



Cuban Blogger Declared Press Freedom Hero

The International Press Institute has declared Cuban blogger Yoani Maria Sanchez Cordero its 60th World Press Freedom Hero.

Sanchez's blog, Generation Y, is an acerbic critique of life in Cuba, and a telling reminder to the world of the restraints on free speech and expression on the Caribbean island.

Sanchez, a graduate of Havana University, left Cuba for Switzerland in 2002, but returned two years later. On her return, she set up, along with a group of other Cubans, the magazine "Consenso" as a forum for reflection and debate.

In 2007, spurred by what she saw as a growing repressive climate in her homeland, she launched her blog, Generation Y. Composed of reflections on daily life, politics and culture in Castro's Cuba, the blog today boasts a readership of more than a million.

In early 2008, Sanchez reported that the site may have been targeted by government censors. In April 2008, the site became unavailable in Cuba.

Since then, Sanchez has resorted to extreme and creative measures to keep her blog alive. In a country where internet access is severely restricted and prohibitively expensive, Sanchez often poses as a tourist to access the internet, emailing her entries to friends outside the country who then publish them online.

Sanchez has been refused permission to travel outside of Cuba at least six times in the past two years alone, despite international acclaim for her blog. In 2008, "TIME Magazine" named her one of the world's 100 most influential people, noting her "feisty dedication to the truth," and pointing out that "under the nose of a regime that has never tolerated dissent, Sánchez has practiced what paper-bound journalists in her country cannot: freedom of speech." She has also received the Ortega y Gasset Prize, Spain's highest award for digital journalism; the Maria Moors Cabot Prize from Columbia University; and in 2009, TIME Magazine named her blog among the 25 Best Blogs of 2009.

In her own country, however, Sanchez has repeatedly faced harassment by authorities. In November 2009, the Daily Telegraph reported that she was beaten by a group of unidentified men while on her way to a peaceful protest. According to the article, after the attack, she was dumped "again in the middle of the street, (...) leaving her bruised, scared and sobbing."

Sanchez says she has not been able to see her own blog since 2007. She reports on her blog that she is under continuous surveillance by state security agents. On 24 May, Sanchez's blog reported that her name had been announced on Cuba's state-run Roundtable program, "mixed with concepts such as "cyber-terrorism," "cyber-commandos" and "media war."

"To be mentioned in a negative way in the most official program on television is, for any Cuban, the confirmation of her social death," says Sanchez in her blog.



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However, Sanchez refuses to be silenced. “If you are insulted by the mediocre, the opportunists, if you are slandered by the employees of the powerful but dying machinery, take it as a compliment,” she says on her blog.

“Sanchez’s tremendously important work provides a glimpse into what is otherwise a closed world,” said IPI Interim Director Alison Bethel McKenzie. “It is perhaps fitting that our 60th and final World Press Freedom Hero represents a future where the power of the internet can be harnessed to promote free speech. We are proud to know Yoani and to award this prestigious prize to her.”

"Yoani's work has contributed tremendously toward a more wholesome understanding of the reality of life in Cuba. Her clear insights, beautiful use of language and tenacity have distinguished Yoani as an outstanding Caribbean journalist, blogger and citizen. We all look forward to the day conditions in her homeland change so that free expression can be more fully and abundantly facilitated, encouraged and exercised. Our congratulations on her achievement of this prestigious award," said Wesley Gibbings, President of the Association of Caribbean Media Workers, reacting to the announcement of the award.