



AMERICAS

What Happened to the Cuban Protesters Arrested a Year Ago?

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FILE - People shout slogans against the government during a protest in Havana, Cuba, July 11, 2021.

MADRID — On July 11, 2021, thousands of Cubans took to the streets of different cities to demand respect for human rights and improvements to the quality of life.

Experts said at the time that these were the "largest" demonstrations, surpassing even those that occurred in 1994, known as "El Maleconazo."

Since the protests a year ago, international organizations, including Human Rights Watch, have been denouncing the arrests that occurred, and maintain that the Cuban government "has committed systematic human rights violations."

How many people were arrested as a result of the protests?

The organization Prisoner Defenders, based in Madrid, highlighted in its most recent report that more than 5,000 people were arrested for demonstrating a year ago.

"They detained more than 5,000 people, throwing them into trucks, beating and humiliating them and forcing them to say 'Patria o Muerte' under the threat of being beaten. The arrest raid continued with the confiscation and search of all the mobile phones of the protesters and the thorough inspection of social networks, looking for indiscriminate faces of protesters," the document said.

The most recent report by Human Rights Watch, entitled "Prison or Exile: Cuba's Systematic Repression of July 2021 Demonstrators," said that "In most cases documented by Human Rights Watch, detainees were held incommunicado for days, weeks, and sometimes months, without being able to make a phone call or receive visits from their relatives or lawyers. ... Some were beaten, forced to squat naked, or subjected to ill-treatment, including sleep deprivation and other abuses that in some cases amount to torture."

How many people were sanctioned after the protests?

With the aim of "informing the people about the legal response to the events of July 11, 2021", the Cuban Attorney General's Office released a document on June 13 that claimed "381 people were sanctioned."

Human Rights Watch said that "Cuban courts have confirmed the convictions against more than 380 protesters and bystanders, including several children" and that "Many trials took place before military courts, which contravenes international law."

The document also denounced police who "repeatedly detained people who were protesting peacefully, arrested critics as they headed to demonstrations, or prohibited them from leaving their homes for days or even weeks.

Prisoner Defenders pointed out that "the regime took advantage of the occasion to arrest the most prominent human rights activists, such as José Daniel Ferrer or Félix Navarro, and dozens of others." The group also highlighted the arrest of other leaders, such as "disaffected priests like Father Castor, Protestant pastors like the Reverend Lorenzo Rosales Fajardos, or Yoruba priests like Loreto Hernández García, artists like Luis Manuel Alcántara and the musician Abel González Lescay."



FILE - Police detain an anti-government demonstrator during a protest in Havana, Cuba, July 11, 2021.

What crimes were they accused of?

The Cuban Attorney General's Office maintains that those sanctioned were sentenced, "for crimes of sedition, sabotage, robbery with force and violence, attack, contempt and public disorder."

Although the government said that some of those arrested committed violent acts, organizations such as Prisoner Defenders asserted that during the protests "there was no violence, except that exerted by state agents and, on rare occasions, the legitimate self-defense of some isolated citizens, that the regime wanted to make believe in vain as something generalized."

What sentences were imposed on the defendants?

On June 13, the Cuban Prosecutor's Office maintains that, so far, "381 people have been sanctioned ... 297 defendants were sentenced to jail, based on the seriousness and circumstances in which the events occurred and personal conduct."

The press release said that 84 defendants received "alternative sentences" including 15 people between the ages of 16 and 18.

The Cuban government added that 36 people were punished "for the crime of sedition" and face sentences "between 5 and 25 years of jail time."

The Prosecutor's Office also maintains that the protests "attacked the constitutional order and the stability of the socialist state." Later, the body added that "according to the seriousness of the facts and degree of participation, 30 were sentenced to imprisonment (20 between five and ten years, and 10 between ten and 18 years)" while two others were sentenced to correctional work.

Despite the report by the Cuban government, non-government organizations and campaigns such as "Miren las prisiones de Cuba" maintain that "there is no definitive number of people detained for their participation in the July 2021 protests, it is unknown how many people have been put released, how many remain in State custody and are under investigation."

Human Rights Watch described the penalties given to protesters as "disproportionate" and added that many protesters and bystanders were convicted based "unreliable or uncorroborated evidence, such as statements solely from security officers, or alleged "odor traces" of the defendants."

A report by Cubalex and Justicia11J pointed to "irregularities in trials," which were documented "in provinces such as Santiago de Cuba, Holguín, Cárdenas, Havana."

"The attempt to hold an oral hearing through a teleconference modality has been observed in the trials, of first or second instance, of demonstrators accused of the crime of sedition, in Havana and Holguín. A marked presence of soldiers has been observed within the rooms where the oral hearing is held. The defendants attended the trials handcuffed and handcuffed," the document said.

Some of those accused by the Prosecutor's Office were finally acquitted, according to independent organizations.

This report originated in VOA's Spanish Service.