



Oscar López Rivera has served 34 years in US prisons for seditious conspiracy - in other words, for his commitment to the independence of Puerto Rico - though he wasn't convicted of hurting or killing anyone. Since 1898, when the US militarily invaded and occupied Puerto Rico, there hasn't been a single decade in which there hasn't been an independentista imprisoned. But it is unusual that López Rivera has served so many years - longer by far than any other Puerto Rican independentista in history, longer than his codefendants, longer than offenders convicted of violence and longer than the 27 years served by the world's most renowned political prisoner, Nelson Mandela.

In a united voice, Puerto Rican society has called on President Obama to release López Rivera. This call has come from the current governor of Puerto Rico, who made a historic diplomatic visit to see him, from former governors, from the legislature, from the Puerto Rican Bar Association, from the archbishop and the entire ecumenical community, and from universities and artists and poets. Editorials from the island's main daily newspaper have channeled this support into consistent, strong expression, calling López Rivera's ongoing imprisonment "the symbol of a flagrant dishonor for his jailers and an affront to democracy that fails to respect human rights."

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Members of the Puerto Rican diaspora and others in the US have also joined this campaign for his release: The AFL-CIO, AFSCME, SEIU, Labor Council for Latin American Advancement, Congressional Hispanic Caucus, American Civil Liberties Union, National Hispanic Bar Association and the National Lawyers Guild have all condemned the violation of his human rights. The international community has likewise embraced the call for his release, including the United Nations Decolonization Committee, the Non-Aligned Movement, the American Association of Jurists, the International Association of Democratic Lawyers, Nobel Peace Prize laureates, regional Latin American organizations such as the Permanent Conference of Political Parties of Latin America and the Caribbean, the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America and the Latin American Council of Churches, as well as the presidents of several nations such as Uruguay, Nicaragua and Venezuela.

As part of this growing support for his release, New York attorneys Juan Cartagena and Natasha Lycia Ora Bannan accompanied me on a legal visit in November with López Rivera.

Cartagena, president and general counsel of LatinoJustice PRLDEF (the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund), is no newcomer to understanding the violations of the rights of Puerto Ricans in the United States. His long legal career is distinguished by his work on the political representation of poor and marginalized communities - especially Puerto Rican and Latino communities. Bannan, a staff attorney at LatinoJustice PRLDEF, recently became the president of the National Lawyers Guild, the most progressive bar association in the United States, which was formed in 1937 as the first racially integrated bar association to advocate for the protection of constitutional, human and civil rights.

Although these two attorneys were already involved in the growing campaign for López Rivera's release from prison, they wanted to meet this man whose resistance and integrity have become legendary. They were not disappointed.

"You do this work for so long, and then there are the momentous occasions," Cartagena said. "I was in Vieques, [Puerto Rico,] when the Navy left. I don't think I've ever been so proud of being Puerto Rican. Meeting Oscar was like that."

Although López is 72 years old, and passed more than 12 of his 34 years in solitary confinement at Marion and at ADX Florence, "he was gracious, smart, current on issues of the day," Cartagena said. "His mind [was] fresh with things that happened to him as a kid. I can't believe that someone who served 12 years in solitary has any kind of mind."

Bannan remarked on "his knowledge and deep understanding of the world, of human nature, of events, or the interrelatedness and intersectionality of our lives and events, and what he intends to do with the rest of his life." She added, "These 34 years aren't what define him. His life and vision is so much bigger than those walls that hold him. That's what he wanted to talk about."

Two particular expressions uttered by López Rivera impacted them. For Cartagena, it was "tengo mucha esperanza, pero tengo una mochila llena de preocupaciones," or "I have a lot of hope, but I also have a backpack full of preoccupations." For Bannan, it was "la lucha sin amor se muere," or "without love, the struggle dies."

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Bannan added that López Rivera's book, *Between Torture and Resistance*, comes from this same deep place of love. She was moved when he recounted a story about learning how to treat farm animals as a child: He was taught that "our actions are a reflection of who we are, how we move through the world, how we treat each other, the most vulnerable among us." She added, "His story is to try to sensitize us to our humanity."

The attorneys' last image of the political prisoner made a deep impression. Cartagena said that upon seeing López Rivera wave as he headed to exit the visiting room, he felt "the overwhelming sense of injustice ... of my ability to leave and his inability to follow us. Of how he can describe the torture he went through in such a way that can only reflect his resiliency of surviving the torture and 34 years of resilience ... In many ways he personifies resistance in so many levels."

The visit gave them a sense of action and a sense of urgency. "What I got to live today brought me so much more committed to his release," Bannan said. "I need to communicate that, so that he's not just a worshiped figure. The reality of his confinement, waving to us as he went back in - the urgency of it somehow gets lost."

Cartagena added, "In some ways we have to figure out a way that more people can see and hear what we just saw and heard. Only if we can get some media in there to broadcast the sound of his voice, his mannerisms. Everything about him, his humanity. Meeting a man like that, you can't help wanting to do more."

(Photo Oscar by Jan Susler)

Jan Susler is a partner at the People's Law Office in Chicago, Illinois, where her practice focuses on police misconduct civil rights litigation. She is a member of the National Lawyers Guild. For over three decades she has worked with the Puerto Rican independence movement and its political prisoners, serving as lead counsel in the efforts culminating in the 1999 presidential commutation of their sentences. She continues to represent Oscar López Rivera, who has served more than 34 years in US prisons for his commitment to the independence and self-determination of his nation.