

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.

Francisco Herodes Díaz Echemendía

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Political prisoner Francisco Herodes Díaz Echemendía was born on September 17th, 1956, in Santiago de Cuba. His humble, Christian family was comprised of parents, both now deceased, and three siblings. His father was a soldier in the army during the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista Zaldívar (1952-58). The family moved to the city of Victoria de las Tunas, where Francisco Herodes spent his childhood and adolescence, attending primary and secondary school.

While his parents held differing opinions about the revolutionary process, his father's influence had a greater impact on the boy. Despite having been a member of the dictatorship's armed forces, his father instilled in him the value of living freely and democratically. When he was a boy, Francisco Herodes suffered humiliation at the hands of his schoolmates, because of his father's past record, and his fam-

ily's Christian faith—both parts of his past with which he was unfamiliar. He lived in extreme poverty and never had toys, which motivated him to query his father about the reason for his difficult life. He was scarred by hunger and injustice, which would lead him to becoming potentially anti-Castro in his attitude and actions.

Once, as a troubled youth of fourteen (1970), he placed a sign that read "Down with Fidel" on the trunk of a patrol car parked outside the Hotel Casa Grande (Santiago de Cuba). Thus, began the contestatory work of this young, black-skinned youth. After a while, he was openly criticizing the Castro regime at his workplace. He also skipped paying his union dues, and refused to join the *Milicias de Tropas Territoriales* (MTT) [Territorial Militias]. This was enough to get him repeatedly fired from different jobs, yet despite this, he



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managed to graduate as an Emerging Teacher (1978) and passed a number of English courses. After graduating, he enrolled at the *Instituto Superior Pedagógico para la Enseñanza Técnica y Profesional* (ISPETP) “*General Vidal Ducasse Revé*” [General Vida Ducasse Revé Higher Pedagogical Institute for Technical and Professional Teaching], in Santiago de Cuba. He was in his last year of the Special Education program when he was imprisoned, and was not able to complete his university studies.

In 1980, based on his opposition to the government, Francisco Herodes planned to take up the armed struggle launched by Santiago teacher Frank País against the Batista dictatorship. He saved his pay and started a cell whose purpose was insurrection, purchasing arms, ammunition and other equipment—but his plan failed. Then he began to proselytize via books and documents about *perestroika* (a transformative process in the Soviet Union) that were not only censored, but also ended up in the hands of leaders of the State’s Central Administration’s divisions, informing them of the imminent collapse of “the cradle of Socialism.” These actions got him arrested on

August 8, 1990, and charged with Assault, Contempt, Enemy Propaganda, Sabotage, Terrorism, and Illegal Exit from the country, charges that got him 20 years and 10 months in prison (Case 42/96).

Francisco Herodes endured severe conditions at the Boniato (Santiago de Cuba) and Guantanamo provincial prisons, but his attitude as a political prisoner was uncompromising, despite the weekly beatings he received for two years, for not participating in political and pro-government events. Of course, he also endured prison cruelties like a lack of hygiene, food, medical attention, medication, as well as physical and psychological abuses. Yet, his activism never ceased: he never stopped denouncing his jailers’ human rights violations and atrocities.

His precarious imprisonment also kept Francisco Herodes separated from his twins and the rest of his closest family. Another factor that contributed to his declining state were the illnesses he contracted in prison—osteoporosis, chronic gastritis, tooth loss from infections, and partial blindness. One beating he received at the Boniato prison caused him to have arterial thrombosis in his left leg, for which he had to have a surgical intervention. Regarding the conditions at this locale, he says that an animal gets better treatment than a prisoner, explaining that he entered the operating room just minutes after two dogs had been surgically treated. As a result, he developed a staph infection, and suffered greatly.

Francisco Herodes completed his sentence on February 15, 2010: his current quality of life is deplorable. Notwithstanding, he bears his indigence with dignity, valor and patriotism, saying he will not abandon his homeland because he wants to see it democratic and free of the Castro brothers’ dictatorship.