

# Will the Arab Uprisings Influence Blacks in Cuba?

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On January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2011, more than 4,000 people, poor (mostly black) residents of the El Condado neighborhood of Santa Clara, in central Cuba, spontaneously joined protests begun by a small group of peaceful, anti-government protestors, among them black psychologist Guillermo Fariñas, winner of the 2010 Sakharov Prize for Human Rights. The dissidents went to El Condado to keep police forces from evicting a homeless, pregnant woman with two children who had sought refuge in an uninhabited medical office that had been empty for nine years.

Fariñas told me that they did not ask the population for its support. Their initial plan was to dissuade those who were charged with carrying out the eviction by trying to get them to understand the lack of sensitivity in what they were going to do, and how abusive it would be. Notwithstanding, the functionary in charge of the operation felt offended, and was seemingly out of her mind, answering them by screaming at them that they were “mercenaries,” and hurling other accusations commonly used by government rep-

resentatives. It seems that her intention—as naïve and arrogant as any could be—was to manipulate the neighbors that were already surrounding them, so they could lash out against the oppositionists while also forgetting why they were there in the first place. It was precisely that set of circumstances that converted this act of solidarity (which was unplanned and spontaneous) into a political act.

In just a few minutes, several thousand people joined a protest in a neighborhood of more than 19,000 inhabitants (3098 residents per square kilometer), of which nearly 90% are black and *mestizo*. Police patrol cars were not able to reach the place where the oppositionists were, to arrest them, but the crowd impeded them from being able to do so. The only reason this incident did not have greater consequences was because of the oppositionist group’s responsible behavior. In keeping with its peaceful tendencies, it kept this performance of public disobedience from becoming an event marred by violent acts of truly unpredictable proportions.

However, it did generate foreseeable dangers for the residents of *El Condado*.

According to Fariñas, State Security Captain Raúl Azarí, one of the officers that directed the repressive actions against the oppositionist group, did not gratuitously and methodically warn them that they [the police forces] are not willing to let our island succumb to the domino effect brought about by the spiraling, popular rebellions taking place in the Arab world.

This is just an anecdote, but it broadly examines an incident that in many countries might potentially be seen as a daily, common occurrence. Yet, it is still a rare event in today's Cuba, not for any lack of social injustices and police abuses, but because for the past fifty years we have lived under a system of public repression whose purpose it is to instill fear as a way to keep people from protesting or disagreeing. Despite the fact this repressive apparatus continues essentially unchanged, it is noteworthy and now becoming quite common for its actions not to result in the same effects, particularly among the poorest strata of Cuban society—which, in other words, effectively means blacks and *mestizos*.

The reasons for this have been abundantly revealed in recent times. What in the beginning seemed as if it was going to be a revolution for the benefit of the marginalized classes, over five decades became a dictatorial system with a fixed, privileged, fundamentally white, overbearing, and demagogic elite group in power. In practice, it shows itself to be as inefficient in its administrative actions as in its inconsequential historical promises.

In more than one way, this specific incident is fraught with signs of scandal. It has left the revolutionary government literally misstepping in its navigation of the delicate terrain of race discrimination that impacts

blacks in Cuba. Details of this problem are now even seeing the light in some of the information media, and even more so, and more gravely, outside of Cuba and at the margins of its official spheres of influence. Perhaps we should recall the words uttered by General of the Army Raúl Castro—President of the Council of State and the Council of Ministers of Cuba—when referring to race and gender discrimination in the closing of the annual session of the National Assembly of People's Power, on December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2009: "The lack of progress in this matter in 50 years of revolution is an embarrassment." At the very least, what is confusing about this statement is that Raúl Castro barely mentioned that "these are not issues resolved simply by fiat, nor would that have the desired effect; it would still take us some time, but what is basically needed is that we acknowledge the problem, and then decide and take action." In hearing his words, one cannot help but wonder if after 50 years of absolute control over all of Cuba's institutions, and governing the behavior of all of Cuba's legal, economic, socio-cultural spheres, they still need more time to acknowledge the issue, decide and take action? What were they doing up till now? Besides, time is not quite that flexible. How much longer would it take them to acknowledge the magnitude of the social and economic drama that is affecting blacks, and is undoubtedly the worst result of Cuba's severe crisis? It is as obvious as it always has been, and is proportionately hurting most of the population, the country's stability, and the prestige of its leaders.

It is calamities such as this that make a lot of people wonder about the possibility of blacks and *mestizos* taking part in a popular uprising against those in power in Cuba, not unlike those that are taking place around the world, particularly amongst Arabs and Afri-

cans. Naturally, it is not clear or even desirable that black Cubans decide to stage a rebellion against their government any time soon. Despite the fact we cannot deny this possibility, no one could guarantee that such a rebellion wouldn't generate a horrific wave of violence, chaos, and death. What we cannot doubt—and this is not the only doubt—is that no one on the island has more reasons than black Cubans to argue in favor of such a rebellion. If one considers the particularities of their history, and their long tradition of struggle, one could conclude that if this hypothetical rebellion actually and unfortunately took place, blacks would constitute a majority of the rebels.

Of course, not everything that is reasonable is necessarily advisable, which is exactly the case here. Yet, it is much less advisable to forget just how reasonable it might seem, so much so that those of us who do not approve of violent rebellion as an alternative would not dare to totally disregard the possibility of this happening, precisely because of how long these conditions have prevailed, and because of how these potential rebels feel as a result. In other words, these two reasons—better than any possible domino effect we could incur—explain why this could happen, particularly if one considers what is going on elsewhere—abroad.

### *A Before and After*

It might do well to point out the year 2003 as a time at which there was a notable change in the attitude of Cuba's black population towards the revolutionary government. There were already much earlier, general causes that brought about this change. In fact, there was never a time when they didn't exist, and there were even signs of a sharp crisis several years before. Yet, as has been the case in

other particularly complex historical processes in Cuba, it took a concrete act to detonate, bring to the forefront, and propagate this change in attitude.

In April 2003, the Cuban people became upset upon learning of the killing of three young black men who in the space of one week were lawlessly and summarily judged and executed for having attempted to hijack a craft to leave the island for ports north. This is what caused the detonation. Someday, when our contemporary history is properly written, this book will no doubt contain a separate chapter about this event, because of its dramatic and revealing connotations. Then will come the time when we must measure just how much this event marked a 'before and after' in the perceptions of more recent generations of blacks who, for the most part, have learned little about their historical destiny, and what they have learned has taken place in a context that is both a utopian limbo and retrograde.

Before this, they had been the object of a manipulation of one of José Martí's ideas—one in which they innocently believed. At its best, the government said it applied and continues to apply this concept in a reductionist and mediocre manner. At its worst, the government uses it as an easy tactic for controlling and dominating blacks. It reads: "Cuban means more than white, more than mulatto, more than black."<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding, after that 2003 tragedy, something perhaps not mysterious or surprising but definitely symptomatic became obvious about the content and even form of criticisms black Cubans were making. Slowly but surely, there have been changes in their attitude as blacks, without this change also altering their notion of themselves as Cuban nationals.

There are now finally studies taking place in Cuba that employ a new focus and

much less prejudice about the racism that affects blacks on the island. One of them, titled “Identidad racial de gente sin historia” [“Racial Identity of a People with no History”], is particularly noteworthy in its treatment of this racial identity consciousness raising. It is a chapter in the book *Antología de Caminos, raza y racismo* [Anthology of Paths: Race and Racism] (2009), that deals with the results of a psychological study done by young specialists Yesenia Selier and Penélope Hernández for their thesis. Their many surveys of young black men in Havana (data that is significant for more than one reason) reveal that “68% of those interviewed hold racial identity to be equally or even more important than national identity, which speaks to the hierarchic nature of the first, at least amongst this population of blacks in Havana.”<sup>2</sup>

They also reveal that “around 94% of the subjects perceive that there is racial discrimination in Cuba, which is doubtlessly tied to their belief in the inequality there is with regard to opportunities and possibilities. More than 60% believe there is formal equality. In addition, more than half of them placed the blame for this situation outside their group, and said it was legitimated by an “other” (someone near them in an interpersonal relationship, or farther from them, as in the power exercised by higher levels of society)”<sup>3</sup>

The fact that Cuban blacks have developed a consciousness about their racial identity is so palpable today that even the government itself has had to concede to them at least an aside in its speeches, and some strategic plans—despite the fact it does not back down from its aging dogmatic attitudes. Meanwhile, the number of intellectuals in that power sphere who want to give this issue the attention and treatment it deserves (and always did) is ever increasing. This is motivated by either

plain humanistic convictions (this is the case for quite a few) or because some folks are becoming convinced that a change is needed in dealing with the race issue if the system is to survive. Despite the fact it may have actually germinated earlier, what is certainly clear about the change that began in 2003 is that it promises to be one of the principal agents of the transformations that necessarily must occur in Cuba in the near future.

The competence and disposition the government reveals in dealing short term with this very new reality, will be what determines—more than anything else—the path that Cubans generally, and black Cubans in particular (who are the majority, the most affected majority) choose to follow in demanding their rights. Unfortunately, we cannot be sure that what is reported at the Sixth Cuban Communist Party Congress (April 16-19, 2011) will turn out to be positive at all. In fact, peaceful oppositionist Guillermo Fariñas has summarized this meeting with words that we can only hope are filled with passion and even some exaggeration: “... a lost opportunity to avoid a social explosion, a civil war, and even a possible foreign intervention in Cuba.”<sup>4</sup>

#### Notes:

- 1- Martí, José. “Mi Raza,” *Obras completas II*. (La Habana: Editorial Ciencias Sociales, 1975): 299.
- 2- Selier, Yesenia, and Penélope Hernández. “Identidad racial de gente sin historia,” in *Antología de Caminos, raza y racismo* (La Habana: Editorial Caminos, 2009): 136.
- 3- *Ibid*, 137.
- 4- “El Congreso ha dado falsas señales de cambio,” *Diario de Cuba* <[www.ddcuba.com](http://www.ddcuba.com)> (April 9th, 2011).