2-22-2013

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Uruguay Examines Hidden Racism Following Violent Attack on Afro-Uruguayan Woman

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Category/Department: Uruguay

Published: 2013-02-22

Peaceful Uruguay, a small corner of South America with slightly more than 176,000 sq km, fewer than 3.3 million inhabitants, and a progressive government, awoke on Dec. 16 to news that, before dawn in the capital Montevideo, four white women had attacked an Afrodescendent woman, screaming "black shit," kicking and punching her, and leaving her unconscious, bleeding, and with a perforated liver.

More than a century and a half after Uruguay abolished slavery, 47 years after the country signed the UN's International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, and having always lived in apparent peace with the descendants of the men and women brought like animals from Africa—slightly more than 8% of the Uruguayan population has African roots—the cultured and egalitarian country discovered that racism is widespread in its society.

The brutality of the attack on Tania Ramírez, a young social worker and activist in the collective Mujeres Afrodescendientes, brought immediate condemnation from all political parties, the labor federation, numerous social agencies, and various state institutions. President José Mujica said he felt "sickened."

The Montevideo city government showed its commitment to the struggle against racism and discrimination, calling for "an exemplary punishment against the attackers and those who witnessed it but did nothing to stop the aggression." It said something that, as the days went by, became the crux of the debate that today the entire population is engaged in. "This act is evidence that racism and discrimination are deeply rooted in Uruguayan society," said the mayor. He said what Uruguayans did not want to hear, or worse, what they continued to deny despite the evidence.

As the days passed, worrisome signs appeared that what Uruguayans were really trying to do was minimize the responsibility of the four white women. On radio programs, which is where, protected by anonymity, people most candidly express their opinions, there were countless nuances but what stood out were those who indirectly criticized the victim, saying that, if a white person had been attacked, perhaps such an outcry would not have been raised.

That was just the beginning. From then on, the rightist press began to cast doubt on Ramírez's version of what happened. The attackers remained at large apparently as long as they wanted to, and, when they decided to turn themselves in, they told the judge that the incident could not be called racially motivated, that none of them was racist, and one even said that the whole thing was the result of "a street fight."

**Video records attack**

Two weeks after the awful attack, a video from security cameras outside the nightclub where Tania Ramírez and her attackers had spent the evening was released. Everything can be seen, with absolute clarity, since the sun was just coming up. The women can be seen and heard arguing about
who was entitled to take the taxi that had just stopped. The four white women are seen immediately beginning to insult the black woman, push her, pull her hair, and punch her in the face.

When the incident seems over, the four white women again turn on Ramírez, throw her to the ground, and kick her all over her body. The video shows some twenty people who watch with simple curiosity, without intervening to stop the ferocious beating. They do not even help the victim, who was left unconscious and bleeding, lying in the street.

After seeing the video, Minister of Education Ricardo Ehrlich, who is in charge of the state Comisión Contra el Racismo, la Discriminación, y la Xenofobia, expressed his "indignation and concern." He said, "I am struck by the passivity of those present, by the tendency to trivialize what happened, with people laughing and closely watching the events, and by the perseverance of the violence. It is terrible, the incident ends, and they [the assailants] go after her again to hurt her even more."

While newspapers, radio stations, and TV channels dominated by the right tried to find ways to put the whole thing in the context of a "street fight," former Sen. Juan Raúl Ferreira, a member of the anti-racism commission, sounded an alarm. "It worries me that an alarming discussion has begun in society about what would have happened if Tania were white. I don't know what would have happened, but in this case, while they were hurting her, they attacked her racially, calling her 'black shit,' and saying, 'Go straighten your hair.'"

All this is heard clearly on the video. On Feb. 1, Judge Juan Carlos Fernández Lecchini handed down his decision. He said that this was not a racist act; that there was no evidence of the type of criminal intent described in Article 149 of the Penal Code. This article stipulates that "anyone who commits an act of violence, moral or physical, of hatred or contempt against one or more persons because of their color, race, religion, or national or ethnic origin, may be sentenced to 6 to 24 months in prison."

The judge did not release the names of the attackers. Although they are adults, he protected their identity, referring to them by their initials. The government and social organizations say that the decision is a victory for the structural, hidden racism that exists among Uruguayans.

Beyond the intellectual exercise of debating whether racism and discrimination are present in Uruguayan society, many convincing signs indicate that, despite their apparent progressive politics, many Uruguayans are racists and despise blacks.

**Victim worked at agency that denounced racism**

In her outreach work at Mujeres Afrodescendientes and the Ministerio de Desarrollo Social (MIDES), Tania Ramírez's job was to denounce racism. Ciudadanía Afrodescendiente, a 48-page booklet produced by MIDES for distribution among high school students, says, "The lifespan of Afrodescendants is between 10 and 15 years less than that of the rest of the population. In education, 47% of 20-year-old blacks have only a primary-school education, and barely 7% of the community reach post-secondary education, 10 percentage points less than the [national] average. Overrepresented in menial jobs and with low salaries, mostly in the service sector, Afro-Uruguayan women make up 72% of domestic workers ['servants," as they have been disrespectfully called since the time of the Spanish colonization]. Of black children under age 18, 57% live in homes that are below the poverty level."
These statistics support the booklet's conclusion that "material and structural racism runs deep and silent in Uruguay. In that discretion, even the most blatant discrimination seems to have impunity, clearly protected by those in power—power, not government."

The data compiled by Ramírez is complemented by other data that contributes to rounding out the picture of the reality in which Uruguayan blackness is developed. A socioeconomic map of Montevideo drawn up by sociologists Marisa Bucheli and Wanda Cabella based on a study by the state Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas (INE) showing the percentage of the black population by urban areas in the capital makes it impossible to deny the existence of structural racism.

While the Afro-Uruguayan population of the country is just over 8%, in the coastal strip (the richest area of the city), the percentage never tops 4%, with some areas where black presence is essentially nonexistent. In the lower-working-class suburbs, the percentage of blacks is 25.8%, and in the slums—areas without running water, electricity, or sewers—the average is 30%.

In their "Demographic and Socioeconomic Profile of Uruguayans According to Racial Background," Bucheli and Cabella say that the concentration of Afro-Uruguayans in the poorest areas of Montevideo is three times the average and almost eight times greater than in rich neighborhoods.

In late 2012, governing party Deputy Felipe Carballo, a rural worker of African descent, said, "Despite Law 17.818 against racism and xenophobia, Ministerio de Trabajo reports show that 70% of the people whose job applications are rejected by employers are black."

Edgardo Ortuño, a former deputy and now vice minister of industry and president of the Casa de la Cultura Afrouruguaya, said, "Available official data is particularly uncomfortable for the dominant groups since it reaffirms the existence of structural racism and also shows that there are social sectors that benefit from racism."

The judge’s ruling made it clear that, as Tania said, "structural racism runs deep and silent." Two other black women summed up the opinion of the healthier part of Uruguayan society. "In the days before the decision, a prevalent discussion considered racism a cultural manifestation, in which those who benefit do not stand out even though there are victims. Considering it like that is a way of making it natural, almost allowing it," said social worker Mónica Rodríguez.

For psychologist Ana Moreira, "If culture is considered the institutionalization of social practices, then changing some behaviors gets rid of racism. In other words, racism exists in the ties among persons, which means a very poor perspective that makes the systemic causes invisible."

Moreira say this leads to the position that "we blacks have no enemies, and everything comes down to isolated incidents, as if racism were a marginal expression." But that is not true, she says. "The attack on Tania shows that, for one sector of society, the place of blacks must be what it always was when our ancestors were brought as slaves. When a person who was subservient become insubordinate, conflict cannot be avoided. Tania was insubordinate, that's why she was punished."

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