

PRISONERS OF COLOR

ISLAS WILL DEDICATE A PAGE IN EACH ISSUE TO THE AFRO-CUBANS SERVING TIME
IN CUBA'S PENAL SYSTEM

In many countries people are detained for trying to exercise their rights of freedom of expression, association, assembly, or movement. Some are imprisoned because they or their families are involved in political or religious activities. Some are arrested because of their connection with political parties or national movements that oppose government policies. Trade union activity or participation in strikes or demonstrations are common causes for imprisonment. Often, people are imprisoned because they questioned their government or tried to publicize human rights violations in their own countries. Some are jailed on the pretext that they committed a crime, but it is in fact because they criticized the government. People who are imprisoned, detained or otherwise physically restricted because of their political, religious or other conscientiously-held beliefs or because of their ethnic origin, sex, color, or language and who have not used or advocated violence are considered to be prisoners of conscience.

José Oscar Sánchez Madan

Juan del Pilar Goberna
Human rights activist
Havana, Cuba

Independent journalist José Oscar Sánchez Madan was born in 1961 on December 10th, in Marianao (in Havana). He was brought up in a tight-knit, humble family of five children. In 1969, his family moved to Matanzas, where José Oscar finished his primary and middle school education, excelling as a wrestler. He then enrolled in the Camilo Cienfuegos Military Academy, a prep school that fed into the Cadet School. In 1977, his academic career facilitated his enrollment in the Political-Military High School, in the Ukraine (U.S.S.R.), from which he graduated with a degree in Political Science and as a lieutenant in the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR).

Back in Cuba, from 1984-89, he worked as a Political Commissioner while also holding a fleeting position as an instructor for the

Union of Communist Youth (UJC): for small, Central Army combat units, and for the José Luis Tasende National School for Sergeants and Instructors. By 1985, he was an active member of the Cuban Communist Party (PCC), but was expelled in 1989. He suffered a similar fate at the FAR.

Sánchez Madan's dissent started as a series of political-ideological confrontations while in the military environment. They were influenced by *Glasnost* and *Perestroika*, which changed the course of Eastern European history, and turned him into a firm critic of Castro-style totalitarianism. The Cuban's State's response to this was to begin viciously persecuting and discrediting him. He was eventually removed from his Marxism post at the Carlos Marx Vocational Institute for Exact Sciences, in Matanzas. By 1999,



José Oscar Sánchez Madan

he begins to suffer arbitrary arrests and jailing, for days at a time, during which he also received brutal beatings and suffered obscene offenses. He was denied the right to work and was labeled an “ungrateful black.” In 2000, he was committed to a Manzanillo psychiatric hospital for 30 days of psychological observation. The authorities tried to correct the errors it committed against Sánchez Madan, and eventually reinstated him at the Ministry of the Interior (MININT), where he worked for three months, but also where he became further aware of even more abuses and violations. He then decided to definitely leave the regime, define his identity as a pro-democracy, pro-human rights activist for all Cubans, and to fight against racial inequality.

As a member of the FAR, Sánchez Madan came to understand the kinds of privileges that were conceded to people who were taken for white, high paying jobs to managerial positions to which only whites had access, and except for a few notable exceptions—a small number of African descendants known for their outstanding work. He was able to

confirm that integration and racial equality were only a façade in Cuba.

Among Sánchez-Madan’s many stories is one that took place in the early 1980s. It is about his father, a prestigious, Afro-Cuban attorney, who was falsely accused by the political police of bribery (they fabricated the accusation). He was arrested, tried and sentenced under Case 430/82 at Havana’s People’s Popular Court.

Around 2001, Sánchez Madan founded the Patria and Libertad Association in the town of Cidra (in Unión de Reyes, Matanzas Province). The organization disintegrated a year later under government repression and due to the inexperience of its members. Since 2005, he has been active as an activist-oppositionist, and later as a member of the Executive Board of the Alternative Independent Option Movement. In April 2007, for reasons of security (a euphemism for legal sanctioning), the Municipal Court decided to ‘admit’ him (another legal euphemism for depriving someone of his freedom) to prison for three years. Their motivation was his *peligrosidad predelectiva* [predilection for dangerousness], a judicial term to remove disquieting dissidents from circulation. While serving his sentence at the Combinado del Sur prison (in Matanzas), a police collaborator asked him: “Why don’t you leave the country?” Sánchez Madan’s answer was to say that if anyone had to leave the country, it should be the Castro brothers.

Sánchez Madan has been an independent journalist since 2004, working with the Noticuba Internacional news agency, and other virtual ones—Cuba Net, Payolibre, and Primavera de Cuba. This allows him to validate the coincidence of having been born the very same day when in 1948 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was first proclaimed.