

IAPA'S Virtual Mission Evaluates the Critical Situation Facing Cuba and its People

Through Popular Support, Cuban Journalists and Artists Manage to Resist Crackdown

Independent journalism in Cuba is going through its most critical period in decades. However, at the same time, Cuba is enjoying its moment of most significant connection with the people and the historical responsibility of reflecting a process of unprecedented citizen participation since the beginning of the socialist dictatorship.

A month after the crackdown on the massive protests that demanded freedom on the island, directors of the Inter-American Press Association held a round of virtual meetings with journalists, intellectuals, artists, YouTubers, Catholic priests, and lawyers who defend those prosecuted by the Castro regime. Most of them requested not to disclose their identities for security reasons.

The president of the continental entity, Jorge Canahuati, stressed that this was one of the few missions that - in this case completely virtual - the IAPA was able to carry out in Cuba since the arrival of communism to power. In addition, this was the first time that IAPA took full advantage of the new video platforms.

Canahuati, president of the OPSA Group from Honduras, considered it "imperative that the international community demand respect for fundamental human rights on the island and support the courage of independent journalists who risk their freedom every day."

Carlos Jornet, president of the IAPA Committee on Freedom of the Press and Information and director of the Argentine media *La Voz del Interior*, stated: "the objective of the mission was to know from the protagonists about Cuba reality today, and to seek more appropriate actions to contribute to guarantee free expression, citizenry debate, central claims of recent events."

Jornet led the conversations together with the entity's executive director, Ricardo Trotti, who highlighted the role that independent journalism plays on the island today and stressed "the unavoidable value of social media in the permanent search of all areas of freedom by citizens."

The citizen demonstrations that began on Sunday, July 11, continued in later days to demand freedom and the end of the dictatorship, unleashed a wave of arrests and judicial prosecutions. The whereabouts of many detainees are not known with certainty, as authorities do not provide information to the families or allow them to bring food or visit the detention centers.

Several journalists were detained in those days for alleged "public disorder" or "instigation to commit a crime," ambiguous charges that are applied to avoid referring to political prisoners or prisoners of conscience. Those imprisoned were IAPA vice president of the Committee on Press Freedom, Henry Constantín, director of La Hora de Cuba, and reporters Iris Mariño and Neife Rigau. They were held incommunicado for several days. After being released on July 21, they had to remain under house arrest until August 23, the day they were fined 1,000 Cuban pesos (about US \$40) when the case was finally closed.

As similarly occurred months ago, artists, intellectuals, and dozens of young people were also victims of repression for demonstrating against state censorship. Neither they nor their lawyers can access the file of their respective cases, which they will only be able to learn about when they appear before the court when their fate is determined. The penalties they could face range from three months to one year in prison.

A significant fact is that many practices applied to the defendants are the same as those collected by the IAPA mission two months ago in Nicaragua, and very similar to those reported in Venezuela: imprisonment without giving reasons, detention conditions subhuman, overcrowding even with patients suffering Covid and a 7-day period, supposedly part of the investigation, in which the detained person cannot even communicate with their family members, even though procedural norms allow a call within the first 24 hours.

For this reason, defense attorneys for the detainees raise cases of enforced disappearance since this concept applies when information about a person's whereabouts is denied. They also report beatings and lacerations of the wrists at the time of arrests and transfers and subhuman hygiene in prisons.

"We cannot complain."

In their contacts with Cubans, the Inter American Press Association (IAPA) officers learned about the scope of the repression unleashed by Miguel Díaz-Canel, current president of a government. He came to power in 1959 and claimed he was doing it so he would be able to free Cubans.

The virtual meetings took place under the difficulties of accessing the Internet, from poor signals to virtual private networks (VPNs). However, years ago, it was unthinkable to contact so many people through communication platforms and audio and video.

Throughout the round of meetings, IAPA verified the growing fear people are experiencing to talk. Several meetings were canceled without notice. Alternatively, they changed to a different platform to communicate without interference. In addition, they alleged suspicions that those who watch their homes day and night monitored the dialogues.

After the initial greetings, the officers asked a journalist how he was doing in one of the meetings. The response was unexpected in the current context: "The truth is, we cannot complain." After noticing the incredulous faces, he clarified that it was a way of facing the situation with humor: "We cannot complain... because if we do, they crack down on us. Thousands of people do not explain how they are feeling for fear of losing their jobs, although they are as fed up as we are of living in subjection."

Independent journalists, artists, and intellectuals are the most vulnerable sectors because, in the current context, they are promoters of change together with thousands of young people, including medical personnel whom officials question.

The most persecuted among those who report on the news are Cubans who lack a university degree. This requirement certainly should not be required to exercise freedom of expression. Still, if they do not comply, they are accused of "usurpation of legal capacity."

There are currently over a hundred non-official journalists on the island, many young people trying to express their freedoms against the government crackdown. Dozens have left the country in the last three years after suffering intense government pressure.

There are about 20 non-official female journalists throughout the country. Several of them, classified as CR (counterrevolutionaries), suffer

interrogations that represent interference in their private lives and threats to take away their parental authority over their children. In addition, IAPA officials received complaints of gender violence, sexual abuse due to unreasonable police searches, detention in cells without privacy, even cleaning themselves. They also complain of online violence due to comments they receive on Facebook from false accounts.

Likewise, there are reports of hacked accounts and identity theft to post on social media, which compromise them and eventually lead to criminal complaints.

The vast majority of the media are public, but they do not broadcast dissonant voices. Instead, it exits a "surgical bombardment against freedom of expression, to ensure the tyranny carries out the political apartheid," said one of the people contacted.

An intellectual, a member of the 27N movement, said that although the communist government has always controlled art, there were moments of greater openness. "But since decree 349 of 2017, she added, there is complete intolerance, open censorship, and the will to attack anyone who demands freedom. Moreover, even more so after J-11, when it became clear that the disagreement is not something that occurred as a result of four artists, but the feeling of an entire group of people."

Whoever expresses himself is optimistic about the process of change that has begun: "We Cubans carry the ideal of freedom in our blood. Moreover, we are willing to put our bodies and lives to achieve it. We have lost so much that we do not even have fear."

A constant comment made during the interviews was that, unlike other similar protests that Castroism faced years ago, the episodes of 11-J seem to have marked a before and after in society's relationship with the communist government.

The closest reference to a similar event is the Black Spring of 2003, which ended with the conviction of 75 prisoners of conscience, including 33 journalists. A similar event is also the "Maleconazo" of August 1994. However, unlike those episodes, which were also more focused than those of 11-J, the government now shows less internal solidity. It has lost a good part of its international support and has not found answers to the economic and health crises, which essentially ignited the claims last July.

"Cubans today are barely surviving," one interviewee told the IAPA mission, "and here we say that it is "a war from lion to monkey, with the aggravating circumstance that the monkey is tied up. The country is more militarized than ever. The pandemic is the excuse for a curfew until sunset and for social manipulation.

Social media control

Social media triggers the protests, which, based on the hashtag #SOSCuba, made it possible to replicate the calls to "not keep silent" in the face of the regime's abuses. Thus, the Cuban rebels are winning the battle in social media, which Fidel Castro never faced.

Due to this new context, the government's first measure was the issuance of Decree-Law 35, which seeks to regulate the use of social media and the Internet.

The regulation's text, repudiated on social media with the hashtag #NoAlDecreto35, does not seem to differ from laws passed in more developed countries, as regime officials argued. However, a careful reading shows the real intentions.

For example, the text reads that one of the purposes is "to defend the achievements of our Socialist State." Article 3 states the "defense of the Revolution" as the first objective. Article 15, paragraphs e and f, seeks to "prevent telecommunications / ICT services from being used to undermine the Security and Internal Order of the country, transmit false reports or news (...) transmit information that is offensive or harmful to human dignity; (...) Collective security, general welfare, public morality and respect for public order." And the same thing appears in article 69.

It is symptomatic that, in a 78-page text, the word "freedom" is used only once, but not in a positive sense. For example, it appears in Annex II when speaking of grooming as an act that violates "sexual freedom." In the same section, we have included the "dissemination of false news, offensive messages, defamation with an impact on the country's prestige" and the dissemination of content that "incite mobilizations or other acts that alter public order" and "spread messages that apologize for the use of violence."

Social subversion is considered very dangerous, classified as "pretends to alter public order, promoting social indiscipline."

Another aspect that caught the attention of the independent Cuban press is the possibility that the decree gives licenses to operators, which many claim impose a gigantic firewall to prevent Internet access. The chance that the United States can guarantee free access to a global network provides hope for those who bet on change, but there are doubts that it is technically possible.

The issuance of Decree 35 and the limited responses the government has given to the people's demands (the most concrete measures were the flexibility to import medicines and food and to enable small businesses) lead several of those interviewed not to be optimistic about change. "If there is no willingness to listen, there is hardly any willingness to open a serious and constructive dialogue," said a journalist. "The only thing that works is international pressure because the dictatorship wants to preserve six decades of impunity," she added.

However, they all repeat that "nothing will ever be the same again" and that "sooner or later there will be a change in Cuba since the people no longer have anything to lose." "Young people have already tasted freedom," said one interviewee.

According to the interviews, the international press plays an essential role in denouncing the regime's corruption and repression. This way, the world leaders will focus on the small country with no free elections since 1948. Moreover, they considered that this external media pressure (which the government fears) is key to empowering citizens and independent journalists to denounce power abuses.

In this sense, there was consensus in condemning "the feeling of international abandonment" and that many intellectuals continue to analyze the Cuban regime "with a romantic gaze and repeating the tune of supposed social equality, without seeing hunger, deprivation, and human rights violations."

"Those of us who are critical," said an artist, "are subjected to isolation, our families being threatened, and psychologically tortured to force us to emigrate. It is a murderous and criminal dictatorship."

The complaints about detention conditions were partially endorsed by one of the interviewed lawyers, a member of the National Organization of Collective Law Firms (ONBC), a parastatal entity that has the monopoly on representing detainees in court. "Many things that are said are not true,"

argued the lawyer, who admitted that he practices his profession in a 'thin red line.' He also said that he gives 70 percent of what the client pays to a buffet of lawyers. And he added: "The repression, in general, worsened after July 11. But with journalists they have been smart, to avoid international repercussions. They don't want bad press abroad," he said, explaining why they were granted house arrest.

Those locked up in their homes also assured us they are subject to surveillance and permanent espionage (and are watched to see who they meet and what they are talking about). In addition, they are only allowed to leave if they are summoned by the courts to take their children to school or buy food. "And always under surveillance."

Another aspect that the interviewees considered relevant is the greater participation of the Catholic Church. The commitment of "village" priests and nuns is recognized (barely 200 in a country of 12 million inhabitants). However, people question the extreme caution of bishops, the Nuncio, and the Vatican. "The regime has managed to kidnap the Episcopal Conference," said one of the interviewees, alluding to the weakness and passive stance taken by the church.