

Amnesty International Report 2014/15

Republic of Cuba

Head of state and government: Raúl Castro Ruz

Freedoms of expression, association and assembly continued to be repressed. The number of short-term arrests increased sharply and politically motivated criminal prosecutions continued.

BACKGROUND

Amendments to the Migration Law which became effective in January 2013 facilitated travel abroad for all Cubans. Although government critics were allowed to travel abroad without hindrance, there were reports of documents and other materials being confiscated on their return to Cuba.

By the end of the year Cuba had still failed to ratify the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, both of which it had signed in February 2008. The government did not respond to requests to visit Cuba from the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, sent in October 2013, or from the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, sent in March 2014. The authorities have not granted Amnesty International access to the country since 1990.

An exchange of prisoners between the USA and Cuba in December, and the announcement of the further release of over 50 political prisoners, raised hopes for significant human rights change amid efforts to normalize relations between the two countries, which decided to renew their diplomatic relations.

Freedom of expression, association, assembly and movement

Criticism of the government continued to be repressed and was routinely punished by various means, including arbitrary and short-term detentions, “acts of repudiation” (demonstrations led by government supporters with the participation of state security officials), intimidation, harassment and politically motivated criminal prosecutions. The judicial system remained firmly under political control, gravely undermining the right to trial by an independent and impartial tribunal.

Government critics, independent journalists and human rights activists were frequently detained for exercising their rights to freedom of expression, association, assembly and movement. Activists were detained as a preventive measure to stop them from attending public demonstrations or private meetings.

There were increasing reports of government critics being threatened and also physically assaulted by state actors or individuals in their pay.

In June 2014, Roberto de Jesús Guerra Pérez, director of the independent news agency Hablemos Press, received threatening telephone calls and was assaulted on the streets of the capital, Havana, by an unidentified individual, in what he believed was an attempt by the authorities to dissuade him from continuing his journalist activities.¹

The government continued to exert control over all media, while access to information on the internet remained challenging due to technical limitations and restrictions on content. Independent journalists were systematically subjected to harassment, intimidation and detention for reporting information that was not sanctioned by the state apparatus.

In May, blogger Yoani Sánchez and her husband launched an online news website called 14 y medio. Shortly after it went live, the website was hacked and anyone accessing it from Cuba was redirected to a webpage which carried propaganda against Yoani Sánchez.

Prisoners of conscience

At the end of the year, five prisoners of conscience detained solely for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression, remained imprisoned. Three of them, brothers Alexeis, Vianco and Django Vargas Martín, were sentenced in November on charges of “public disorder of a continuous nature” after having spent more than a year and a half in pre-trial detention. Alexeis was sentenced to four years’ imprisonment, and Vianco and Django to two and a half years.²

Articles 72-90 of the Criminal Code which criminalize “dangerousness” and punish those deemed to be likely to commit a crime in the future, were increasingly used as a means to incarcerate government critics. Prisoners of conscience Emilio Planas Robert and Iván Fernández Depestre were sentenced to three and a half and three years’ imprisonment in October 2012 and August 2013 respectively for “dangerousness”. Emilio Planas Robert was accused of putting up posters in Guantánamo City with “anti-government” slogans.

Despite the relaxation of travel restrictions, 12 former prisoners of conscience arrested as part of the mass crackdown in 2003 and released in 2011 were not allowed to travel abroad as they were deemed to be serving their sentence outside prison.

Arbitrary Arrests and detentions

Short-term arbitrary detentions as a tactic to silence dissent increased sharply. The Cuban Commission on Human Rights and National Reconciliation reported 8,899 politically motivated short-term detentions during 2014, an increase of more than 27% compared with 2013.

Members of the independent civil society organization Ladies in White faced constant harassment and every Sunday dozens were detained for several hours to prevent them

from travelling to attend mass and carry out peaceful marches. The organization reported that 1,810 of its members had been arrested during 2013.

Dozens of government critics were arbitrarily detained or pressurized not to travel to Havana during the second summit of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States on 28 and 29 January. As a result of the arrests and the wave of intimidation, various meetings that were due to be held in parallel to the summit had to be cancelled.³

On 9 December, Ladies in White member Sonia Garro Alfonso, her husband Ramón Alejandro Muñoz González, and dissident Eugenio Hernández Hernández, were released and put under house arrest after having spent more than two and a half years in prison without trial. They were detained in March 2012 during the visit of Pope Benedict XVI, accused of assault, public disorder and attempted murder.⁴

US embargo against Cuba

In September, the USA renewed the Trading with the Enemy Act, which imposes financial and economic sanctions on Cuba and prohibits US citizens from travelling to and engaging in economic activities with the island. In October 2014, the UN General Assembly adopted, for the 23rd consecutive year, a resolution calling on the USA to lift the unilateral embargo. US President Obama announced in December that he will engage in discussions with the US Congress in order to lift the embargo on Cuba.

1. Cuba: Journalist threatened and attacked (AMR 25/001/2014) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/AMR25/001/2014/en/>
2. Cuba: Sentencing of three brothers postponed (AMR 25/003/2014) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/AMR25/003/2014/en/>
3. Cuba steps up repression on the eve of the CELAC summit (Press release) <https://www.amnesty.org/press-releases/2014/01/cuba-steps-repression-eve-celac-summit/>
4. Cuba: Further information – Government critics under house arrest (AMR 25/005/2014) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/AMR25/005/2014/en/>