

PRISONERS OF COLOR

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.

Rafael González Ruiz

Juan del Pilar Goberna
Human Rights Activist
Havana, Cuba

A construction worker and political prisoner, Rafael González Ruiz was born on August 18, 1965, in Guantánamo. At a very young age, and from his own personal experience with the every-day prohibitions, limitations, poverty, and fear that most Cubans equally endure, he became aware of the contradiction between discourse and official praxis. This was the beginning of his contestatory thinking, even before the existence of the Castro regime, which demanded duties and obedience.

Once he became aware of his contestatory nature, he left his hostile little hometown, and moved to Santiago de Cuba, in search of new horizons. He wasn't able to express his dissent there either, but got word that he'd be able to better channel his desire to express his ideas against the Castro government in the capital.

González Ruiz enrolled in the Civil Construction School, located in Ceiba del Agua (in the Caimito municipality of the province of Havana), but was expelled in 1987, after found listening to Radio Martí. For seven days, he was

detained at the Bauta Police Unit for constituting a "threat to the school's Director." The Caimito Municipal Court finally fined him 30 pesos.

González Ruiz refused to pay the fine, complaining that he had not committed any crime. From 1987 to 1993, National Revolutionary Police (NRP) harassed him, and subjected him to systematic detentions and lockups at different Havana police units. His constant refusal [to cooperate] caused the NRP to concoct a common felony, falsely accuse him, and sentence him to six months of preventive prison. At the trial, he was sentenced to the six months he had already served.

By November 1999, when Havana was preparing for the G-77, González Ruiz was at a political meeting¹ in the city's Central Park, from which he was taken to the Dragones and Zulueta Police Unit for criticizing the Castro government. He was officially charged and "fined 300 pesos for 'illegally selling at the market.'" González Ruiz complained to the Court, which,



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in turn, revoked his fine, but sentenced him to a year and four months of non-prison, correctional work for “disrespecting the figure of the President of the Republic.”

Once he was free, González Ruiz was at the Albear Park (at Monserrate and O’Reilly, in Old Havana) when a police officer came and told he could not be there. When he mentioned his rights, he was taken to the police station, where he was locked up for ten days. It took a 300-*peso* bail to get him out, but at the hearing was sentenced to three years in prison for disrespecting the figure of the President of the Republic.

Even while awaiting his incarceration, González Ruiz managed to quixotically intercede when a police officer was physically mistreating a citizen on a public thoroughfare. He tried to dissuade the agent, who turned around and attacked him. González Ruiz reacted in an act of legitimate self-defense, but the consequences were foreseeable—another fine, this time a thousand *pesos*; another trial for “assault, resisting, and disrespect.” This all resulted in a total sentence of four years of prison to be served while moving him from prison to prison—Combinado del Este, Quivicán, Melena, and Guasin. This is how González Ruiz settled the debt of his civil disobedience and contestatory behavior. Yet, he was always peaceful, whether when working with the Varela Project or refusing to cooperate with the Castro government.

He kept up his firm and contestatory attitude even while in prison. When there were only 20 days left for his sentence to be over, he was charged with the popular crime of disrespecting not just the President, but the prison authorities, and newly sentenced to from four to nine years.

During his eight years of imprisonment, González Ruiz never weakened in his denunciation of the abuses he suffered at the hands of his jailers. He declared numerous hunger or fasting strikes, refused to cut his hair or shave, went a year without seeing his family, and refused to ingest or use the prison’s “personal hygiene products” for three years, depending instead on his family to bring them to him.

The prison’s precarious sanitary and hygienic conditions, its physical and psychological abuses; poor nutrition; and lack of lighting and drinking water in its cells; and of medical attention and medications—the rigorously dehumanizing conditions of Cuban prisons—destroyed González Ruiz’s health. He ended up with partial vision loss, parasites, digestive problems, and, cardiac, respiratory, and circulatory issues.

This humble and simple political prisoner was “freed” on March 17th, 2009. Despite his exaggerated and unjust imprisonment, he claims to feel no hatred towards the intolerant and oppressive, explaining that these help him stay focused on and even increase his anti-Castro feelings. González Ruiz asserts the regime’s judges and other oppressors doubly punish black and mulatto people because of an official disqualification that says that this racial group should adhere to Castro’s rulings because it gained the most from “its” Revolution.

Note:

1. This is what officials called the group that practiced peaceful, civil disobedience. It was comprised of humble people from different walks of life that got together to pronounce criticism of the Castro regime—but always under the supervision and within earshot of the political police.

