

Case Study Activist Movement in a Non-Free Country

The Ladies in White: Marching for Change in Cuba

Vision and Motivation

Over a span of three days in March of 2003, the Cuban government arrested 75 members of the political opposition, many of whom were prominent journalists, human rights activists and librarians. Many of those who were arrested had been filing critical reports with international news outlets on life in Cuba. The Cuban regime had become anxious over the increasing amount of international attention these reports were receiving. Fearing that they might lose their grip on the population, the



government decided to crack down in what became known as the Black Spring arrests.¹ In order to legitimize the arrests, the Castro regime accused dissidents of receiving financial compensation from the United States for attempting to politically destabilize the state.² Dissidents were convicted in one-day trials and given jail sentences ranging from six to 28 years. Throughout their imprisonment, they have suffered physical abuse, given water contaminated with fecal matter and food with worms, and prevented from receiving medical care.³

A group of women who became known as the *Damas de Blanco*, which translates to “Ladies in White” in English, decided to voice their opposition to the crackdown, which has been considered

the harshest in Cuba in recent years. The Ladies in White began as a group of mothers, sisters, and other relatives of the prisoners who hoped to secure the release of their loved ones.

Goals and Objectives

According to Miriam Leiva, a member of the Ladies in White, "Our objective is purely humanitarian, to free the prisoners of March 2003."⁴ As an initial reaction to the Black Spring arrests, the Ladies in White demanded that their family members and loved ones be released from jail. They hoped to achieve this by orchestrating peaceful demonstrations, which began two weeks after the arrests. While the group's primary goal remains the release of all 75 political dissidents, the Ladies' overall mission has grown broader. They have been joined by other women who were not directly affected by the Black Spring arrests, but who oppose the repressive political tactics of the Cuban government.⁵ "I started fighting for my husband, then for the group, and now it's for changes for the better of the country," says Laura Pollán, one of the Ladies in White. "We found qualities in ourselves we did not know we had."⁶

Leadership

The Ladies in White began gathering at St. Rita's Church in Havana two weeks after the Black Spring arrests in 2003. The group, started by Blanca Reyes and Laura Pollán, recruited women related to those who were arrested.⁷ Within weeks, they were able to mobilize a total of 30 women, none of whom have stopped marching since.⁸ In addition to Reyes and Pollán, the Ladies in White leadership circle includes Miriam Leiva, the wife of Oscar Espinosa Chepe; Berta Soler, the wife of Angel Moya Acosta; Loida Valdes, the wife of Alfredo Felipe Fuentes; and Julia Núñez, the wife of Adolfo Fernández Saínz.⁹

Civic Environment

Castro's rule has been defined by the ongoing arrests and incarcerations of political dissidents since the Communist regime came to power in 1959. In February 1999, the government passed

strict sedition laws; activities like importing texts on democracy and material from international news agencies became punishable by up to 20 years in prison.¹⁰ In addition to placing legal limits on Cubans' right to free speech and the dissemination of information, the regime tries to discredit and weaken opposition figures by labeling them as agents of the United States.¹¹ With the Black Spring arrests, Castro hoped to crush the independent press; however, the crackdown conversely led to an increase in independent journalism. Castro's repression served as a catalyst for dissident writers. Many Cubans without internet access began hand-writing their stories and typing them on computers at various embassies.¹²

While the Ladies in White have been careful to work within the bounds of Cuba's restrictive environment, they have nonetheless met heavy resistance from the Cuban government. The government has accused them of working with the United States to subvert the socialist regime in Cuba and has attempted to arrest them.¹³ According to one Cuban government official, the Ladies in White are a "provocation...ordered by their Yankee masters."¹⁴ They have also been insulted and physically assaulted by government supporters whom they believed to be following official orders.¹⁵

During their protests, the Ladies have been harassed by government supporters and forcibly removed by security forces. In April of 2008, a few members of the Ladies in White were staging a sit-in protest when they were interrupted by around 100 government supporters who shouted insults at them and then helped the police force the women onto buses to remove them from the area. Similarly, the Ladies' March 2010 protests on the seventh anniversary of the Black Spring arrests were disrupted by security forces and hundreds of pro-government demonstrators.¹⁶ Both the civilians and security agents physically assaulted the Ladies with punches, scratches, pinches, and hair-yanking.¹⁷ The women were dragged onto buses as the crowd shouted insults and physically attacked them.

Because the Cuban government tightly controls the media, it is able to manipulate the Ladies' image. For instance, in 2008, rather than showing images of the Ladies being forcibly removed from their sit-in, the television news played excerpts of a phone conversation that the Ladies had with US Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen.¹⁸ The Congresswoman had called not in connection with the sit-in protest but simply to express her solidarity with the Ladies in White.

However, the Cuban government had recorded the phone call and played it on the news to reinforce their allegation that the Ladies are a 'counterrevolutionary' political group in disguise, controlled by the United States. "It is all a big farce and the government is manipulating the information," said one of the protesters. "The government did not show the images of us being yanked around, dragged and kicked."¹⁹

Message and Audience

With the goal of securing the release of jailed family members, the Ladies in White decided to march peacefully through the streets of Havana on a weekly basis. Every Sunday, the Ladies in White dress in white and meet for Mass at St. Rita's Church, then silently walk down Fifth Avenue in Havana.²⁰ They each carry a flower and wear an image of their imprisoned relative labeled with the number of years of his prison sentence.²¹ Through the marches, they hope to raise awareness of the victims of the Black Spring arrests and remind the government that they have not forgotten about their loved ones.²²

The peaceful methods of the Ladies in White may be the key to their success; some believe that had they not chosen to make their protest entirely peaceful, the movement would have been quashed at once by the government. "I think that is why we have a space in Cuban society and that's why the government has to admit us walking in the streets and demanding. It's the first time that the Cuban government has accepted the fact that someone has the right to go out and demand openly and speak out," says protester Miriam Leiva.²³ They also write letters to the Cuban government demanding the release of the prisoners and appeal to foreign governments for support.²⁴ So far, 22 of the people arrested during Black Spring have been released, and the Ladies continue to campaign for the release of the remaining 53 prisoners.²⁵

Outreach Activities

The Ladies in White did not set out to build coalitions or recruit larger numbers of protesters, but their example has inspired others to participate in the movement. Women in provinces outside Havana have begun to dress in white, marching in protest to²⁶ the unjust imprisonment of their

own family members.²⁷ As many as 100 women are reported to have joined in the marches on special occasions.²⁸

The Ladies have also reached out to the international community for support. In addition to having conversations with supportive American politicians like Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, the Ladies in White have met with Mike Parmlly, the head of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana.²⁹ Pollán believes that some of the prisoners who were released were freed due to international pressure. She says that their release “was not a humanitarian gesture but rather a trade off in exchange for the goodwill of Europe and Spain in particular.”³⁰ In 2005, the Ladies in White were awarded the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought by the European Parliament in recognition of their struggle.³¹

Learn More

News and Analysis

[“Country Report: Cuba.” Freedom House. 2009.](#)

[“Cuba’s ‘Ladies in White’.” Human Rights First.](#)

[Frank, Marc. “Cuba Lashes out at ‘Ladies in White’.” Reuters UK. 25 April 2008.](#)

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[Lauria, Carlos, Campbell, Monica, and Salazar, Maria. “Cuba’s Long Black Spring.” The Committee to Protect Journalists. 18 March 2008.](#)

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[Lockhart, Melissa. "Dissident Treatment – The Ladies in White." Foreign Policy Association. 19 March 2009.](#)

[O'Grady, Mary Anastasia. "Ladies in White." Wall Street Journal. 18 Dec. 2005.](#)

["Statement of purpose from Cuban dissidents Ladies in White." Havana Journal. 8 Aug. 2006.](#)

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["Cuba: Las Damas de Blanco." YouTube. 20 Feb. 2008.](#) (Spanish)

["Neighborhood Vigilantes." YouTube. 30 Aug. 2007.](#)

¹ [Lauria, Carlos, Campbell, Monica, and Salazar, Maria. "Cuba's Long Black Spring." The Committee to Protect Journalists. 18 March 2008.](#)

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ [Frank, Marc. "Cuba Lashes out at 'Ladies in White'." Reuters UK. 25 April 2008.](#)

⁵ [Llana, Sara Miller. "Cuba Arrests Ladies in White." Christian Science Monitor. 22 April 2008.](#)

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ [O'Grady, Mary Anastasia. "Ladies in White." Wall Street Journal. 18 Dec. 2005.](#)

⁸ [Llana.](#)

⁹ [O'Grady.](#)

¹⁰ ["Country Report: Cuba." Freedom House. 2009.](#)

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² [Llana.](#)

¹³ [Frank; Llana.](#)

¹⁴ [Frank.](#)

¹⁵ [Lockhart, Melissa. "Dissident Treatment – The Ladies in White." Foreign Policy Association. 19 March 2009.](#)

¹⁶ [Ariosto, David. "Pro-government demonstrators swarm human rights march in Cuba." CNN. 18 March 2010.](#)

¹⁷ Tamayo, Juan O. "Cuban protesters punched, dragged." Miami Herald. 18 March 2010.

¹⁸ [Frank.](#)

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ ["Statement of purpose from Cuban dissidents Ladies in White." Havana Journal. 8 Aug. 2006.](#)

²¹ [Lockhart.](#)

²² [Ibid.](#)

²³ [Gjelten, Tom. "Bolder Tactics Divide Cuba's 'Ladies in White'." National Public Radio. 16 May 2008.](#)

²⁴ [Llana.](#)

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ [O'Grady.](#)

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ [Ibid.](#)

²⁹ [Frank.](#)

³⁰ [Voeux, Claire. "'Black Spring' Five Years After." Reporters Without Borders. March 2008. \[PDF\]](#)

³¹ [O'Grady.](#)