

U.S. Democracy, the Cuban Five and the ANPP

By Arnold August, April 2012

The U.S. has its definition of democracy. It is promoted for other countries that do not adhere to the U.S. as being the leader of the world. Cuba is one of those countries. For those countries that are allies or friendly to the U.S., Washington does not insist on its model. Since 1959, Cuba's defence of its sovereignty and right to self-determination is perhaps the most consistent and long-lasting resistance to U.S. domination of any country in the contemporary world.

U.S. democracy promotion for Cuba is far from being peaceful. The U.S. political and judicial system is not democratic when it comes to many issues as my book details in Chapter 2. One of the most flagrant violations of human rights in the entire history of the U.S. justice system is the case of the Cuban Five. Who are Gerardo Hernández, Ramón Labañino, Antonio Guerrero, Fernando González and René González, to whom I have dedicated my book? It is necessary to go back into history to get to the roots of the Cuban Five.

The U.S., as reviewed in Chapter 5, has used every means, including violence, in order to try to force regime change in Cuba, with "democracy promotion" being one of the signposts.

Since 1960, there have been approximately 800 terrorist acts inside Cuba, resulting in 3,478 people being killed and 2,099 injured. "It is hard not to find someone who doesn't have a story to tell of a relative or friend who has been a victim of terrorism."¹

According to the late U.S. attorney Leonard Weinglass, five Cuban nationals travelled to the U.S. after decades of terrorist acts against the Cuban people. The acts were carried out with complete impunity and even with funding from U.S. authorities. The five Cubans' objective was to monitor and report to the Cuban government plans for terrorism, in order to put a halt to them. The five men were arrested in Miami in September 1998. They were immediately separated and kept in solitary confinement for seventeen months, until the beginning of the trial. The trial, which took place in Miami, lasted seven months. They were charged with 26 counts of violating U.S. laws, most of them minor and none involved the use of violence. Moreover, they were not spying, despite the repeated media appellation of the five Cubans as being spies. In December 2001, they were sentenced to maximum prison terms: two double life sentences and fifteen years for Gerardo Hernández; life for both Antonio Guerrero and Ramón Labañino;

nineteen and fifteen years respectively for Fernando González and René González. They did not receive a fair trial in Miami, as it is a hotbed of anti-Castro activities and press. On August 31, 2012, an affidavit was submitted to Florida's South District Judge Joan Lenard by Gerardo Hernández's lawyer, Martin Garbus. In the motion to free Gerardo Hernández, one of the main themes in the 66-page document is the role of the press. The U.S. government paid some Miami journalists to create an atmosphere in Miami in which a fair trial was impossible. Readers can read the affidavit and reach their own conclusions.² It was so evident that a fair trial in Miami was impossible that even the Eleventh Circuit Court sitting in Atlanta, Georgia, "reversed the convictions on the ground that the Five did not receive a fair trial in Miami... and ordered a new trial... The venue [was] incapable of providing a forum for a trial." The U.S. administration at the time took steps to reverse the court's decision.³

For further information on this case, Asamblea Nacional del Poder Popular (ANPP — National Assembly of People's Power, or Parliament) President Alarcón de Quesada has written a fully documented sixteen-part series. While dealing with all the political and complicated legal ramifications, this series is reader-friendly for everyone.⁴ In addition, Stephen Kimber, Professor of Journalism at the University of King's College in Halifax, Canada, wrote a revealing book. It contains information never before fully divulged or analyzed. It is to be released by Fernwood Publishing in spring 2013.⁵ Readers can consult a synopsis of some aspects of the book from a 2012 talk given by the author.⁶

The Cuban Five story in itself goes a long way in exposing democracy in the U.S.

The demand by the Cuban people for the release of the Cuban Five is a grass-roots issue that touches the very heart and soul of all Cubans. As Keith Bolender points out above, just about everyone in Cuba knows someone who has been affected by the U.S.-backed terrorist attacks that the Cuban Five had as a mission to stop. Yet, the Cuban Five were imprisoned. The U.S.-backed terrorists were *not* arrested. This had sent shock waves into the very fabric of Cuban society. As Mirta Rodríguez, the mother of one of the Cuban Five, Antonio Guerrero, told me in an interview, her son is present in the minds of all the people in her neighbourhood.⁷

The International Relations Commission of the ANPP has been working throughout the year to advance this cause and thus contribute toward normalizing relations between the two neighbours. More than the 90 miles separate the two countries; there is also the case of the five Cubans that suspends the

normalization of relations. In addition, the U.S. government has continually denied entry visas to Adriana Pérez and Olga Salanueva to visit their imprisoned husbands, Gerardo Hernández and René González respectively. For Cuba, where the family has so much importance, this additional punishment further deepened the demand from the base for their release and the right of family visits until they are liberated.

Once again, as in previous ANPP mandates since the arrest of the Cuban Five, in formalizing the new membership of the Permanent Working Commission on International Relations coming out of the 2008 elections, Alarcón noted that the priority of the Commission is to work for the freedom of the Cuban Five.⁸ Elizabeth Palmeiro, wife of one of the Cuban Five, Ramon Labañino, told me in an interview that Alarcón, in his position as president, has a very clear grasp of the entire case. With his experience in the U.S. as a diplomat in the UN, he is best qualified to lead the desire of the Cuban people to free the five.⁹

Since the beginning of the campaign to free the five men, the ANPP commission deputies and Alarcón himself, along with other Cuban organizations and the Ministry of Foreign Relations, have made enormous efforts. One of them consists of successful outreach to parliamentarians and parliaments of the world, international organizations and personalities that they demand the release of the Cuban Five.

The ANPP working commission makes use of its enormous global reach, developed over the decades, to all countries of the world. One of the building blocks consists of the parliamentary friendship groups between Cuba and other countries. These committees are one of the key responsibilities of the commissions. Most deputies often join one of them.

In the Permanent Working Commission on International Relations session I attended on December 23, 2008, Commission President Pez Ferro reported there were 85 such joint friendship groups. He also reviewed the number of parliamentarians and parliaments in several countries in Europe, Africa and Latin America who had made public statements directed toward Washington to free the Cuban Five. This included parliamentarians in Great Britain, France and many other countries. The number of parliamentary friendship groups rose from 85 in December 2008 to 97 in 2011.¹⁰

The international relations working commission includes as one of its members Deputy Magalys Llort, mother of Cuban Five prisoner Fernando González. In 2008, Magalys Llort said in an interview, soon after the January 2008 elections, that she was

proposed as a candidate for elections to the ANPP. This was suggested by mass organizations perceiving her as a valuable addition to the ANPP resulting from her work on the Cuban Five case. Once the new ANPP mandate was initiated, she became part of the Permanent Working Commission on International Affairs.¹¹ A year later, she told me about the work that she and other members of the Commission were carrying out. The first example was her participation in Panama at an international parliamentary friendship campaign for the freedom of the Cuban Five. Not only was it helpful for this cause, listening to testimonies from parliamentarians from several countries whose constituents had benefited from Cuba's literacy campaigns, but it also strengthened her pride in Cuba. Magalys Llorca was also encouraged by the rapidly changing situation in the Caribbean and in Latin America. Many leaders in this area "think differently, the people are awakening," which should assist the cause of the Cuban Five.¹²

The Cuban influence in the world, despite enormous and continuous U.S. pressures, succeeds on such a touchy issue as the Cuban Five. The parliamentary friendship groups, such as the one with Great Britain, are often presided over by prestigious Cuban figures, such as Cuban Deputy Roberto Fernández Retamar. He is a poet, essayist and writer, and head of the internationally recognized *Casa de las Américas* in Havana.¹³ Fernández Retamar was the object of the following comments regarding his 2009 visit to the University of Manchester in the United Kingdom by one of its professors: "Roberto Fernández Retamar is one of the most distinguished Latin American intellectuals of the twentieth century."¹⁴

The results of the Cuban efforts are outstanding. To provide only a few examples among parliamentarians, in 2006, 110 of all the members of the British parliament, as well as London Mayor Ken Livingstone and others, signed an open letter to Washington for the immediate release of the Cuban Five. Forty-nine members of the Irish parliament did likewise, as did 56 members of the Canadian House of Commons, and the entire Latin American parliament (PARTLATINO).¹⁵ Among the many renowned personalities, the following are a few examples of those expressing their public support for the freedom of the five Cubans: British Priest Geoffrey Bottoms, Wayne Smith, head of the U.S. Interest Section in Havana (equivalent of an embassy between two countries not having diplomatic relations), former U.S. Congressman Esteban Torres, Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn. Eight international Nobel Prize winners petitioned the U.S. administration.¹⁶ The United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention issued a strong statement and detailed report.¹⁷ Amnesty International did likewise.^{18; 19; 20}

The Cuban ANPP, through its International Relations Permanent Working Commission, and Alarcón, who had been the Cuban representative in the New York headquarters of the United Nations for many years, have also had some success in the U.S. itself. This is being assisted by U.S.-based support groups. Some U.S. municipal-level elected people in the U.S. and many artists and personalities have made declarations. Thirteen California mayors wrote a letter to Washington to demand the right of the two wives to visit their respective husbands in prison.²¹ The Latino Congress and the National Congress of U.S. Lawyers took a stand.^{22; 23}

Former President Jimmy Carter, upon his return to the U.S. from his latest visit to Cuba in 2011, issued his formal public report. He wrote “both privately and publicly I continued to call for the end of our economic blockade against the Cuban people, the lifting of all travel, trade, and financial restraints, the release of Alan Gross and the Cuban Five.”²⁴ A U.S. prisoner in Cuba, Alan Gross was tried and convicted for violating Cuban laws in order to subvert the constitutional order in Cuba. His case is, of course, publicized in the U.S., while the real reasons for his detention are distorted and generally blacked out. The U.S. government holds that Gross is innocent and demands his release. The release of the Cuban Five and their unconditional return to Cuba is a demand of the entire Cuban population.

Washington does not admit it, but the pressure from the international community and within the U.S. itself to release the Cuban Five is enormous. As far as Cuba is concerned, the leadership and the grass roots in this case are one. The Cuban ANPP and its working commission on international relations act all the time. Since the 1998 arrests, agreements, decisions and appeals to parliamentarians around the world have been formally taken. This situation is not like others regarding controversial bills, such as the one on Social Security. In fact, many proclamations in the ANPP on the Cuban Five are not even taken by a show-of-hands vote, but by acclamations signalled by a round of applause. Just as the Cuban ANPP can go through meticulous consultations on some draft bills, it can also act swiftly and continually on an issue, such as the Cuban Five, their release being unanimous at the grass roots; right from the beginning, there was consensus. Such is the diversity in the activities of the ANPP.

With the arrest, trial and conviction of Gross, the situation seems to be coming to a head as far as the prisoners in the two countries are concerned. Relations between the two neighbours are at this time largely dependent on this dilemma. For full information on the Gross and the Cuban Five cases, and an opinion for a swap between the U.S. and Cuban prisoners, see the U.S.-

based website Centre for International Policy.²⁵ The Associated Press has a fully detailed article on Gross.²⁶ The United Kingdom-based academic International Institute for the Study of Cuba also provides further information about Gross.²⁷ Alarcón has clearly stated that “to expect a unilateral gesture wouldn’t be reasonable.”²⁸

The outcome depends on the work of the Cuban ANPP and their friends all over the world. The Cubans have one major obstacle. Any Cuban, from a high school student to a senior, is fully aware of the details and politics surrounding the Cuban Five case; the Alan Gross issue is well known in Cuba. Almost any member of the U.S. Congress could learn a lesson from Cubans on the Cuban Five. The only Congress people who have decided to be informed are a small group of seven forward-looking members of the Congressional Black Caucus who visited Cuba in 2009. They met with President Alarcón and the families of the Cuban Five.²⁹ Aside from this exception, U.S. Congress and the overwhelming vast majority of the people in the U.S. are unaware of the Cuban Five case. Regarding Alan Gross, his name is often mentioned by the Obama administration and people in the U.S. Congress. The reasons for his detention, however, are completely distorted.

There is always a place for reconciliation between the two neighbours. Olga Salanueva, wife of René González, has been denied a visa to visit him since his arrest in 1998. Yet she holds no hostility toward the people in the U.S., as she said in an interview. “They [people in the U.S.] have a band over their eyes, we cannot judge them as being guilty; they are rather victims of a major propaganda against our country.”³⁰

The contrasting attitude on the issue of family visiting rights for the Cuban prisoners in the U.S., on the one hand, and Gross in Cuba, on the other hand, is itself a lesson on democracy in the U.S.

Everyone, I believe, can appreciate the difference in treatment between Cuba and the United States in terms of family visits for prisoners. Cuba has systematically accepted all visa requests from Gross’ wife. Washington has systematically refused all requests for visas from Olga Salanueva, the wife of Rene González, and from Adriana Pérez, the wife of Gerardo Hernandez.³¹

¹ Bolender, Keith. 2010. *Voices From the Other Side: An Oral History of Terrorism Against Cuba*. NY: Pluto Press, p. 2.

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- ² United States District Court. 2012. “Affidavit of Martin Garbus in support of the motion to set aside the conviction and, in the alternative, in support of Movant’s motion for discovery and oral argument.” Southern District of Florida. The Cuban Five (August 31). At <<http://www.thecuban5.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/Affidavit-Gerardo-Hernandez.pdf>>.
- ³ Weinglass, Leonard. 2008. *The Cuban Five and the U.S. War Against Terror, in Reinventing the Revolution: A Contemporary Cuba Reader*. Philip Brenner et al. (eds.), Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- ⁴ Alarcón de Quesada, Ricardo. 2011. “The Trial: The Untold Story of the Cuban 5.” Monthly Review (February 23). At <<http://monthlyreview.org/commentary/the-untold-story-of-the-cuban-5>>.
- ⁵ See <<http://www.fernwoodpublishing.ca>>.
- ⁶ Kimber, Stephen. 2012. “The Real Story of the Cuban 5: What Lies Across the Water.” (April 25). At <<http://www.counterpunch.org/2012/04/25/what-lies-across-the-water/>>.
- ⁷ Palmeiro, Elizabeth, Mirta Rodríguez and Olga Salanueva. 2007. Interviews with author (September 19), Havana.
- ⁸ Asamblea Nacional del Poder Popular, Playa. n.d.a. “Comisión de relaciones internacionales. Asamblea Nacional del Poder Popular.” At <http://www.parlamentocubano.cu/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=185:comision-de-relaciones-internacionales&catid=56:biografia-de-los-diputados&Itemid=55>.
- ⁹ Palmeiro, Rodríguez and Salanueva, op. cit.
- ¹⁰ Sanchez Serra, Oscar. 2011. “Cuba está presenta en las principales organizaciones parlamentarias.” *Granma* (December 23), Year 47, No. 306.
- ¹¹ Llor, Magalys, and Irma Schweret. 2008. Interview with author (January 24), Havana.
- ¹² Llor, Magalys. 2009. Interview with author (January 8), Havana.
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- ¹⁴ University of Manchester. 2009. “Cuban Cultural Leader Makes Rare Visit to England.” (May 26). At <<http://www.manchester.ac.uk/aboutus/news/display/?id=4696>>.
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- ¹⁹ Amnesty International USA. 2010. “Amnesty International Seeks Review of Case of the Cuban Five.” (October 3). At <<http://www.amnestyusa.org/news/press-releases/amnesty-international-seeks-review-of-case-of-the-cuban-five?id=ENGUSA20101013001&lang=e>>.
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³¹ Alarcón de Quesada. 2012. “Cuba Meets the Challenges of the 21st Century.”
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