



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on March 21, 2016

Obama Visit Doesn't Deter Cuban Government from Suppressing Dissidents

A group of dissidents carrying on their regular Sunday protests in Havana were arrested on March 20, just hours before President Obama and his family arrived for an historic visit. The arrested demonstrators were from a group called Ladies in White, composed of wives of former political prisoners, along with their male supporters. They had carried out their normal Sunday demonstration calling for free speech and amnesty for political prisoners after attending Mass at a Havana Roman Catholic church. The arrests took place in Havana's west side Miramar neighborhood.



Agence France-Presse (AFP) reported that the arrests are an almost weekly feature and the protesters are generally quickly released, but this week's incident was especially embarrassing to the government, taking place just before Obama's visit. The report said that the police declined to tell journalists why they had made the arrests, though it should have been obvious that dissent simply is not tolerated in the communist country.

Among those arrested was Ladies in White leader Berta Soler, who is also part of a group of civil society leaders who had been invited to meet Obama on March 22. However, she told AFP she has not decided whether or not to accept, issuing an open statement to Obama: "You said you would not come here unless there had been advances in human rights — and that hasn't happened."

The online blog *Havana Times* quoted a figure provided by Elizardo Sanchez, spokesman for what it described as "the banned but tolerated" Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation (CCDHRN) stating that the number of arrests "would be around 180." Soler provided a lower count and said about 50 Ladies in White and 20 other activists were arrested on March 20. A Reuters report also cited CCDHRN's tally of 1,000 dissident arrests a month since October, up from a previous monthly average of more than 700.

Interestingly, because the *Havana Times* is written by Cuban journalists, their report cited statements that Sanchez and Soler made to the German Press Agency (dpa).

Soler said that the police warned the dissidents not to organize protests.

"They say they will not let us leave our homes," Soler told dpa. She said that the activists would attempt to protest again on March 21 in the same location, during the second day of Obama's visit in Cuba. The president is scheduled to meet Monday with Cuban President Raúl Castro (the younger brother of the leader of the communist revolution, Fidel Castro).

Obama is scheduled to meet Tuesday with a number of Cuban dissidents. As noted above, Soler has been invited to attend a meeting with Obama, but there are differences in reports about whether or not



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she will attend. While AFP reported she has not decided whether she will accept the invitation, the *Havana Times* report stated that she *does* plan to attend, though she fears being detained en route to the meeting. The blog report stated that Sanchez also plans to attend the meeting if he can make it to the U.S. embassy.

Another report from Britain's *Telegraph* said that Soler wanted to hear Obama deliver his speech before deciding if she would accept his invitation to the meeting. The president is expected to speak about human rights during his March 22 speech.

Another leading dissident who left Cuba for the United States in 1982, Armando Valladares, wrote an article for the *Washington Post's* March 21 edition entitled "I was a prisoner of Castro's regime. Obama's visit to Cuba is a mistake."

Valladares was arrested by the Cuban government in 1960 after he refused to put an "I'm with Fidel" sign on his desk at work. Following his release in 1982, he emigrated to the United States. In 1986, Valladares' account of his prison experience in Cuba, *Against All Hope*, was published by Alfred A. Knopf. The following year, President Reagan appointed Valladares to serve as the U.S. Ambassador to the UN Commission on Human Rights, a post he held until 1990. He has remained a steadfast and outspoken opponent of the Castro regime.

In his article, Valladares talked about a fellow political prisoner who also who spent time in Fidel Castro's prisons, a man named Oscar Biscet. He noted:

Oscar Biscet is one of many people that represent the real Cuba, the people who will be hidden from sight as President Obama visits this week. While the president basks in the Cuban sun and in photo-ops with its heavy-handed dictator, the fate and freedom of political resisters like Biscet remains grim. Biscet is free now in technical terms, but in reality, he remains among a cohort of dissenters who still live in an invisible prison: a society still very much under the thumb of a totalitarian regime. And this week, Obama will provide that very regime with dangerously unwarranted legitimacy in the form of a diplomatic visit.

Anti-communist activists such as the late Robert Welch, the founder of The John Birch Society and *The New American's* predecessor magazine, *American Opinion*, have long spoken out against such grants of legitimacy that our leaders have imparted on official visits such as Obama is now engaged in. Both the JBS and *American Opinion* published countless statements objecting to then-president Richard Nixon's visit to communist China back in 1972.

Years earlier, at the founding meeting of The John Birch Society on December 8, 1958, Welch had warned: "If you have any slightest doubt that Castro is a Communist, don't. If he is successful, time will clearly reveal that he is an agent of the Kremlin."

Several years after that, in an April 26, 1963 press conference, Dwight Eisenhower, who was president when Castro came to power, opined: "It would have taken a genius of prophecy to know that Castro was a Communist when he took control of Cuba."

In his opinion piece for the *Post*, Valladares confirms the folly of our government's continued outreach to Fidel Castro's younger bother, Raúl. He writes:

The government, which no doubt doesn't want to scare away American tourists with visions of bloodied protesters being dragged from the streets, is sending a message to dissidents louder than ever: Shut up or be locked up. As a *Washington Post* editorial said, there were more than 8,000



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political arrests in 2015, up by thousands from years prior. The crackdown on dissidents is so bad that it prompted [Secretary of State John] Kerry to cancel a trip he had scheduled just weeks before Obama's visit....

The same men who [executed dissents with firing squads] are still in power today. In agreeing to meet with Raúl Castro, Obama rewards a regime that rules with brutal force and systemically violates human rights.

History has shown that accommodating tyrants always serves to bolster their tyranny and to demoralize the victims of their oppression. This latest visit by Obama to communist Cuba is no exception.

Photo: AP Images

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