

PRISONERS OF COLOR

ISLAS WILL DEDICATE A PAGE IN EACH ISSUE TO THE AFRO-CUBANS SERVING TIME IN CUBA'S PENAL SYSTEM

In many countries people are detained for trying to exercise their rights of freedom of expression, association, assembly, or movement. Some are imprisoned because they or their families are involved in political or religious activities. Some are arrested because of their connection with political parties or national movements that oppose government policies. Trade union activity or participation in strikes or demonstrations are common causes for imprisonment. Often, people are imprisoned because they questioned their government or tried to publicize human rights violations in their own countries. Some are jailed on the pretext that they committed a crime, but it is in fact because they criticized the government. People who are imprisoned, detained or otherwise physically restricted because of their political, religious or other conscientiously-held beliefs or because of their ethnic origin, sex, color, or language and who have not used or advocated violence are considered to be prisoners of conscience.

Raumel Vinajera

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Raumel Vinajera was born on January 17th, 1973, in the city of Palma Soriano (in the Province of Santiago de Cuba) to a humble, working-class family.

From a very early age, he began to display his open and public rejection of and opposition to the current political system in Cuba and to the constant human rights violations to which Cuban citizens are subjected. He was arbitrarily detained and then subjected to a targeted and prejudiced legal proceeding in which he was condemned to two years in prison on account of being “dangerous,” an judicial aberration that the Cuban authorities often employ to repress their political opponents.

Vinajera complete his first politically motivated prison term in the Boniato and

Moscú prisons in the Province of Santiago de Cuba. Upon going free he joined the Movimiento Cristiano Liberación [the Christian Liberation Movement], led by engineer Oswaldo Payá Sardiñas, winner of European Parliament’s Andre Sacharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, as an activist.

Vinajera became one of the principal promoters in his province of the Varela Project and held various, important dissident meetings and activities at his home, which, upon occurring in close proximity to the home of the Communist Party leader in his town, were interpreted as challenges by the Cuban political police.

On September 11th, 2002, his home was taken over by a large group of agents of the political police and government sympathizers

who subjected Vinajera and his family to an enormous act of repudiation, involving grievous offenses and threats, as reprisal for his activities. This gave rise to an increase in political harrassment and on November 25th of the same year he was once again made victim of another act of repudiation in his home.

On the sixth of December of 2002 Vinajera was assaulted by an official of the Ministry of the Interior, Lieutenant Idoel García Cuevas, an attack that resulted in a severe beating.

This was the pretext for his arrest on December 17th, 2002, upon which he was aggressively pressured to abandon his political positions and activities. The intransigence of the activist-turned-prisoner caused him to be incarcerated for an alleged crime, for which he was condemned to six years of prison.

Vinajera served this new sentenced in a number of penitentiaries in the Province of Santiago de Cuba, Boniato, Las Caobas, Baraguá and Mar Verde the most notable among them. While at these centers he met various prisoners of conscience from the Group of 75 who were condemned during a wave of repression known as the black spring of 2003. He had been involved with some of them in some intense activist activities promoting Cubans to support the Varela Project.

Vinajera maintained a consistent and firm attitude, even while facing frequent attempts to bribe or blackmail him on the part of prison authorities and the political police. This brought about succesive violations of his human rights and abuse, e.g., placement in solitary confinement and constant denial of medical attention.

This mistreatment and the difficult conditions of his incarceration severely compro-



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mised his health. He suffers from conditions like chronic high blood pressure and serious kidney problems.

His delicate condition motivated the authorities to release him under parole, but even being on probation has not kept Vinajera from keeping up his intense activism for democratization in Cuba.

Yet, he continues to be a victim of police harrassment and threats. On March 11th of this year a clearly inebriated officer of the political police invaded his home screaming offenses and provocations.

Vinajera continues to be firm in his convictions, despite the precarious state of his health and the threat of losing his freedom if his parole is rescinded. He brings energy and passion to multiple projects and initiatives that support the democratization of Cuba and respect for human rights, both ideas that have been part of his life since a very age.