
amnesty international

CUBA

Prisoners of Conscience - Manuel Antonio González Castellanos, Leonardo Varona González and Roberto Rodríguez Rodríguez

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Amnesty International believes that journalists **Manuel Antonio González Castellanos** and **Leonardo Varona González**, and former political prisoner **Roberto Rodríguez Rodríguez**, are prisoners of conscience, detained for the non-violent exercise of their rights to freedom of expression and association, and is calling for their immediate and unconditional release.

Manuel Antonio González Castellanos, a reporter for the independent press agency *Cuba Press*, was detained on 1 October 1998 in Holguín and charged with “disrespect”, “*desacato*” (article 144 of the Cuban Penal Code). Following his arrest, family members reportedly went to the local police station to enquire about the detainee, but were denied information and were insulted and threatened by the police. On returning home, Manuel González’s sister and her son, Leonardo Varona, wrote anti-government slogans denouncing the arrest on the walls and doors of their home. The following day they were reportedly subjected to an *acto de repudio* (act of repudiation)¹. Their home was reportedly surrounded by several hundred people, reportedly lead by State Security agents and members of the *Brigadas de Respuesta Rápida*, Rapid Response Brigades², who chanted threats and abuse. Government agents then forced open the door and beat two members of the family, Yoani and Leonardo Varona, as well as a visitor at the house, Roberto Rodríguez Rodríguez. The three of them were arrested, but Yoani Varona was released on 5 October.

¹ These are organized by government officials and involve being verbally abused and sometimes physically assaulted by government supporters.

² These were set up in 1991 “to defend the country, the Revolution and socialism in all circumstances, by confronting and liquidating any sign of counter-revolution or crime” and were subsequently involved in numerous violent confrontations with dissidents. Their activities have appeared to be less frequent in recent years.

On 6 May 1999 the trial took place of Manuel González, aged 41, Leonardo Varona, aged 24, and Roberto Rodríguez, aged 27. All three defendants were convicted of "disrespect". Manuel González was sentenced to two years and seven months' imprisonment, Leonardo Varona was sentenced to one year and four months' imprisonment and Roberto Rodríguez was sentenced to one year and five months' imprisonment. According to reports, relatives of the defendants and several dissidents were temporarily detained until the trial was over.

Manuel González and Leonardo Varona are both said to be affiliates of *Santiago Press*, an independent news agency in the province of Santiago de Cuba. Leonard Varona is the grandson of Lydia Doce, a martyr of the Cuban revolution that brought Fidel Castro to power in 1959. Shortly before his arrest, he reportedly made a statement to the Miami-based radio station, *La Voz, The Voice*, expressing his displeasure that a prison work camp had been named after Lydia Doce.

Background Information

All media in Cuba are state-controlled and freedom of expression, association and assembly are severely limited. In recent years a number of independent press agencies have emerged in an attempt to challenge the state monopoly on news but in the face of the restrictions are only able to disseminate their reports outside Cuba. Many journalists working for such agencies suffer frequent harassment, short-term detention and threats that they will be imprisoned if they do not cease their activities or leave the country. Others have been tried and sentenced and have become prisoners of conscience.

On 16 February 1999 Cuba's National Assembly passed tough new legislation aimed at combatting political dissent and protecting the Cuban economy. Under the new legislation, which became effective in March, dissidents and journalists found to be working against the Cuban state reportedly face up to 20 years' imprisonment. The law, known as the "*Ley de Protección de la Independencia Nacional y la Economía de Cuba*", "Law for the Protection of the National Independence and Economy of Cuba", calls for seven to 15 years' imprisonment for passing information to the Government of the United States, its agencies, dependencies, representatives or functionaries, to facilitate anti-Cuban measures, such as the US Helms-Burton Law (which penalizes business dealings with Cuban companies expropriated from US citizens) and the economic blockade of the island, rising to 20 years if the information is acquired surreptitiously or in collusion with two or more people or if the information is obtained through employment. The legislation calls for three to eight years' imprisonment for the ownership, distribution or reproduction of subversive materials from the US Government, its agencies, dependencies, representatives or functionaries or any foreign entity, and two to five years' imprisonment for collaborating with foreign radio or television stations and publications deemed to be assisting US policy.

Other independent journalists to have recently been imprisoned or charged in Cuba include Bernardo Arévalo Padrón, director of the independent press agency *Línea Sur Press*. He is currently serving a six year sentence for

"disrespect", after being detained on 14 August 1997. In February 1998 journalist Juan Carlos Recio Martínez was convicted of "other acts against state security", "otros actos contra la seguridad del estado", and sentenced to one year's "correctional work without internment". He was convicted on the grounds that he knew of the existence of a leaflet written by Cecilio Monteagudo but did not inform the authorities of it. Mario Julio Viera González, director of the independent press agency, *Cuba Verdad*, Cuba Truth, is currently awaiting trial at home on a charge of "injurid", "slander". On 27 April 1999 he was threatened with a new charge of "disrespect" because of an article he wrote which appeared on the Internet. Jesús Joel Díaz Hernández, executive director of the independent press agency *Cooperativa Avileña de Periodistas Independientes*, Cooperative of Independent Journalists of Ciego de Avila, was arrested on 18 January 1999 and subsequently sentenced to four years' imprisonment for "peligrosidad", "dangerousness".

Please send faxes/express and airmail letters in Spanish. If not, in your own language:

- Expressing concern that Manuel Antonio González Castellanos, Leonardo Varona González, and Roberto Rodríguez Rodríguez have been detained solely for the non-violent exercise of their rights to freedom of expression and association.
- Calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Manuel Antonio González Castellanos, Leonardo Varona González, and Roberto Rodríguez Rodríguez, on the grounds that they are prisoners of conscience.
- Urging that all Cuban citizens be guaranteed their rights to freedom of association, assembly and expression, in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and that the Cuban Government immediately cease to imprison, force into exile abroad or otherwise punish those who attempt to peacefully exercise such rights.

Please send appeals to:

Head of State and Government

Dr Fidel Castro Ruz

Presidente de los Consejos

de Estados y de Ministros

La Habana, Cuba

Telex and Fax: via Ministry of Foreign Affairs (see below)

Salutation: Su Excelencia/Your Excellency

Attorney-General

Dr Juan Escalona Reguera

Fiscal General de la República

Fiscalía General de la República

San Rafael 3, La Habana, Cuba

Telegrams: Fiscal General, Havana, Cuba

Telex: 511456 fsgse

Fax: + 53 7 - 57 07 95

Salutation: Sr Fiscal General / Dear Attorney General

Minister of Foreign Affairs

Sr Roberto Robaina González

Ministro de Relaciones Exteriores

Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores

Calzada No. 360

Vedado, La Habana, Cuba

Telegrams: Ministro Relaciones Exteriores, Havana, Cuba

**Telex: 511122 / 511464 / 512950 Fax: + 53 7 - 333 085 / - 335 261 / -
333 460**

Salutation: Señor Ministro / Dear Minister

KEYWORDS: PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE1 / JOURNALISTS / FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

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