

## Press and Protests in Cuba

In 1810, the Cortes Generales of Spain, the legislative body of Cuba at the time, passed legislation protecting free speech. In 1965, the revolutionary Cuban government reevaluated their policy on freedom of expression. Media censorship in Cuba increased when the Communist Party (Partido Comunista de Cuba) nationalized media outlets while officially implementing a state socialist model. The goal of the revolutionary government was to control the media so they could regulate the revolution's message.

To this day, the Cuban government heavily controls television, radio, and newspapers. According to the Cuban Constitution, privately owned media outlets are illegal, making it extremely difficult for Cubans to access news not filtered through the government's lens. The government increased their control within the last few years, during Cuba's media revolution, by monitoring internet access. Some Cubans found a way around this using VPNs to access prohibited media, but governmental controls made it challenging.

As the Cuban government has increased restrictions of free speech and press, Cubans have been outspoken with their discontent. The country has a rich culture of political activism. In 2003, Cuban activists and journalists were arrested for their peaceful participation in the Black Spring political movement, which focused on protection of fundamental human rights, including free speech and press. Over 100 activists were arrested, and 75 received criminal charges. While some were released within a year, the longest prison sentence was 28 years.

In response to the arrests, the Ladies in White (Damas de Blanco) movement was founded. The group comprised of female relatives of the dissidents met Sunday to pray for their imprisoned relatives and process to a nearby park carrying photos of their jailed relatives inscribed with the length of their sentences. The Ladies in White movement, much like the Black Spring, was limited by the Cuban government. Government officials suspected the United States was involved, a view bolstered by the U.S. embassy's clear support of the protesters. The Cuban response to these movements was harsh as they felt they were also responding to U.S. involvement in Cuban politics.

Cuban activists continue to protest for an expansion to their freedoms of expression. However, Decree-Law 35 was announced in 2021, further restricting freedom of speech, specifically regarding telecommunications. With the proliferation of new media and communication platforms, attempts to limit expression constantly face new challenges, but the Cuban government appears to be committed to protecting its status through policies that limit individual freedoms and control media.

*By Sofia Perrone '25, Clarke Forum Student Project Manager*

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The Information Architects of Encyclopaedia Britannica's "Miguel Díaz-Canel: Facts & Related Content" (Encyclopedia Britannica); Jensen's "Children of Colonial Despotism: Press, Politics, and Culture in Cuba, 1790-1840" in *University Presses of Florida*, 1988; Jenken and Garcia's *Cuba's Digital Revolution: Citizen Innovation and State Policy* (University Press of Florida, 2021); "Cuba: Black Spring Seven Year Anniversary Amidst Desperation and Hunger Strikes," National Democratic Institute (ndi.org); "Cubabreife: Cuba's Black Spring 17 Years Later; José Daniel Ferrer García and Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara Facing The Castro's Injustice System," Center for a Free Cuba (cubacenter.org); "Cuba," Reporters Without Borders (rsf.org); "Las Damas de Blanco" Cato Institute (cato.org)