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The unlikely chance of a serious human rights debate in Cuba

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Nearly a month since Pope Francis ended his historic visit to Cuba, any hope that authorities would loosen control on free expression in the country is fading as fast as the chants that welcomed him.

At the start of his tour, Pope Francis said Cuba had an opportunity to “open itself to the world”. He urged young people in the country to have open minds and hearts, and to be willing to engage in a dialogue with those who “think differently”.

Cubans listened, but the government didn't.

Instead, the Cuban authorities continued to prevent human rights activists from expressing their dissenting views.

According to the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation, an independent organization, in 2014 there was an average of 741 arbitrary detentions each month.

Last September, during the month of the Pope's visit, the number increased even further, with 882 arbitrary detentions registered.

Activists Zaqueo Baez Guerrero, Ismael Bonet Rene and María Josefa Acón Sardinas, members of the *Patriotic Union of Cuba* (Unión Patriótica de Cuba, UNPACU), a dissident group, are three of the activists detained. They were arrested on 20th September after they crossed a security line in Havana as they attempted to talk to the Pope and have been held in prison since then.

They are believed to be charged with contempt (“*desacato*”), resistance (“*resistencia*”) violence or intimidation against a state official (“*atentado*”), and public disorder (“*disorden publico*”). If convicted, they face prison sentences of between three and eight years. The crackdown seems to have escalated since the Pope left the country.

On Sunday 11 October, hundreds of human rights activists and dissidents, including members of the *Patriotic Union of Cuba* and of the group *Ladies in White* (Damas de Blanco) were arbitrarily arrested and detained on their way to peaceful protests organized across the country calling for the release of the activists and prisoners of conscience.

The *Patriotic Union of Cuba* is one of the organizations reporting the highest number of detentions.

One activist recently told me how a bus carrying him and 29 other people was stopped on the way to the city of Santiago de Cuba by 40 police officers.

“They took us off the bus one by one and threatened us with blows and imprisonment. I was taken in a jeep and left somewhere remote and had to walk for various miles to get home,” he said.

According to José Daniel Ferrer, General Secretary of UNPACU, four homes of social leaders were recently robbed or vandalized.

Another activist said he was hit after being arrested: “An official told us we all had to shut up or the police could take out our teeth if it was necessary,” he said. He said the police only stopped hitting him when they saw lots of blood.

Also on Sunday 11 October, in Havana, 60 *Ladies in White* were arrested. Some said they had been beaten, and detained for hours after a peaceful march that lasted less than 10 minutes. “The march started at 1.30pm and was stopped at 1.40pm,” Berta Solar, leader of the group told me.

The mother and grandmother of prisoner of conscience Danilo Maldonado Machado, a graffiti artist known as “El Sexto”, also joined the *Ladies in White*. Danilo’s mother said: “There were lots of police, who picked up the *Ladies in White* in buses. They picked them up so no one would see them protest. It left me traumatized to see how they dragged the women.”

For many, Pope Francis’ visit to Cuba was a sign of hope for freedom of expression in the country. But the recent crackdown on those who think differently shows that the same old tactics of repression are still being used to stifle dissent.

Cuba is undoubtedly at a crossroads when it comes to the protection of human rights. The Cuban government has long said it promotes the rights to education, healthcare and that it has made some advancements for the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex people. But it is impossible to comprehensively assess the wider human rights situation in Cuba when the fundamental right to peacefully express a view is tightly controlled and independent monitors are unable to enter.

As long as Cubans are only allowed to disagree in spaces controlled by the government, but not on the streets, and while the right to protest is severely restricted, a wider discussion on human rights remains an unlikely reality.

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