

The 11 July Protests and the Cuban Evangelical Community

Yoe Suárez

On 11 July 2021, Cuba saw the largest public protests since the socialist takeover of 1959. Many Christians were involved. This moving article by a Cuban journalist captures the exemplary actions, courage and spiritual expressions of prominent evangelical participants in a hostile environment.

Marcos Évora's camera shuttered. Skinny arms, full of tattoos, were held high in front of a row of policemen. Again it clicked. A military man in a black beret raised a baton in front of unarmed people. *Click.* Hundreds of Cubans, mostly young men, walked in front of the Capitol. That day, 11 July 2021 (11J), was now in the young man's Canon, the same camera with which he launched his private business and captured activities at his Baptist church.

'I didn't hear it, they didn't tell me, I didn't see it on the Internet', he recounted. 'I was there, together with many brothers, marching and seeing, for the first time, a hope for my Cuba. I was surprised at how everyone walked with their hands up in a sign of peace, shouting "*Libertad!*" and saying out loud what for many years they couldn't shout freely for fear.'¹

As he found himself in the middle of the crowd, a friend called him on his cell phone. The friend advised Marcos to leave the demonstration, saying that many 'civilians' were arriving with sticks. These were state security officers, political police and socialist sympathizers. Marcos confirmed this when 'it was already too late.'

In Máximo Gómez Park, in Old Havana, he and the rest of the demonstrators were surrounded 'by police from the special forces with batons and pistols', and also by the civilians his friend alerted him to. They were clutching sticks in their hands.

Marcos says he wasn't able to take photos of them for fear that they would break his camera. The Cubans who marched had in their hands only cell phones and a few bottles of water. The plainclothes officers advanced on the demonstrators. Marcos recalled that 'they were hitting and beating, and the special forces supported them by threatening anyone who came to help.'

'With God's help and unique mercy, I was able to get out of there with my two friends, who protected me while I was taking pictures', he said. The companions

Yoe Suárez is an independent Cuban journalist. He has worked with non-state media outlets in Cuba since 2014 and has written extensively about human rights and freedom of religion or belief issues. As a result, he and his family have been regularly targeted by authorities. He recently left the country. A longer version of this article appeared on the Religion Unplugged website on 12 July 2022 (<https://worldidea.org/yourls/46433>).

1 Marcos Évora, Facebook post, 11 July 2011, <https://worldidea.org/yourls/46434>.

were the audiovisual producer C. J. Martínez and the young musician Nesty Theproducer, both members of the Evangelical League of Cuba (LEC, for its initials in Spanish). That day, the three lived through the largest protests seen in Cuba in 62 years, since the socialist revolution.

It is virtually impossible to calculate the number of believers, both Protestants and people of other traditions, who were involved in the demonstrations. But the images captured by Marcos went viral. Media outlets, human rights organizations, and social media took care of that. Marcos did not earn a cent for it, and whoever asked to use the images received permission.

He defines himself as 'a photographer who madly loves his country and wants the best for it'. He later said, 'It hurts me to think that one day I will have to live outside of the country because of people who don't know how to do things.' A few months later, Marcos settled in Madrid.

The Garridos: two sister victims

At the same time as Marcos and his friends were protesting in the crowded streets of the capital, the Garrido sisters were in Quivicán, a small town in Mayabeque province. María Cristina alternated between adjusting her face mask and shouts of '*Libertad!*' as she urged several people walking next to her to exercise their right to public protest. In a Facebook Live video she shared, a group can be seen advancing peacefully along the dusty sidewalks of the town, towards the central park.

There, Interior Ministry forces were waiting for them, said María Cristina shortly before the end of her Facebook Live transmission. According to independent press reports, a concentration of militants and sympathizers of the socialist tyranny, guarded by members of the political police (in plainclothes) and the National Revolutionary Police (PNR), was present. María Cristina and her sister Angélica were arrested.

The sisters belong to an independent evangelical community in Quivicán. Jennifer Reyes Garrido, one of María Cristina's two daughters, explained that they—her mother and aunt—do not belong to a denomination listed in the government's Registry of Associations. 'I can't tell you the name of the pastor', she said—not for safety reasons, but because they don't have one. 'We are all pastors. The New Testament does not give much importance to exalted persons; instead, the church is brothers and sisters in Christ assembled', she added.

In early January 2022, Michael Valladares, María Cristina's husband, reported that the prison authorities had prohibited the two young women from meeting with their families at the same time. According to him, the regime seeks to separate the family and force them to travel twice a week to the prison, far from their place of origin. The host of a forum called Prisoners of Castro, Claudio Fuentes, added that this placed greater economic strain on the family, a considerable burden in the midst of the nation's gravest economic crisis of the 21st century.

On 18 January, the Cuban writer Amir Valle, also an evangelical and exiled in Germany, published a collection of poems by María Cristina titled '*Of Poetic Excellence*'. Valle reminded readers that on 20 January the young woman would go on trial for demonstrating, and that 'they are asking for a long sentence.'

‘Thanks to the poets Manuel Mérida and Rafael Vilches, who knew of her work, we have been able to publish this beautiful collection of poems, which we recommend to everyone’, said Valle. ‘We have decided that the proceeds from the sales of this book will go entirely to this writer.’

María Cristina had been recognized previously in some local poetry contests, and she was active, alongside the ex-prisoner and author Armando Valladares, in the opposition to the socialist regime.

Amir wrote of her, ‘She has stood up for many of her fellow writers and intellectuals on the island who remain silent. Let’s not leave her alone!’

On 19 January, the U.S. Embassy in Havana in a tweet denounced the arbitrariness of the process against the Garrido sisters and condemned their physical and psychological mistreatment in prison.

Luis Rodríguez, Angélica’s husband, told *Martí Noticias* that in the last visit before the trial at Women’s Prison of the West, in Guatao, Havana, she was ‘firm in her ideals, in her faith in the Lord’, although ‘she was somewhat anxious about what may happen to her.’

‘We know that a team of prosecutors met every day’, Rodríguez stated, ‘on all the cases of the 11J [prisoners]. In these meetings they decided which ones to release or not release.’

On Thursday, 20 January, the trial against her, her sister and 22 other participants in the 11J protests in the province opened. In March, Valladares reported that María Cristina had received a seven-year prison sentence and Angélica a three-year term for the alleged crimes of contempt, attempted assault and public disorder.²

More believers speak out

After 11J, other Cuban believers took advantage of their visibility on social media to speak in favor of the peaceful demonstrators and against the police violence committed by the Communist Party. YouTuber Ivan Daniel Calas, who directs the ‘Voz de Verdad’ channel, highlighted in a July 2021 video several pastors advocating for their imprisoned members.

Christian rapper Danay Suárez, nominated for the Grammy awards multiple times and winner of the Gaviota de Plata award, said, ‘Cubans are protesting spontaneously, tired of the toxic government-people relationship.’ She added, ‘The authoritarian party in its constant monologue does not listen, does not protect, does not love, and does not liberate. ... Cuba’s solution is not to get out of a bad marriage to enter into another one. Those who give combat orders to armed children against their unarmed siblings should not talk about the “Family Code”.’ Suárez was referring to the controversial draft legislation that limits the right of parents to choose the education of their children in a preferential manner and introduces gender ideology.³

2 See ‘Un tribunal cubano condena a 7 años de prisión a la escritora María Cristina Garrido’ (A Cuban tribunal condemns the writer Maria Cristina Garrido to seven years in prison), *I4ymedio*, 10 March 2022, <https://worlddea.org/yourls/46435>, translated at <https://worlddea.org/yourls/46436>.

3 See Danay Suárez’s Facebook post at <https://worlddea.org/yourls/46437>.

Reggaeton artist Yomil, singer Leoni Torres, and actor Yuliet Cruz also raised their voice against the repression. But they were exceptions among the best-known Cuban artists.

‘The truth unites us, but it also divides when, indoctrinated in fear, it clouds the reasons for courage’, Danay wrote in another place. ‘The truth cannot be defended with emotions; emotions are the battlefield where the enemy defeats us.’

Danay further reported on her Facebook profile page, ‘At the work centres they ordered the workers to congregate and march in a public act of repudiation of the demonstrations that occurred spontaneously; it will surely be in the so-called anti-imperialist tribune to be televised worldwide. ... Why should the working people attend out of fear of losing their jobs and not voluntarily?’

What Danay describes is not something new in Cuba. Since the state is the largest employer, it is easy for unions (unified under the command of the official Workers’ Central Office since the 1960s) and organizations such as the Party and the Union of Youth to pressure the citizenry to attend mobilizations ‘of revolutionary reaffirmation’. Those who do not attend may be denied bonuses.

Meanwhile, the most important Christian troubadour of the moment, Eric Méndez, shared another song through social media. On 31 July, the young Havana native appeared in the living room of his apartment, standing in front of the camera, with a sofa in the background, accompanied only by his guitar.

I dream of a country that is multicolor,
where there is room for all of us.
A nation where we care about the pain
of him who thinks like me and him who doesn’t.
Where you don’t hate me because I believe in God,
and I don’t hate you because you don’t.
Where you can rise up and say ‘Yes’
without having to veto me for saying ‘No’.⁴

Weeks after the demonstrations, in August, there was talk of nothing else in the independent media and among Cubans, no matter their political persuasion. That was when the PNR summoned Yuri Pérez Osorio to threaten him with fines and jail. The crime? He had hung on the front window of his house a sign with a verse from the book of Isaiah.

‘Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey, and robbing the fatherless!’ it read, with a call for repentance in the second part. Within the context of 11J, those words had a clear meaning.

Pérez was summoned to the police station without a stated reason, as reported by his friend Yunier Enriquez on Facebook. One could guess the likely cause, but no explicit reference to the verse was made. In his post, he explained that those who participated in the nationwide protests were being summoned by the police, but on 11J Pérez was in a hospital after his mother contracted COVID-19.

4 Eric Méndez, video of 31 July 2021, <https://worlddea.org/yourls/46438>.

'I still don't know what is happening or how they are treating him, nor do I know if they will let him return home, but if he does not retract, I very much doubt that they will let him go free. Only God can work such a miracle in the midst of this lamentable reality in Cuba', said Enríquez amidst the uncertainty. As we will see below, others were called in for supposed police interviews but were instead imprisoned.

Enríquez shared an update later about Pérez: they allowed him to return home, but he had 72 hours to take the sign down or he would be detained.

'Yuri was able to preach to all the officers there and only responded with the word of God', Enríquez said. 'This further agitated the officers, who, powerless, could do nothing but threaten him. He remains firm in his conviction to keep the sign. We continue to pray.'

Church leaders in the diaspora respond

While the tension inside Cuba was still palpable, on 13 July 2021, pastors, priests, leaders, lay people and members of the Cuban church in the diaspora launched an open letter stating, 'We do not forget our people in Cuba. We feel the responsibility to raise our voices.' The letter continued:

During all these years of 'Revolution' the church has been subject to persecution, being prevented from exercising its religious freedom, having its buildings closed, its ministers sent to prison or forced to leave the country. The church in Cuba has been persecuted.

We declare our support for the people, a people suffering from hunger, needs, spiritual and material shortages. In recent days and with the desire to perpetuate itself in power, the regime has called for violence that has generated unprecedented repression against the growing demands of a people tired of so much suffering and who see no hope in the face of their reality.

We also call on the different conventions, ministries and churches inside the island to be clear and transparent about the current situation of the Cuban people, to be on the side of justice and not on the side of the oppressor.

We invite leaders and pastors to be the prophetic voice of God crying out in the desert through which our country is passing today, to keep on crying out and praying fervently, but not to forget God's words to Moses: 'Why do you cry out to me? Tell the children of Israel to march.'

We also call on the international community and ask that it not turn its face away from the Cuban reality, to not continue in its complicit silence, and to join in an international intervention which in the Cuban situation can no longer be delayed. We believe in the God of history, but in the God who moves history through our actions. Silence is not an option now.

Also from abroad, Christian organizations such as Outreach Aid for the Americas sent food and supplies to the families of 11J prisoners.

Many duly registered Protestant institutions in Cuba did not remain silent, at the risk of various reprisals, such as losing their legal status. The largest denominations, for example, issued clear public statements in support of the

individual liberties repressed by the socialist system. At the same time, they did not forget their role as peacemakers and called for an end to violence.

On 13 July, Moisés de Prada, Superintendent of the Assemblies of God, the largest Protestant denomination on the island, released a video on social media calling for the 'cessation of repression' and 'hostilities'. 'We call the authorities and the people to sanity', he wrote. 'Violence begets violence and the results are dire. Afterwards we will not be able to look each other in the face.'

That same day, the Evangelical League of Cuba (LEC) issued a statement defending the right to peaceful demonstration.⁵ It called on Cuban authorities to 'listen to the voice of the people and offer solutions based on justice and peace. ... We call upon the members of our institution to act according to biblical principles. Love God above all things. Love others as ourselves. Forgive regardless of the offense. Love our enemies. ... Pray for those who persecute us and do evil.'

Some evangelicals who had participated in the demonstrations, like many other Cubans, left the island for fear of being identified in the many videos that were circulating online and facing trials and prison sentences of up to 20 years. Lorenzo Perdomo, one of the young members of the LEC facing that predicament, arrived in the United States with his wife, after having demonstrated in the streets of central Havana. He kept his videos unpublished until he obtained refugee status.

On 17 July, the Board of Directors of the Methodist Church in Cuba, one of the three largest Protestant denominations on the island, issued a statement stating that it has been called to stand by the people and rejecting 'the repressive manner used against the demonstrating population'.⁶

The statement continued, 'Confrontation and violence only generate death, pain, mourning, and insecurity. To refuse to listen to the voice of those who peacefully protest is to close the only window for understanding and living in peace.' It added that Cuba must be a free and sovereign country 'where all of its children are respected, those who are in agreement with the revolution as well as those who do not sympathize with the socio-political system'.

Havana-based Baptist pastor Daniel González García stated in an audiovisual address on Facebook, 'A genuine Christian faith will never allow a believer to coerce, impede, intimidate, and, much less, repress another person for expressing his or her beliefs.'⁷

González García opposed the regime's request that workers form brigades to repress those who demonstrate. He pointed out that recruiting people to beat or impede the exercise of individual liberties by other Cubans is not a new practice of the dictatorship; in the 1990s, when he was studying electrical engineering at a university in Havana, he himself was pressured, in vain, to engage in similar acts.

In another video shared on social media, the historian of the Western Baptist Convention, Carlos Sebastián Hernández Armas, recalled that on 11 July, in the midst of 'the current economic and health crisis, the repression against political

5 Liga Evangélica de Cuba, *Imágene*, 13 July 2021, <https://worlddea.org/yourls/46439>.

6 Iglesia Metodista en Cuba, *Publicaciones*, 17 July 2021, <https://worlddea.org/yourls/46440>.

7 Daniel González García, 'Cristianismo vs. Represión' (video), 17 July 2021, <https://worlddea.org/yourls/46441>.

dissidents and the impact of social media on young people has been the straw that broke the camel's back of years and years of hardship for the Cuban people.⁸

From his small office in the parsonage of the Baptist Church of El Cotorro, with a Cuban flag and his bookcase in the background, Armas called for the 'cessation of government and police harassment and discrediting of Cuban citizens who dissent from the positions of the government'. Armas also stressed his support for the right to peaceful demonstration, observing that 'the rulers are public servants who owe service to the people and not the people to them.'

Regarding his pastoral and personal position on whether Christians and the church should participate in the nation's political and social life, Armas pointed out that Baptists maintain the separation of church and state as one of the 'most influential principles in the world', but also asserted that 'in none of its forms does this principle prevent the Church from participating and expressing its opinion in defence of human and social rights, as well as on the social and political freedoms of a nation. The church can and should raise its voice and do what it can to bless the nation in which it exists and where its faithful live.'

With respect to the biblical teaching on obedience to civil authorities, he said this also has its limits, pointing, for example, to an excerpt from the Declaration of Faith and Baptist Principles of the Western Baptist Convention which affirms that any state that 'pretends to usurp divine authority cannot count on the support and obedience of the true believer in that particular case'.

He explained further, 'I believe this is our current situation. The Cuban government has tried to remove God from his throne and play the role of God to exercise tyrannical control, over everything, but without the love and justice of God.'

Towards the end of his speech, Armas appealed to his brothers and sisters in the faith: 'I believe and teach that every believer can participate in the political and social life of his country and cannot abide by the authority of a government that goes outside of its sphere assigned by God' to 'dominate also the spheres in which God did not give it authority: the conscience of each individual, the family, work, the church, and the social sphere.'

To the regime he said, 'Hear the words of the people; do not be ignorant of the cry of the people whom you claim to love and serve. Do not continue to use violence against and try to discredit them, for they will turn against you. Have the dignity to renounce the futile power of force and intimidation. If you are not capable or brave enough to do so, then give up your position of power and give way to those who do have it, because dignity has the force of a hurricane and you will be uprooted anyway.'

Finally, Armas reminded his viewers that 'if a government abrogates or believes it has the right to expel God from the nation and rewrite what is good and what is bad, calling the bad good and the good bad, we have the right and the divine obligation to dissent.'

Evangelical producer Sandy Cancino spoke out about the misrepresentation of the protests by the official media. 'Watching the midday news', he said, 'I was left astonished, hearing Cuban diplomats in Spain saying that in Cuba the police and the

8 Carlos Sebastian Hernández Armas, 'Mis cinco declaraciones' (My Five Declarations), video, <https://worlddea.org/yourls/46442>.

army don't suppress the people. How do they dare ignore what the same news channel has confirmed? What complicity with the system! If there are mercenaries in Cuba, it is those in the mass media, who justify all that is wrong and still get thousands of pesos, awards and promotions."⁹

Cancino continued, 'Currently the political system has lost its mask of justice. They are capable of publishing in the newspaper things such as "In Cuba no one is punished for their way of thinking." That is a lie. ... Lying doesn't end up well and today the way the official government media work is more clear than ever.'

Cancino won an award from the International Radio and TV Festival in 2017 for his project to develop a children's television program with Christian values, but it has been censored by the Cuban institute that oversees radio and television in that country.

"They understand that the end justifies the means, and with that premise they feed the minds of the "revolutionaries". It must be so hard for the confused revolutionaries! A new term is needed for those who have awakened to the reality of the system, those whom, without a doubt, they will try to convince again', Cancino continued.

Cancino and Armas had a prior reputation as evangelical leaders willing, on occasion, to confront state authorities. But after the 11 July protests, many others raised their voices.

Pastor and LEC leader Abdiel Nieto lamented seeing the streets in Havana 'totally militarized' with the presence of 'police, military men, special troops, state security agents dressed as civilians and others who were called to stop any peaceful manifestation'.¹⁰

His youngest son, Alejandro Nieto Selles, commented on the fact that the government press said 'all is peaceful', asking, 'What are you so afraid of that you bring so much repressive power into the streets?'

Unusual and risky outreach opportunities

In late July 2021, Abdiel Nieto's older brother and co-pastor, Noel, parked the church car outside Valle Grande Prison in the Havana suburbs. A member of the congregation had asked him for a ride there to pick up one of his best friends, who was going to be released after having been detained since 11 July.

When they arrived on the plains where the penitentiary is located and were waiting for their friend to appear, they saw other men coming out of the prison, all going towards the highway, with the hope that something would drive them to their houses. Such a hope was not viable, as the regime had discontinued public transportation during the worst months of the pandemic. The roads were deserted.

When Noel and the other believer identified the man they were looking for, it was late in the day and other men were still waiting. Noel invited the others into the car and drove them where they wanted to go. During that time, he listened to their

9 Sandy Cancino, 'La verdad está en las imágenes, no en el discurso' (Truth Is in the Photos, Not in the Statements), 16 July 2021, Facebook, <https://worlddea.org/yourls/46443>.

10 Abdiel Nieto, Facebook post of 16 July 2021, <https://worlddea.org/yourls/46444>.

stories of their time in the jail and was able to share the gospel and offer support to them.

We have also seen the church come together in previously unnoticed ways. After I published an essay on the protests for the independent magazine *La Hora de Cuba*, the iconic Catholic writer Rafael Almaza wrote a comment in response: 'I am proud of my Protestant brothers. Only one Christ, only one homeland for Christ. Amen.'

Help also came from the Christian community in exile. Family members of those arrested on 11 July welcomed the support of pastors from outside Cuba who counselled and prayed with them online, including Baptist pastor Mario Felix Lleonart and Adventist Alexander Pérez Rodríguez.

In addition, other pastors 'in the field', such as Carlos Macias and Enrique de Jesús Fundora, have held similar sessions. The former, a leader of the Jovellanos Methodist Church, has maintained contact with and paid frequent visits to families of well-known opponents, participants in the 11 July protest in Matanzas province, prominent protester Sissi Abascal, and Felix Navarro, one of the 75 who were unjustly sentenced in a 2003 crackdown on dissidents.

Macias also accompanied, on prison visits, others whose children, grandchildren or nephews and nieces remained imprisoned for political reasons. In some cases, state security agents coerced these persons into refusing further assistance from the pastor.

Fundora, one of the religious leaders of the Apostolic Movement in Mayabeque province, experienced intimidation in a direct way because of his pastoral work with relatives of the 11J prisoners.¹¹ On 9 November, he received an official summons requiring him to appear for questioning the following day, which resulted in a fine and warning.

Fundora noted that the captain who 'interviewed' him was visibly annoyed by his messages calling for non-violence in the Civic March for Change, then scheduled to take place on 15 November 2021 in several cities on the island.

'That is why the state security in Cuba focuses on intimidating the pastors, men of God, leaders', Fundora contended, 'because in Cuba they are not after crime itself, in Cuba they are after ideals. But for this moment God has brought us here, for the freedom of our people.'

'Through this medium I make an appeal for love among Cubans', Fundora continued. 'For unity, for prayer, for claiming [rights and freedom], and for the church of Christ to not stop, no matter how much intimidation comes to us pastors, the public faces of the church.'

'We will not stop carrying out our social work. As a church and as pastors we don't take sides with political parties, but we do take our position on the side of justice.'

11 Yoe Suárez, "'No se persiguen delitos, en Cuba se persiguen ideales": pastor Enrique Fundora tras amenazas del régimen' ('They Don't Prosecute Crimes Here, They Prosecute Ideals': Pastor Enrique Fundora on the Regime's Threats), *La Hora de Cuba*, 10 November 2021, <https://worldidea.org/yourls/46445>.