



Episode 943: Cuba Persecutes Libertarians; Here's What's Going on

Guest: Shaine Robbins

WOODS: I've been reading about what had been going on in Cuba for some time now, and it was all very disturbing, and people had wanted me to have somebody on to talk about it. And the only difficulty I had was trying to find somebody who wanted to talk to me who could speak English because I don't – it's not possible to do translations and stuff. So then when I found out that you'd been doing this work related to it and you released this press release over in the LP of Tennessee where you've been active, I thought, all right, you're my man. So give people, please, the background on what's been happening – I mean, you recently released a press release saying that the founder, president, and vice president of the Cuban Libertarian Party on June 22nd, 2017 were arrested and detained for simply opening a library. But it's more than this, because, as you note later in the release, there have been other episodes involving the Cuban government and the LP of Cuba. So tell us about those and how long they have been going on.

ROBBINS: Sure. The one you just referenced from June 22nd, that happened in the Camaguey province in the eastern part of the country. And the backstory to these provinces that I have to tell so I can describe what happened to the leadership is that the Camaguey province, during what's called the Special Period in Cuba, which was when the Soviet Union was no longer sponsoring Cuba and they went through a lot of economic hardship, people from Camaguey were actually made to come west and work in the factories in Havana. And once they had satisfied that need for work, they were then sent back to Camaguey, and they have actually been deported. So there is a law that allows the police and the military police to deport people from the west to the east to take them back to Camaguey.

Well, that law was used to deport the leadership who started that library in Camaguey back to Havana. And it was just a library that they had set up over there, but they were arrested June 22nd because they intervened when the state was kicking a woman and her children out of their home. And they intervened and they took pictures, and when they got back to the place where they were staying in Camaguey, because they were all from Havana, they were all deported. And when they were deported, no one was told where they were going or why. No one understood what had happened. So we all assumed that the state had taken them. And one of them, the vice president of the Havana Cuban Libertarian Party, he was handcuffed and he was actually put in a cell for a while.

But they did manage to get back, and since that draft had been written, the LPTN resolution, since that has been written, they have been discovered. They have been back home. And then yesterday, Nelson, the founder, he was arrested again.

WOODS: Okay, that I didn't know. For what reason?

ROBBINS: We don't know. But there's a history of this over and over again, especially in the last six months. Nelson is a lawyer and he's been barred from practicing law. He's the founder of the Partido Libertario Cubano, which is what they call it. They name it José Martí, and José Martí was a revolutionary figure when the Cuban people separated from the Spanish crown. The president of the Havana CLP, Cuban Libertarian Party, is Caridad Ramirez Utria, and the vice president is Heriberto Pons. So that's the leadership in Havana.

And Caridad Ramirez Utria, just to give you a little bit of backstory on these people, she has been a part of the Ladies in White for a long time, and they march every Sunday in Havana and they march in opposition to the imprisonment of political figures. So political prisoners, they occupy a lot of jail cells in Cuba. Like right now, Nelson Luis Chartrand, the founder, he is occupying a cell right now. And it's strictly because of the philosophy of freedom that he espouses and spreads. Heriberto Pons and Caridad Ramirez Utria, they're both paramedics, but the state does take their livelihoods if they engage in political activities that are unfavorable to the regime.

And that's what they've done also to Elsa Fernandez Garelle who's the vice president of the Camaguey Libertarian Party. She has in her past spent eight years in prison as a political prisoner. She's a special needs teacher and she is now no longer allowed to teach because of her politics. And so livelihoods as well as homes – there's no private property, so if you engage in these activities, not only can you wind up in and out of prison – and when I say in and out, some people have spent months and years as political prisoners in Cuba. But not only will they take your livelihood, but housing. If all of the housing there is state-run. It's state-organized. It's public housing. And internationally, I don't know how, but some people laud that. They suggest that Cuba's public housing situation is so fantastic. But it's a rug –they pull that rug out from under people for disagreeing with them politically all the time.

WOODS: You know, it occurs to me that if the U.S. government persecuted the Libertarian Party of the U.S., this would be far worse for it than if it just ignored the Libertarian Party. So I'm wondering what possible gain, of all the parties – because there are other parties in Cuba. Political parties were – the existence of political parties other than the Communist Party was legalized in 1992. There are still tremendous constraints on them, but they can exist. It would seem that the Libertarian Party must be by far the smallest, so it's just not obvious to me why they would even bother.

ROBBINS: Yeah, they must be gaining traction. I would estimate that the regime feels an immediate need to counter some of the blows, because obviously they have experienced growth and there is a lot of interest. They don't just have a couple of members. There's a lot of members. And like I said, the Ladies in White are a good example. There are many groups throughout Cuba who unite for their overlap and common interests, and ending this practice of making political prisoners of people –

who are just whispering that they're not crazy about the Castro regime. As the Castro regime maybe begins to feel more and more isolated, perhaps this leader, because – I don't know how long Raul's been in office, but maybe he feels more and more isolated, and maybe he's providing leadership that suggests that using the heavy hand as opposed to the propaganda model is going to be necessary at this point. Perhaps their desperation has grown. I don't know.

WOODS: Yeah.

ROBBINS: But the incarcerations are real and they are occurring, and they will continue to occur, and they're occurring more frequently now than before. So Nelson, for instance, May 22nd this year, just a month and a half ago – not even a month and a half ago – he was beaten and robbed by secret police. Now, of course he can't prove that they were secret police, but they were four men who approached and beat him, took his shoes, took his copy of Murray Rothbard's *Ethics of Liberty* that was in Spanish, and dropped him off 30 kilometers from his house, barefoot. So when he woke up – because he was beat unconscious. When he woke up, he had to walk 30 kilometers back home, barefoot.

And the incarcerations actually started back in February. See, I think when they opened up their libertarian library in Havana, that's when they became – I think that's when they became somewhat of a threat, because they didn't open a Libertarian Party in December of 2016; they opened a library. And I think what that told the regime was they were more interested in providing ideas to people than selling a product. And of course we all know how dangerous ideas can be, particularly in the hands of people who feel desperate.

And so the Benjamin Franklin Libertarian Library was established in Havana in December 2016, and not even two months later, two of their members were beaten, they were arrested, tortured, and they were gone for months. They were in prison for months. In fact, it was not until the end of May that they were released.

WOODS: Wow, that is unbelievable. What do you know about the origins of the LP in Cuba and how far back it goes? I assume not very.

ROBBINS: Yeah, the furthest back my research goes is 2014. Nelson Chartrand, who is one that I've mentioned multiple times, he's the founder. He opened up – he started with Joyce Garcia an Anarchocapitalist Club of Cuba. And they did this after viewing lectures – This is important. They did this after viewing lectures of Jesús Huerta de Soto, who is a professor in Spain. And so it was the ideas that they had never been exposed to that motivated and inspired them and pushed them to act. And so after they established the Anarcho Club, it wasn't long before they recognized the need for providing more information like what they had been exposed to to more people. And so their next major move was the opening of that library two years later.

WOODS: Okay.

ROBBINS: Yeah, and after opening the library, after they dealt with so much repression, that's when they launched the actual party. So they launched the Anarcho

Club, then they launched the library, and then after they had experienced so much abuse at the hands of the regime, they went ahead and launched the party.

WOODS: Okay, all right, I've got more I want to ask you about; let's first pause to thank our sponsor.

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Let's talk about conditions in Cuban prisons and what you know about them so that people can get an idea of what it would be like if you were in fact so unfortunate to be in one.

ROBBINS: Well, you're arrested and you have no idea how long you're going to be in jail before your trial. The pretrial detention period is indefinite, so that not knowing is enough to drive someone insane. So you're placed in a 7x7 cell. No running water. You're using the bathroom in a bowl. You're being fed food that is not fit for human consumption. You're not spending any time in any sunlight. The only communications that you're going to have with other people are – if you're alone in the cell. Some cells – it depends on the prison, but from my research, if you're alone in the cell, you're just hollering down the hall trying to speak with someone at some point after so much separation, after so much isolation. Political prisoners are mixed in with murderers and the mentally insane. Death row inmates are mixed in with political prisoners. Lifers are mixed in with political prisoners. It's certainly not anything like United States prison systems. Not at all.

And you can be incarcerated for periods of months and years, and if it weren't for the Cuban people being so active and in support of ending the practice of political imprisonment, I'm sure that it would be much, much, much worse, because people continue to put themselves in the line. Like for instance, the Cuban Libertarian – the early Cuba Libertarian Party incarcerations resulted in Libertarian Party members plastering their faces all around Havana because they were missing, because they were imprisoned. And they did that of course at great risk to themselves, and this is the bravery that we have in the Libertarian Party of Cuba.

This is the courageousness that we're seeing out of these people, and this is why I feel like it's incumbent upon the Libertarian Party here in America and around the world to do all that we can to not only let them know that they have our moral support, but that we will do whatever we can to provide them financial and material means as well. If they need a thousand bucks for a lawyer, let's raise it.

WOODS: Yeah, exactly.

ROBBINS: Yeah, if they need us to come and visit them just so they know that they're not alone, then let's visit them. Let's do whatever we can, whenever we can do it, because the degree of tyranny that they're experiencing is much different from the degrees of electoral abuse that the Libertarian Party experiences here in America.

WOODS: Yeah, so let's come back in a minute to different things that we can do, because I want to close on that note, because I want to see are there ways that we

can help them and people listening can do. But before that, I want to know how did you come to know – how did you gather all this information, not just from publicly available sources, but you got to know people. Who in particular?

ROBBINS: I first reached out to Nelson through the Partido Libertario Cubano Facebook site. Nelson is the founder, Nelson Luis Rodriguez Chartrand, who is in prison right now. I reached out to him and we've communicated. They only get about an hour worth of email and Internet a week, so obviously the communications are sparse. There's long distances in between communications, and I wasn't able to get tons of information out of him, but getting a little bit of firsthand information is wonderful.

For instance, when I asked him what I could do for him, he said I'd like to continue building this library because he understands the importance of providing people with the information that can change their hearts and minds and motivate a positive action. And that's one of the reasons that I completely fell in love with his vision, is because he understands the importance of the information and he understands how important it is for people to value liberty and how that can motivate them for their entire lives to challenge this regime. And I think that his vision there is absolutely gorgeous. So I spent a little bit of time talking to him.

The best information that I've gotten has been from Mamela – here name is Mamela Fialla Flor. She's the South American spokesperson for the CLP. She's a writer for the *PanAm Post*. She's also a professor. I forget which college she teaches at. But she's the one who translates most of what's on the *PanAm Post*, and she does write some original articles too. So I got a lot of good information there. I read a little bit from Nicholas Amato, who is a libertarian journalist here in the United States, and I've talked with Zach Foster, who is the North American Cuban Libertarian Party spokesperson.

WOODS: Okay, so now I want to ask what I think a lot of people are curious about. Is there anything that libertarians in the U.S. can do that would be helpful. And number two, I know that the Obama policy toward Cuba is in the process of being reversed, but I'm not sure if that's already taken place, if that's just a proposal. I haven't read it in enough detail to know. And is that going to be a problem? So here, I'm throwing that all in your lap. Give me an answer.

ROBBINS: Yeah, as far as what we can do, obviously it's very challenging because our governments are at odds. It was a little bit easier to get them information prior to last week. Now FedEx is really no longer running routes there. DHL the same. So getting information, getting books, getting laptops or anything like that over there is now much harder than it was. Obviously the reasoning behind that difficulty, the reasoning behind Trump's policies having changed Obama's policies so much, I think it's fair to say that the intention is to weaken the regime and certainly not to limit the amount of information that folks have access to. I know that the current administration has paid some lip service to and hopefully will follow through on joining with the Cuban regime to expand Internet access for the people of Cuba, which I think would be just dramatically effective in changing the way that the Cubans see freedom.

I mean, Nelson said it best when he said the people of Cuba have forgotten what it is to be free. It's the same phenomenon that you see in slavery. The first generation slaves are often the toughest to break. Second, third, and on are the ones who never knew freedom, so they don't have a point of reference to which they can hearken back to and say, Yeah, there was a golden age. We had more freedom then. And that is the circumstance that we have in Cuba.

I think that the best thing right now that we can do – and keep in mind, this is something that I do in my spare time. I'm not pretending to have all the answers, but I think the best thing right now that we can do is to use venues like this one and speak about this, write about this, try to get this more and more into the public eye. And particularly, to start with, in the libertarian public eye. I would like to see a lot more effort on the part of county parties, state parties, the national party to use libertarian media to bring it to the fore. And if it's on the front burner, then we can all discuss in a meaningful way how we can really effect change for the Libertarian Party of Cuba, how we can help them to grow. And that's one thing.

If some people feel like they have a representative in Congress or a senator who's going to be amenable to a discussion about this, perhaps put forth a resolution or a bill that might better open up lines of communication between the United States, go ahead. I don't actually have one of those. I don't think that my representatives and senators are that type of people, but if you feel like you have someone as your representative or as your senator who will listen to you and who will entertain the idea that possibly a resolution or a bill to open up communication once again – for instance, if we were able to send things through FedEx again, then I'd definitely be able to get things to Nelson and the team over there much more easily. As of right now, it looks like I'm probably going to have to take it there in person, and that's very expensive.

Yeah, I don't have all the answers. I run a business. I have a day job. I ask them the question, How can I help? when I speak to them, and I found out certain information about the limitations of help before they did, like FedEx no longer running in their country.

WOODS: Yeah, yeah.

ROBBINS: Yeah, so there's no clear-cut, simple answer, but if we don't continue writing and talking about this and bringing this to the fore of the public mind, then they will not have us and they will not have us as a force multiplier for their movement. And I feel that it's incumbent upon libertarians. We are right now, for the most part, electorally unviable, and we do have an organization. And we often use that organization in somewhat strange ways. I've heard critiques of the Libertarian Party that it's just a bunch of pseudointellectuals jockeying for titles within an organization that's electorally unviable. And I think that this circumstance is one in which we can actually do something. We can actually use our organization to a great benefit to people who really have earned it, and they certainly do deserve it.

They've shown in their courage and in their bravery that they deserve our assistance, and if we can use this organization that we have to empower people who are living under the iron fist of a Marxist regime, then we should. If all that means is we have to

research and write and record and share information and demonstrate that we are empathetic, that we are a party of principle and that principle number one being personal freedom, and they're standing up for that while a bludgeon is over their head, yeah, that's in my opinion where we need to be.

WOODS: Well, no question about that. One final thing. I was reading about Internet access in Cuba, and although it has improved, it still would be considered intolerable to us. I know that a few years ago it was made absolutely clear that you can't have Internet in your home but you could go to a public hot spot and stuff like that. Under those constraints, does the LP of Cuba have – even if it's in Spanish, does it have any online presence that I could publicize?

ROBBINS: Yeah, the Partido Libertario Cubano - Jose Martin Facebook Page is going to be the best one to go to.

WOODS: Okay, so why don't you send me the link to that and I'll put that up. The show notes page is TomWoods.com/943. I'll put a direct link up to that and people can check it out.

ROBBINS: Great.

WOODS: Okay, good. Well, Shaine, I appreciate this briefing from you, because I think a lot of us have been reading these rather disturbing reports here and there and not really known what's been going on. And in a way, we still to some degree don't entirely know what's going on, but it's not good. And I'm glad to be connected to somebody who's plugged in down there and has a sense of what's happening, along with suggestions for things we might be able to do to help, but certainly staying informed and telling people about it would be not a bad start. So I hope this episode is helpful for people to do that and, again, to check out TomWoods.com/943, where we will link to that Facebook page where you can get more information and stay in touch. All right, best of luck, Shaine. Thanks a lot.

ROBBINS: Thank you, too. Take care.