

Conversations with Cuban Blogger Yoani Sanchez

By [Salim Lamrani](#)

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Global Research, May 06, 2010

6 May 2010

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Salim Lamrani

Yoani Sanchez is the new face of the Cuban opposition.□ Since the creation of her blog Generation Y in 2007, she has won numerous international awards: The Ortega y Gasset Journalism Award (2008), the Bitacorras.com award (2008), The Bob's Award (2008), and the Maria Moors Cabot Award (2008) from the prestigious Columbia University in the United States. Similarly, the blogger was named among the 100 most influential people in the world by Time magazine (2008), along with George W. Bush, Hu Jintao and the Dalai Lama. Her blog was included in the CNN and Time magazine list of the top 25 blogs in the world (2008). On November 30, 2008 the Spanish newspaper El Pais included her in the year's top 100 most influential Latin American personalities (a list which did not include Fidel Castro or Raul Castro.) Foreign Policy magazine, for its part, included her among the 10 most important intellectuals of the year and the Mexican magazine Gato Pardo did the same in 2008.

This impressive avalanche of awards received simultaneously has raised many questions, especially since Yoani Sanchez, according to her own words, is totally unknown in her own country. How does a person unknown to her neighbors- according to the blogger herself- come to be included on the list of the year's 100 most influential personalities?

A Western diplomat, who is close to this atypical opponent to the government of Havana, read a series of articles I wrote about Yoani Sánchez that were relatively critical and showed them to the Cuban blogger. She wanted to meet with me to clarify some points I had made.

The encounter with the famous young dissident in question did not take place in a dark apartment with closed windows or in an isolated, inmate place away from the prying ears of the "political police." On the contrary, it occurred in the lobby of the Hotel Plaza in the center of Old Havana on a sun-drenched afternoon. The place was crowded, with many foreign tourists wandering through the immense lobby of the majestic building that opened its doors in the early twentieth century.

Yoani Sanchez has a close with the Western embassies. Indeed, a single call from my contact at noon allowed me to set up an appointment for three hours later. At 3pm, the blogger appeared smiling, wearing a long skirt and a blue shirt. She wore a sport coat to protect her from the relative coolness of winter in Havana.

The conversation lasted about two hours around a table in the hotel bar. Her husband, Reinaldo Escobar, accompanied her for about twenty minutes before leaving to go to another appointment. Yoani Sanchez was extremely cordial and friendly and appeared quite

calm. Her tone of voice was sure and at no time did she appear uncomfortable. Accustomed to the Western media, she is fairly well versed in the art of communication.

This blogger, fragile in appearance, intelligent and wise, is aware that, although difficult for her to admit, her media coverage in the West is not a coincidence, but is due to the fact that she advocates the creation of “sui generis capitalism” in Cuba.

The incident of November 6, 2009

Salim Lamrani: Let's start with the incident that occurred on November 6, 2009 in Havana. In your blog, you said you and three friends were detained by “three burly strangers” during an “afternoon full of blows, shouts and insults.” You denounced the violence that Cuban law enforcement committed against you. Are you sure of your version of those events?

Yoani Sanchez: Yes, I confirm that I suffered violence. They kidnapped me for 25 minutes. I received blows. I managed to take a piece of paper out of the pocket of one of them and put it in my mouth. One put his knee on my chest and the other, from the front seat, hit me in the area of the kidneys and the head trying to make me open my mouth and drop the paper. At one point, I felt I would never leave that car.

SL: The story on your blog is truly terrifying. I quote: You spoke of “blows and punches”, of “raps on the knuckles”, of a “flurry of blows”, of a “knee on [your] chest”, of blows to “the kidneys and [...] the head, of “hair pulling” and your “face reddened by the pressure and [an] aching body” from “the blows [that] continued to fall” and “all the bruises.” However, when you received the international press on November 9, all marks were gone. How do you explain that?

YS: They are professionals.

SL: Ok, but why didn't you take pictures of the marks?

YS: I have photos. I have photographic evidence.

SL: You have photographic evidence?

YS: I have photographic evidence.

SL: But, why haven't you published the photos in order to squelch all the rumors that you invented this aggression to gain press attention?

YS: For now I'd rather save them and not publish them. I want to present them in court one day so that those three men can be judged. I remember their faces vividly and I have photos of at least two of them. The third is still not identified but since he was the boss, it will be easy to pinpoint him. I also have the paper that I took from one of them and that has my saliva on it because it was in my mouth. On this paper is the name of a woman.

SL: Okay. You post many photos on your blog. We find it difficult to understand why you prefer not to show the marks at this time.

YS: As I said, I prefer to reserve them for court.

SL: You understand that this attitude is lending credibility to those who think you invented this story of aggression.

YS: It's my choice.

SL: But even the Western media, which is quite favorable to you, took unusual oratorical precautions in telling your story. For example, the BBC correspondent in Havana Fernando Ravensberg wrote that you "had no bruises, marks or scars." Agence France Presse carefully clarified that it was publishing your version of the story by using the title "Cuba: the blogger Yoani Sanchez says she was beaten and briefly detained." That journalist also reported that you "were not hurt."

YS: I don't wish to evaluate their work. I'm not one to judge them. They are professionals who deal with very complicated situations that I can't evaluate. The truth is that the presence or absence of physical marks is not evidence of the fact.

SL: But the presence of marks shows that an act of violence took place. Hence the importance of publishing the photos.

YS: You must understand that they are professionals of intimidation. The fact that three strangers would put me in a car without presenting any document gives me the right to complain just as if they had broken every bone in my body. The photos are not important because the crime has been committed. The accuracy of "I was hurt here or I was hurt there" is my inner pain.

SL: Yes, but the problem is that you presented this as a very violent assault. You spoke of "kidnapping in the worst Sicilian Camorra style."

YS: Yes, that's true. But I know it's my word against theirs. By entering into such details, whether or not I have marks, distances us from the real issue, which is that I was kidnapped for 25 minutes in an illegal manner.

SL: I'm sorry but I think the emphasis is important. There is a difference between an identity check that lasts 25 minutes and police violence. My question is simple. You said, quote: "Throughout the weekend I had a swollen cheekbone and eyebrow." Since you have photos, you can now show the markings.

YS: I told you. I'd rather save them for court.

SL: You understand that for some people it is difficult to believe your version if you do not publish the photos.

YS: I think to get into that kind of detail obscures the essence. The essence is that three bloggers, accompanied by a friend, were headed to the corner of Calle 23 and G. We had heard that a group of young people had called a march against violence. "Alternative" people, singers, hip hop and rap artists. I went there as a blogger to take pictures and publish them on my blog and get interviews. On the way we were intercepted by a Geely car.

SL: So that you couldn't participate in this event?

YS: That was obviously the reason. They never told me officially, but that was the objective.

They told me to get in the car. I asked them who they were. One of them took me by the wrist and I started to pull back. That happened in a very central area of Havana at a bus stop.

SL: So there were people. There were witnesses.

YS: There were witnesses but they didn't want to talk. They're afraid.

SL: Not even anonymously? Why hasn't the Western media interviewed them anonymously as it often does when they publish critical reports on Cuba?

YS: I can not explain the reaction of the press. I can describe what happened. One of them, a man of about fifty, well built as if he had practiced wrestling at some point - I say that because my father practiced the sport and has the same features. I have very thin wrists and I managed to free myself and asked him who he was. There were three men besides the driver.

SL: So there were four men in total, not three.

YS: Yes, but I did not see the face of the driver. They said, "Yoani, hop in the car, you know who we are." I replied: "I do not know who you are." The shortest guy said, "Listen, you know who I am, you know me." I replied: "No, I do not know who you are. I don't know you. Who are you? Show me your papers or any documentation." The other said, "Hop in, don't make things harder." Then I started screaming, "Help, kidnappers!"

SL: Did you know they were plain-clothes cops?

YS: I thought so, but nobody showed me documents.

SL: What was your objective then?

YS: I wanted things done by the book, that is, that they show me their papers and then take me, although I suspected that they represented the authorities. You can't force a citizen into a private car without showing your identification. If it is not unlawful, it's a kidnapping.

SL: How did the people at the bus stop react?

YS: The people at the bus stop were astonished because "kidnapping" is a word never used in Cuba; it doesn't occur here. So they asked what was happening. We didn't look like criminals. Some people approached but one of the policemen shouted: "Don't get involved they are counterrevolutionaries!" That confirmed that they were political police, but I had figured as much because of the Geely they were driving, which is a newly manufactured Chinese model that is not sold in any shop in Cuba. They belong exclusively to the Ministry of the Armed Forces and the Ministry of Interior.

SL: So you knew from the beginning that they were policemen in civilian clothes by the car.

YS: I sensed that. On the other hand I had the confirmation when one of them called a policeman in uniform. A patrol car with a man and a woman came and took two of my friends. We were left in the hands of these two strangers.

SL: But by then you didn't have the slightest doubt as to who they were.

YS: No, but they did not show us any documentation. The police did not tell us that they [in plain clothes] represented the authorities. We were not told anything.

SL: It is difficult to understand the Cuban authorities' interest in physically assaulting you with the risk of unleashing an international scandal. You are famous. Why would they do that?

YS: Their objective was to radicalize me so that I would write violent texts against them, but they will not succeed.

SL: It cannot be said that you are soft on the Cuban government.

YS: I never use verbal violence or personal attacks. I never use incendiary adjectives as "bloody repression" for example. Their purpose was to radicalize me.

SL: But you are very hard on the Havana government. In your blog, you say: "the boat taking on water about to sink." You mention "the cries of the tyrant" of "beings from the shadows that, like vampires, feed on our human happiness, inoculate us with fear through beatings, threats, blackmail," "has shipwrecked the process, system, expectations, and illusions. [It is a total] Shipwreck" These are strong words.

YS: Maybe, but their goal was to taint the Yoani Sánchez phenomenon, to demonize me. That's why my blog was blocked for so long.

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Articles by: [Salim Lamrani](#)

About the author:

Docteur ès Etudes Ibériques et Latino-américaines de l'Université Paris IV-Sorbonne, Salim Lamrani est Maître de conférences à l'Université de La Réunion, et journaliste, spécialiste des relations entre Cuba et les Etats-Unis. Son nouvel ouvrage s'intitule Fidel Castro, héros des déshérités, Paris, Editions Estrella, 2016. Préface d'Ignacio Ramonet. Contact : lamranisalim@yahoo.fr ; Salim.Lamrani@univ-reunion.fr Page Facebook : <https://www.facebook.com/SalimLamraniOfficiel>

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