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Opposition Women, Bloggers Intensify Demands Through Internet

by Daniel Vázquez

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Women opposition activists and young bloggers in Cuba have gained greater international visibility this year for their political and economic demands through their growing use of the Internet, cell phones, and the immediate distribution of information through tools such as personal blogs and the social networking site Facebook.

The flow of information out of the island is being managed with more immediacy, no longer dependent on coverage from foreign correspondents authorized to work in Havana, and in counterbalance to the Cuban press and mass media that has most often acted in official state capacity since the early sixties.

Among the social actors with the greatest visibility internally and abroad are the Damas en Blanco (Ladies in White), women who march through the streets demanding the release of family members being held as political prisoners, and the bloggers who use the Internet to distribute testimonials, photos, and recordings as alternatives to the official government voice.

Damas en Blanco and the Internet

The Damas en Blanco is the opposition group with the greatest public presence on the island because of their systematic marches through the avenues of Havana. They claim that they have brought the release of some 200 political prisoners, including around 50 belonging to the group of 75 dissidents jailed in 2003 during "Black Spring."

Last March, seven consecutive days of peaceful marches organized by the women in commemoration of the seventh anniversary of the Black Spring roundups were marked by clashes with pro-government groups that intercepted them on their way through the central district of Havana.

Photos, audios, and videos of the incidents were reported by the foreign press, but also by the cameras and cell phones of the protesters. These were circulated on You Tube, in on-line editions of newspapers like El País (Spain) and El Nuevo Herald (Miami), and through emails sent inside and outside Cuba.

Given this climate of confrontation, the Catholic Church intervened last month asking the government to cease harassment of the Damas en Blanco, who usually attend a Catholic church in Havana on Sundays and march through the surrounding areas holding flowers, with their cell phones on in case incidents occur.

These issues were discussed on May 19 at a meeting, which lasted more than four hours, with President Raúl Castro, Cardinal Jaime Ortega, leader of the Catholic Church in Cuba, and Dionisio García, archbishop of Santiago and president of the Conferencia de Obispos Católicos de Cuba (COCC).
After the meeting, Ortega proclaimed a "new period" in the relationship between the church and the government. Among the agreements reached were the transfer of ailing political prisoners to health facilities and the relocation of prisoners serving their sentences far from their hometowns, which hinders communication with families.

The relocation of political prisoners began earlier this month, ten days before the arrival of the Vatican's foreign minister, Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, scheduled for June 15. In 1998, before Pope John Paul II’s visit to Cuba, the government also released common criminals and government opponents.

The February death of prisoner of conscience Orlando Zapata Tamayo after an 85-day hunger strike (NotiCen, March 4, 2010) and protests by the Damas en Blanco have brought increased traffic to two manifests posted on the Internet supporting freeing political prisoners. These documents have already been signed by thousands of people on Internet sites created for that purpose and are now being circulated on Facebook.

**Critics/bloggers carry opposition message**

Despite limited Internet access on the island, available only for a minority within state institutions, offices of foreign companies, or in international hotels, the opposition blogger movement tends to be spreading in Havana and among Internet users under 35 years of age, said the Inter American Press Association (IAPA).

According to the IAPA, last November there were about 30 personal blogs for informational purposes written by Cuban residents, which are increasingly being signed with the authors’ real names. Since its inception in 2007, one of the most visited blogs is Generación Y by philologist Yoani Sánchez.

Sánchez founded an academy of bloggers in her home and has achieved firsts such as an interview with President Barack Obama on the US-Cuba relationship. Her labor as an independent blogger has garnered copious awards, as well as government criticism including police harassment, according to recordings and photos posted on her blog.

In the interview with Sánchez, President Obama said, "Your blog provides the world a unique window into the realities of daily life in Cuba. It is telling that the Internet has provided you and other courageous Cuban bloggers with an outlet to express yourself so freely, and I applaud your collective effort to empower fellow Cubans to express themselves through the use of technology."

The political content of personal blogs, as well as foreign press and other media reports, discreetly circulates through Cuba on flash drives and CDs provided by a small group of people with Internet access through state businesses or through visitors to the island.

In Cuba, Internet access in international hotels was authorized for the local population in May 2008, although the fees are prohibitive, running between US$6 and US$12 per hour in a country where salaries are US$10 to US$20 per month.

The government insists that the Internet be used within Cuba to defend the principles of the Revolution. Members of the Unión de Periodistas de Cuba (UPEC), who have Internet access through their membership in the state media association, have opened Facebook pages this year to
counteract opposition critics/bloggers and try to gather sympathizers to the political project headed by the Castro brothers.

The Internet in Cuba is an escape valve not only for political demands but also for private economic initiatives. In October 2009, the government blocked access to Revolico.com, a site where Cuban citizens advertised sales of goods and services outside of state control.

**Cuban youth and cellular telephones**

The Obama administration’s 2009 authorization to allow the flow of cellular telephones and communication technologies from the US to the island allows initiatives like "Cell Phones for Cuba" of the Roots of Hope organization, which has sent more than 1,500 phones to Cuba since September.

Among its members are Cuban-American academics and professionals in favor of policy changes on the island. Collections of discarded cell phones in Miami and across the country are sold to the EcoPhone Company in Texas. Proceeds from the sales of these phones are used to purchase new cell phones, which are then transported to Cuba by tourists, visiting exiles, and activists from humanitarian organizations.

Roots of Hope members say that they intend their contributions to encourage contact among the island's youth. Felice Gorordo, co-founder of Roots of Hope, said, "We have great faith in the power of decentralized communication...We are trying to promote better forms of communication between Cubans."

In Yoani Sánchez's opinion, "[What) is happening in Cuba is] that institutional censorship is ineffective for new models of transmission such as blogs, cell phones, illegal satellite dishes, and the memory sticks that are carrying to the people everything that we can't see in accepted media."

Two years after Raúl Castro authorized wireless telephone service, mobile phones have become important social and political tools. In a country of almost 12 million inhabitants, the Empresa de Telecomunicaciones de Cuba (ETECSA) reports that, by year's end, a million Cubans will be brandishing a cell phone.

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