

Cuba: One month after releases were announced, hundreds remain in prison

On 14 January, the Cuban authorities announced that “in the spirit of the Ordinary Jubilee of 2025” and following talks with Pope Francis, they would release 553 people from prison. At the same time, the United States government announced that, among other measures, it would remove Cuba from the list of state sponsors of terrorism. Although both countries denied any agreement, White House sources confirmed that a significant number of people would be released following the announcement, particularly those linked to the protests of 11 July 2021. To date, Cuban human rights organizations have registered the release of more than 171 persons who had been arbitrarily detained for political reasons. In this regard, Ana Piquer, Americas director at Amnesty International, stated:

“The release process has been marred by irregularities and a lack of state transparency. The Cuban authorities have not acknowledged the existence of individuals detained for political reasons, nor have they provided a list of the names of those to be included in the process. They have also been unwilling to guarantee the immediate and unconditional release of prisoners of conscience such as Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara, Maykel Castillo, Loreto Hernández, Roberto Pérez Fonseca and Sayli Navarro. These individuals and all those imprisoned simply for speaking out must be released,” added Ana Piquer.

The releases have been characterized by the exclusion of the victims and their families, and the absence of guarantees that they will not be detained again if they are perceived to be dissenting voices or opponents of the government. Those released and their families were given only a few hours’ notice of their release, usually at night. In many cases, the authorities informed them that they had been granted a prison benefit – in most cases conditional release – with no explanation or guarantees as to the conditions or their legal status.

“Hundreds of families have been torn between anguish and hope, waiting for a phone call or other form of communication, without any criteria or element that would allow them to know if their relatives would be released. The continuing context of repression and failure to acknowledge the arbitrariness and injustice of the legal proceedings against these people place them in a situation of extreme violation of their rights,” said Ana Piquer.

The Cuban authorities have not provided a list of those who may be released. They have insisted that such releases do not constitute a pardon, and that those released would receive the prison benefits established in Cuban law.

The organization Justicia 11J has verified the release of 172 persons and reported that a further nine people who had already been released from prison were informed that the legal benefits originally granted to them had been changed. Most of those released were serving sentences for their participation in the 11 July protests, having been charged with “public disorder”, “contempt” and “assault”, offences typically used by the Cuban authorities to punish peaceful protest and the exercise of the right to freedom of expression and association.

While prisoners of conscience José Daniel Ferrer, Félix Navarro, Luis Robles and Donaida Pérez Paseiro are now with their families, they have all denounced restrictions on the exercise of their human rights as part of the conditions of their release.

Prisoner of conscience Pedro Albert, for example, who was released on parole in November 2024, was informed that his benefit was to be changed to conditional release and told that failure to accept the change would risk his return to prison. On 21 January 2025, Pedro Albert was arbitrarily detained for a few hours, interrogated and then fined for visiting the offices of the Damas de Blanco.

Similarly, prisoner of conscience Donaida Pérez Paseiro reported that her husband, prisoner of conscience Loreto Hernández, was informed that his possible release would only be granted if she renounced her activism and refrained from speaking to the media, as she has denounced prison conditions and expressed her intention to continue defending human rights following her release.

Opposition leader and prisoner of conscience José Daniel Ferrer García was released on 16 January, having spent over three years in prison. Since then, persons close to him have been threatened for visiting him and the mobile phones they lent him for his initial communications have had their internet access blocked. José Daniel Ferrer told Amnesty International that he had refused to sign the conditions of his release and that he had been removed from the prison premises without being allowed to collect his personal belongings.

On 20 January 2025, Donald Trump's administration repealed the measures taken by the government of then-President Biden, including the removal of Cuba from the list of state sponsors of terrorism. Although the Cuban government has insisted that the release process was a sovereign and unilateral decision, organizations monitoring the process have reported that no new releases have taken place since 21 January.

“The possible cancellation or pause in releases is alarming, as it would seem to indicate that political prisoners have once again been dehumanized and used as bargaining chips in a political game, with no regard for their lives, their physical integrity or their rights,” said Ana Piquer.

Given this situation, Amnesty International urges the Cuban authorities to immediately and unconditionally release all those unjustly imprisoned in Cuba for exercising their human rights. “While these releases were taking place, political activists and human rights defenders have been arbitrarily detained and have suffered harassment and intimidation because of their work. The Cuban government must repeal repressive laws and cease these systematic practices of repression against dissidents,” concluded Ana Piquer.