

Blacks Under the Collimating Lens

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To be black and a dissident in Cuba is a lethal combination that sparks racial hatred, severe malice, and other things that lead to torture and murder.

Dark skin and ideological apostasy are realities we must watch carefully, attack with a vengeance. We must vocally reject the following common expression meant to recall the reason for black subordination—alleged gratitude to a mostly white caste that asserts its members took part in the Cuban liberating and civilizing process on behalf of the country's black citizens: "It's hard to believe that anyone black could be against the Revolution.

This concept is quite prevalent, despite the fact there is no specific support for this point of view, or any segregationist laws. Yet, Cuban reality offers many examples. Far from disappearing, this attitude is camouflaged in an endless number of ways.

There is a tendency in Cuban society to highlight what is wrong with its black citizens, and to overlook the wrongdoings of its white ones—it is a stereotype. Being black is still a great disadvantage, and it doesn't matter if there are justifications or grounds—the dark-skinned person must be the culprit—every time.

These conditioning factors increase racial tensions to new heights, but when combined with others, e.g., regionalism, a chronic lack of

poverty-escaping opportunities, etc., this could result in a dangerous situation. Other factors include those reproduced by a political model based on imposition, anarchic decisions, and an entire infrastructure favorable to relaxed control, apathy, a deconstruction of ethical and moral values, and may more.

Much of the Cuban black population's verbal or physical violence attempts to resolve matters, which should be seen as a reflex conditioned by harsh living conditions, marginalization, political harassment, offensive humor directed at their physical and other features, etc. These damaging attitudes have been passed down through the generations. It is not current government's model that has paved the road to finding solutions to these problems; this is a lie.

Blacks in Cuba continue to exist on the fringes, with a slim chance of escaping their status, where the overtones of slavery cannot help but be seen. The dictatorship has been relentless with all Cubans, especially those who have chosen to stray from the official script. However, the black population has received its own additional quota of hate and pain.

From rebellion to death

We cannot lose sight of the racist aspect of dissident Orlando Zapata Tamayo's

appalling death on February 23rd, 2010. His constantly inhumane treatment at the hands of his jailer-executioners, his vigorously loud denunciation of the dictatorship's excesses—despite the beatings that left him bleeding and dazed—slowly led his death. “Let’s do this black guy in,” said one of his jailers, whose words eventually became a final death sentence, just a few weeks later. Zapata Tamayo’s mother, Reina Luisa Tamayo, now retells her son’s ordeal; he was beaten repeatedly—to delirium—by a host of henchmen who couldn’t imagine a black citizen determined to openly expose his dissatisfaction with the lack of civil, political and economic rights in Cuba, and reject the island’s single party orthodoxy.

Lacking alternatives, Orlando Zapata Tamayo, was living in a dank and stinking cell, with mosquitoes waiting to attack him, rats and roaches also ready to join in on the siege, and a sentence that during his seven-year ‘pilgrimage’ through numerous prisons skyrocketed from 36 months to 36 years. He opted to escape these infernal conditions in the most dignified manner possible—a hunger strike.

From his position as a prisoner of conscience (recognized by Amnesty International), he dared to request better conditions, even while surviving the horrific scourge of his daily existence. He wanted to prepare himself for a long sojourn behind three walls and an iron gate, because an additional 29 years were added to the 44 he had already lived. When the offense is of a political nature, the government often refuses to reduce a convict’s sentence or grant parole. Zapata Tamayo would have been released at the age of 73.

Intent upon breaking him, Camagüey’s Kilo 8 chief warden (and with one of the worst records of abuse), ordered his supply of water to be cut. He endured eighteen waterless

days, after which he was transferred to the Provincial Hospital. According to his family, it was too late, because he was already dying from severe dehydration. After 86 days, his assassination was complete—Orlando Zapata Tamayo died at the Hermanos Ameijeiras Hospital (Havana), on February 23rd, after a dramatic, last-minute transfer there.

He expressed his claims in accessible and direct language, and did not need to be a university graduate to demand his rights as a simple citizen, someone who was imprisoned for having ideas different from those of an elite that had been in power since 1959. He had sufficient courage and basic knowledge to prove that human rights were and continue to be violated in Cuba. His persecutors had their own way and got away with it—they killed a poor, black bricklayer from the eastern town of Banes. Racism often becomes an incentive for increasing the cruelty inflicted on its victims. Zapata Tamayo’s was a typical case. Fortunately for other blacks, it does not always come down to death, but they bear the same psychological or real scars. The weapons of injustice are mudslinging; impunity, sharp, icy swords—but they cannot last forever. They will melt with the passing of time, and then what?

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