Cuban police quell protest and detain young artists and academics on hunger strike

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While Americans were celebrating Thanksgiving on Thursday night, in Havana Cuban police forcefully ended a hunger strike by young artists, academics, journalists and activists protesting government repression.

The protesters are members of the Movimiento San Isidro, a loose collective advocating for freedom of expression on the communist island. Several of them, including artist Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara, started a hunger strike last week to protest the imprisonment of rapper Denis Solis, who was accused of contempt of the police and sentenced to eight months.

On Thursday night, police and what appeared to be military officials wearing medical gowns broke the door to Alcántara’s dilapidated house in the rundown neighborhood of San Isidro and detained a dozen protesters, according to videos posted in social media and the accounts of some of the activists who were freed Friday morning.

“Agents of the dictatorship broke into our headquarters ... took them away, and we do not know their whereabouts. We fear for their safety,” the Movimiento San Isidro tweeted on Thursday night.

The Facebook account of Razones de Cuba, a website linked to the state security agency, posted an edited video briefly showing some of the activists’ detention. The footage quickly cut to images of a government-organized demonstration — known as an act of repudiation — nearby where people could be heard screaming and chanting “Fidel.”

Previously, an article by a former intelligence agent who is now a journalist for the Communist Party newspaper Granma claimed without evidence that the San Isidro Movement was “orchestrated by Washington and Miami” to subvert the revolution.

On its website, Razones de Cuba published a quasi-official note explaining that authorities were forced to “extract” the people from the house because they were not following regulations to prevent the spread of COVID-19. In particular, the report blames journalist Carlos Manuel Alvarez, who had traveled from Mexico to cover the protest and allegedly broke the health protocol by staying with the protesters.

“I’m on a hunger strike. They pushed me and took my phone. What doctor seizes your phone?” Anamely Ramos, one of the protesters, can be heard yelling as she is being detained, the video published by Razones de Cuba shows. “This is arbitrary, and you all know it.”

In a video posted later on Facebook, Ramos, a doctoral student at the Iberoamerican University in Mexico and a former University of the Arts professor in Havana, said she was taken to a police station and then taken back to her house. Alcántara, who has become known for his daring public performances and has been detained several times, was not allowed to return to his house in San Isidro, she said.

“If they do this with us — we who have visibility in Cuba and abroad — what will not happen with Denis Solis? Think of all the people who are political prisoners right now and about whom we know nothing. What about those people?” said Ramos on the video.

Shortly after posting the video, Ramos was again detained, independent journalist Maykel González Vivero confirmed to the Miami Herald. In another video showing her second detention, she is seeing walking out of the house and immediately being arrested by two Ministry of Interior agents.

“They cannot continue to violate the rights of people like this, with impunity, without absolutely nothing happening, and then start inventing lies to justify those illegalities,” Ramos said shortly before being detained again. “I refuse to live in such a country.”

According to González Vivero, before being arrested, Ramos told him she would continue the hunger strike. The journalist, who runs the [LGBTQ-focused website Tremenda Nota](https://www.tremendanota.com/), reported first on the detentions. He talked to neighbors who confirmed the police broke into Alcántara’s house and forcefully removed the protesters.

González Vivero told the Herald that Alcántara was arrested again on Friday morning because he insisted on returning to his house in San Isidro, but the police intervened. “Right now they [the protesters] are dispersed around the city; we have to wait to see how all this ends,” he said.

Attempts to communicate with Alcántara were unsuccessful. González Vivero said the government confiscated the cellphones of the protesters.

### THE CUBAN GOVERNMENT TARGETS YOUNG ARTISTS

The arrests ended what has been a week of harassment and intimidation by state security forces that surrounded the house with the excuse of an alleged COVID-19 outbreak and prevented any visitors, including U.S. diplomats, from checking on the health of the activists.

The whole showdown unfolded on social media, where the protesters documented the harassment by police and neighbors cooperating with state security agents. With the acknowledgment of the police, whose agents stood a few yards away, a neighbor threw glass bottles at Alcántara’s house and hit him on the head, Alcántara said in a video, where he is seen with bruises and blood on his forehead. The video shows how someone was trying to destroy the house door from the outside.

During the arrests, the government temporarily blocked social media platforms such as Facebook, according to reports by activists and independent journalists. This week, the government also blocked access to several news outlets, including el Nuevo Herald and the Miami Herald.

Under Cuban leader Miguel Díaz-Canel, state security agencies have grown more aggressive, harassing and arresting dissidents, journalists and activists, regardless of broader political considerations. The latest wave of repression, this time against young artists, musicians, academics and activists, will make it harder for the incoming Joe Biden administration to ease sanctions against the Cuban government and the military to pursue the engagement policies promoted by the Obama administration.

“We urge the Cuban regime to cease harassment of San Isidro Movement protesters and to release musician Denis Solís, who was unjustly sentenced to eight months in prison,” Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Twitter. “Freedom of expression is a human right. The United States stands with Cuba’s people.”

The Movimiento San Isidro has become a challenge for the embattled Díaz-Canel government, which is confronting a severe economic crisis and increasing discontent among the population. While it has gotten support from other dissidents, the Movimiento San Isidro is not linked to the traditional opposition, and the fact that its members are young artists or professionals who are social media savvy has won it a larger audience.

Cuban government Decree 349, which legalizes censorship and has been enforced since December 2018, [galvanized independent young Cuban artists](https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/cuba/article217129975.html) and activists, who started using visual arts, performances, music and poetry to oppose government policies. Alcántara made headlines last year [when he was arrested for wearing a Cuban flag](https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/cuba/article234263602.html), a public performance he made to question notions of identity and to demystify the use of the flag. Flag displays are also regulated by a government decree about national symbols, he told the Herald at the time.

In March last year, he was arrested when he was on his way to another public performance and was told he would be put on trial. After several Cuban artists and intellectuals, international organizations and foreign governments publicly condemned the arbitrary arrest, the government eventually released him.

After stifling criticism by sending dissident intellectuals to prison or exile and declaring that all cultural production should be within the limits imposed by the revolution, Fidel Castro actively used artists, writers and musicians to sustain his revolution.

But in recent years, that support has faded, and even established artists have criticized the government’s policies.

Cuban singer Haydeé Milanés, the daughter of singer-songwriter Pablo Milanés, who was once a prominent cultural icon of the revolution, sharply criticized how Cuban authorities responded to the plea of the Movimiento San Isidro.

“They have violently removed all the people who have been in the San Isidro headquarters for several days, several on hunger strike. Peaceful people. We have asked for dialogue. Is this the way out that they have found?” she said on Twitter. “I feel shame and horror.”