-Cubans.

The current issue of *ISLAS* is specifically dedicated to the conference in Honduras and once again delves into that racial framework in which "races," interrelations, inherited and constantly reproduced racism, and all its social repercussions continue to gnaw at the daily life of Cuba's African descendants, and darken their future. Despite its history, this population group—already a demographic majority—is struggling to attain and enjoy the place in society it deserves in a country where it always played a multifaceted and fundamental role. It has witnessed any and all glimmer of hope, that on numerous occasions throughout our nation's development seemed to offer possibilities for which those who impatiently and distrustfully watched and continue to watch die out.

At one point, convinced of its historical privileges and firmly in control of all power, the white governing elite was not entirely negative about blacks and *mestizos* from different places and positions openly discussing the problem, congregating in societies and institutions, and criticizing the disadvantages that

were everywhere evident and impeded their total integration into the nation. Yet, to be truthful, we cannot really say there were ever any concrete actions that brought about true social repercussions. Later on, when many thought the time to clear the way had arrived, with the triumph of the Revolution and its demagogic allusions to the race problem, quite a few blacks and *mestizos* began to believe in a more hopeful future. Notwithstanding, life has shown this hope was unfounded.

The government dismantled a entire social and economic framework that had been so difficult for these Cubans to create, and then proceeded to gag them, using reprisal tactics that are still in use today. Every single voice that attempted to say anything at all was silenced. Any project that tried to deal with the problem at a social level was not only prohibited, but many of their main players—except those that backed off—were and continue being condemned to ostracism. Many people are not aware of the purges that take place at all levels; the same is true for a number of scientific and social research institutions.

Cuban leaders have consistently shown their support for civil rights movements in Africa, the United States, and anywhere African descendants' voices were raised. In Cuba, on the other hand, the leadership seems bent on not allowing anything to happen. The few times this problem has been discussed or dealt with, it has been black and white representatives of the regime doing so. They use an apologetic tone that lauds the system, focusing on the gains made in education, health, and other social spheres that at least seemingly involve blacks and whites equally. Time has shown that all this was for the sole purpose of garnering support from the triumphant revolution's most dispossessed people. In the hardest of times, non-whites always end up suffering the most, as was the case with the effects of the crisis that began at the beginning of the 90s, in the latter part of the twentieth-century.

These were the circumstances under which a hand-tied, civil society prepared and strengthened itself. Political leaders and activists began to emerge and be seen in the limited media spaces available to them. Today, we are optimistic about the many organizations whose leaders and members have decided to confront an official polity that tends to ignore both the problem and possible solutions to it—despite the risks to their personal welfare, and that of their families.

The *Citizens' Committee for Racial Integration*, "*Juan Gualberto Gómez*" *Movement for Racial Integration*, "*Rosa Parks*" *Feminist Movement*, *Independent Foundation of Afro-Cubans*, *Cubabarómetro project*, and many other organizations are caught up in an effort that the Cuban government can no longer encumber. Their meetings, social activism, conferences and working sessions are under constant siege, so much so that their participants often find themselves behind bars solely for denouncing, demanding, and fighting for rights that are justly theirs. As is the case in other preceding issues, articles in this issue of *ISLAS* provide eloquent evidence of their valor, commitment, and sense of responsibility.

The Cuban government is not unaware of this whole unstoppable movement. This explains why it has created groups, organizations, and foundations with carefully selected members, to reveal a political will that in reality does not exist, but does allow foreigners to see that at least the problem of racism is openly analyzed. Their membership represents the interests of a powerful few. Among those *poci electi* are those who responded to U.S. intellectuals who published

an open letter critical of Cuba's race problems, when an emerging black leader of our increasingly powerful Cuban civic movement was being incarcerated, in 2010.

Every so often they plan and hold circus-like events with deliberations that are as closed as they are superfluous. They are not open to the public because that would really get people thinking about the problem, about all those who are so tired and frustrated they have decided to just wait for something to happen. Now, the General-President somewhat insistently mentions the race problem, and calls it "shameful," but no more. As on other occasions, when it is mentioned, no one admits or assumes any personal responsibility for it.

Meanwhile, we await the results of the World Conference Against Racism, as well as for governments and institutions to get in tune with them and respond to the United Nations' call. We are confident that the articles and authors in this new issue of *ISLAS* will contribute to revealing realities hidden from public view, inspire debates, and cause people to think. They contain the thoughts and projects of a Cuban African descendant population whose strength is as evident as it is hopeful, despite the open hostility it faces.

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