

# Cuba: May 20<sup>th</sup>'s other Color

Fernando Palacios Mogár  
President, *Cuban National Liberal Party*  
Havana, Cuba

May 20<sup>th</sup>, 1912 was the date chosen by black Cubans to demand acknowledgment of their constitutional rights. The armed protest of the Independent Party of Color (PIC) that, unfortunately, brought about its end—which began in 1908 as a political alternative for blacks—has stood as a landmark in their history of struggle.

This protest, also known as the 1912 uprising, began under the influence of revolutionary veterans of the dissolved Liberating Army, most of them blacks and supporters of the PIC. Their specific goal was to pressure the government into repealing the Morúa Amendment (1910) and the Voting Law (1908), which made it impossible for the PIC to participate in the elections as a political party.

The protest of 1912 ended up being a golden opportunity to squash with the same violence and racial hatred as on other occasions a great number of blacks and *mestizos* of the twentieth century. This brings to mind a similar action, in the nineteenth century, after the aborted 1812 conspiracy organized and led by free black José Antonio Aponte, and the repression unleashed in 1844 against blacks allegedly involved in the La Escalera

Conspiracy. Both times, people from the ill-named 'colored' population displayed rebelliousness against a regime that denied them the exercise of their most basic human rights. What followed was a persecution, violence and massacre illustrative of the most brutal racism.

Between 1908 to 1910, the PIC's leaders—its president, Evaristo Estenez; Vice-Presidents, Agapito Rodríguez and Pantaleón Valdés Sierra; Secretary, Gregorio Surin; and Vice-Secretary, Julián Valdés Sierra—used every, possible, legal avenue to have their social group's demands acknowledged as coming from a legitimate political party. They were seeking to satisfy the needs of many thousands of Cubans who were systematically excluded from any and all participation in public affairs.

A hundred years later, the race problem has not been resolved. As a group, blacks have never been identified as a group with specific problems, which would have made efforts to change that easier. What does continue today is political indifference at a real need for a structural and historic examination of the topic. Silence, and then silent integration, has

been responsible for keeping black Cubans without a direct, political way in which to find a solution to the problems that were not solved by the wars of independence, or the republic, or more than half a century under the current government.

Officialdom's silence about race contributed to the survival, reproduction and even creation of racist ideologies. The intensity with which these have penetrated Cuban society and popular consciousness is astonishing. They have found very favorable conditions under the leadership of the white elite that (mis)governs the country. The idea that social blackness is linked to marginality and crime is quite ensconced in society's false perceptions, despite the role played by black Cubans in the country's rich history.

This increased racism and racial discrimination has generated resentment and resistance in the black population. Suddenly, it finds itself in a hostile environment without political or institutional recourse. Furthermore, the government's reaction has been slow and inadequate. This official inaction is more than evident in the crude reality of racism's scourge, the legends, rumors, clothes, street rows, fear and marginality that serve to drive the marginalization, exclusion and criminalization of a social group whose color and race are still the most important determinant in the place of blacks on the social and political ladder.

Yet, Cuban society has not been at a standstill. Movements aimed at seeking a

homeland for all—regardless of racial differences—have emerged from within it. One such movement is the *Cofradía de la Negritud* [Brotherhood of Blackness], whose daily work attempts to raise consciousness among government functionaries and society about this growing social inequality. Another is the *Comité Ciudadanos por la Integración Racial* [Citizens' Committee for Racial Integration] (CIR), whose program hopes to adopt measures capable of reverting the racism with quicker, visible and efficient, official action in facing a deep inequality that could reach critical levels in a not too distant future.

Black Cubans aspire for these organizations to be able to function peacefully, free of the governing elite's repression and persecution. They could open up a space in which to conduct studies and debates for minimizing the social impact of racism's aggressive scourge.

A hundred years after the events of May 20<sup>th</sup>, 1912, it is comforting that there are social movements and multiple artistic and aesthetic sensitivities, such as Raudel Collazo's (from *Escuadrón Patriótica*), to lead society towards what already exists within it: the race problem. We hope that General President Raúl Castro does whatever is necessary and does not assume a position like that of General President José Miguel Gómez, who unleashed an unprecedented massacre. That is why it is so important to remember each and every May 20<sup>th</sup>—at a symbolic level—as part of a history that cannot repeat itself.