

## **Santiago de Cuba's angry feminists** Despite threats, group protests Castro policies

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SANTIAGO DE CUBA - She checks skittishly over her shoulders when walking through the city that gave birth to Fidel Castro's revolution.

Antagonizing the Cuban president's rule from the eastern end of the island, Daysi Carcassis has reason to anticipate retaliation. Local authorities refer to her contemptuously as *la rubia flaca* - the skinny blond.

This defiant 50-year-old, daring what has been virtually unheard of during the 38-year regime, is leading repeated open protests, announcing, "I am the opposition."

In December, she launched civic demonstrations in the city, staging four within 10 days.

"Those are the only organized protests I know of in Cuba at the time. Significantly, it shows that opposition is not a phenomenon limited to Havana," said Mariella Ferretti, coordinator for the Human Rights Project of the Cuban American National Foundation in Miami.

### **Disobeyed laws**

Carcassis and dozens of dissidents bucked laws against public assembly and political heresy with acts that included reciting the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights in a church park, then distributing hundreds of copies to passersby.

The protesters later held a vigil at local Communist Party offices on behalf of political prisoners Cecilio Pozo and Daniel Despaigne, who are serving 14-year sentences for their second attempt to escape the island in 1992. The protesters, including the prisoners' mothers, refused to leave until the state promised medical attention for the hunger strikers and agreed to review their sentences.

"They got their medicines. They're eating again. And supposedly their cases are being reevaluated. A triumph," Carcassis concluded.

Dubbing themselves the Allied Democratic Feminist Front, with Carcassis as president, they claim 50 active members, mostly women. Founded by Carcassis in 1994, they try to wage opposition against the regime while advancing the feminist cause.

They are one of several overlapping dissident groups in Santiago, according to Ferretti.

### **Women's complaint**

"Castro's revolution never emancipated women," asserted a 21-year-old law student in the group. "On the positive side, it gave women education and access to certain productive work and professions. But we have never been liberated from our domestic, reproductive roles."

But the fact that these dissidents are women "offers them no protection," Ferretti observed. "The government is just biding its time."

In fact, their activism has not gone unchecked by state security. There have been numerous arrests within the group.

Carcassis says she has narrowly escaped being beaten by Rapid Response Brigades, unofficial citizens' groups recruited by authorities to squelch protest through physical threats and force.

"That way, if you get beaten or killed, the government technically keeps its hands clean and says they are not abusing human rights," Carcassis said, adding that she has occasionally had to dodge cars trying to run her down.

Putting themselves at even greater risk of backlash, Carcassis and another dissident leader, Rafaella Lassalle, report their activities by phone over Radio Marti in Miami and other anti-Castro broadcasts.

Operating the Oriental Press, they have filed reports regularly since last year. The Oriental Press belongs to a network of eight independent organizations across Cuba. Some of its reports appear on the Internet.

"It's not all legitimate journalism, but there are professionals like the reporters for Havana Press, operating outside the official media, who strive for objectivity and reject being called dissidents," said Suzanne Bilello, coordinator for the Committee to Protect Journalists in New York.

Anyone working for the network is targeted by the state police, says Bilello, who was arrested on a visit to Cuba last June while meeting with network representatives; she was thrown out of the country on charges of working for the CIA. In January, two Havana Press reporters were arrested during a visit by Canadian Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy to discuss human rights issues with Castro.

### **Police pressure**

Carcassis and Lassalle say they have been interrogated and threatened with violence by police. Carcassis was coerced into signing written warnings from police that any further provocation by her would be prosecuted, according to Mario Garcia, publisher of the Carta Cubana newsletter based in Puerto Rico, which helps channel funds to the independent news network.

Although the crackdown has rattled Santiago dissidents, Carcassis remains steadfast. "You can't flinch," she said. "This isn't a game. We know the consequences. We know what's at stake."

She holds the regime, which swept into power when she was 12, responsible for ruining her life. Though trained as an economist, she was blacklisted from Cuba's work force in 1980.