



THE
MILTON
FRIEDMAN
PRIZE FOR
ADVANCING LIBERTY

Las Damas de Blanco

Fifteen years ago, 55-year-old teacher Laura Pollán was at home in Havana with her husband, Hector Maseda, when the Cuban police raided their house and arrested Maseda for the crime of daring to criticize the Castro regime. Maseda was an independent journalist and the president of the Cuban Liberal Party, which the government had banned. He was sentenced to 20 years in jail for endangering “national security.” Maseda was just one of 75 journalists and opposition leaders imprisoned in a mass arrest that March now known as the Black Spring.

But from that Black Spring rose the Ladies in White—a new opposition force that the Cuban government had not anticipated. They are the wives, sisters, and other female relatives of these unjustly imprisoned men. Far from being cowed by the government’s lawlessness, they banded together—led by Pollán until her death—to demand justice for their families. “The group formed spontaneously, because none of us understood why [this had happened],” recalled cofounder Blanca Reyes. Their first meetings were in Pollán’s home, Reyes said, “and from her living room, we spread throughout Cuba.”

Every Sunday, the Ladies in White gather for Mass at Saint Rita de Casia Church in Havana—dedicated to the patron saint of impossible causes—followed by a procession down Fifth Avenue. They wear white to symbolize peace and purity, and each wears or

carries a photograph of a loved one who is in prison. They also carry pink gladiolas, which symbolize family.

The regime has labeled the Ladies in White “counterrevolutionaries,” and they are routinely harassed, threatened, beaten, and arrested for their actions. Pollán, who had become an internationally known spokesperson for freedom in Cuba, died in 2011 under gravely suspicious circumstances. Yet the women remain undaunted, calling for the release of all political prisoners and liberty for all Cubans.

“From Laura Pollán’s living room, we spread throughout Cuba.”

The original 75 prisoners have all since left prison, following constant intervention from the Ladies in White and pressure from the international community—but their release was not unconditional, with the majority having had to leave Cuba. And since then, Cuba’s human rights record has only deteriorated, with continued arrests of journalists, lawyers, and other intellectuals who criticize the regime. The group’s work is not done, and in the face of this constant

oppression, the women offer an awe-inspiring example of unwavering courage.

In May, the Cato Institute awarded the Ladies in White its 2018 Milton Friedman Prize for Advancing Liberty. The *Wall Street Journal* celebrated this decision in a column disparaging Castro’s recent faux-transfer of power to civilian Miguel Díaz-Canel. The *Journal* declared that “A prize for the Ladies in White is bigger news than Díaz-Canel. . . . They deserve more media recognition in the U.S.



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than does the phony transfer of power to Mr. Díaz-Canel.” Sens. Ted Cruz (R-TX), Marco Rubio (R-FL), Bob Menendez (D-NJ), and Bill Nelson (D-FL) introduced a resolution in Congress proclaiming that the U.S. Senate “congratulates Las Damas de Blanco on receiving the prestigious 2018 Milton Friedman Prize for Advancing Liberty” and “calls on the Cuban regime to allow members of Las Damas de Blanco to travel freely both domestically and internationally” to accept the prize at Cato’s award dinner in New York.

Nevertheless, the Cuban government ultimately blocked several members of the group, including their current leader Berta Soler, from leaving the country to attend the Institute’s May award ceremony in person. In video remarks she recorded for the ceremony, Soler highlighted the sacrifices that many members of the Ladies in White have made in their fight for liberty:

The Cuban regime thought that with Laura Pollán’s death the Ladies in White would disappear. They were wrong. Seven years later, we continue on the path of freedom for all Cuban political prisoners—with no exception.

In the last three years, the State Department of Security and the National Police have worsened their physical and psychological repression, from defamatory campaigns against us, to the harassment of our families, to deportation to other provinces.

In these last three years, nine members of the Ladies in White have been sent to jail, and two remain imprisoned: Nieves Matamoro, sentenced to one year and six months, and Marta Sánchez, whose trial is still pending. The only felony committed by these women was to promote and defend human rights.

Dear friends, advocates, and defenders of freedom: this prize means solidarity with our commitment to not turn aside from those who are behind bars in Cuba. We dedicate this prize to Laura Pollán, to all political prisoners in Cuba, and to everyone who has trusted in us. ■



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1. Tables are set at the historic Cipriani 42nd Street. 2. Prevented by the government from leaving Cuba, Ladies in White leader BERTA SOLER addresses the crowd via video. 3. Vice President MIKE PENCE congratulates the Ladies in White on their award. 4. Ladies in White representatives LOURDES ESQUIVEL, DOLIA LEAL, and BLANCA REYES (left to right).