

## Black Political Prisoners in the United States

**This panel examined contemporary issues surrounding black political prisoners while aiming to provide new directions for scholars who seek to address this issue.**

*Herb Boyd:* The people most dear to us in this struggle—some 100, 150 prisoners inside the United States—would not fall under Amnesty International's definition of political prisoners of conscience, so I think we need to extend that definition to include a number of Puerto Rican, African-American political prisoners that we have, most particularly Sundiata Acoli, they talk about Sekou Odinga, Susan Rosenberg, Sylvia Beraldi, and of course, Mumia Abu Jamal.

Beyond those who are jailed up, we have to talk about the ones that are in exile. In my travels abroad I've spent quite a bit of time in Africa, particularly in Dar es Salaam, which used to have a sizable community of African Americans, a good number of whom were what we like to call fugitives from justice. Michael Tabor Cetawayo, for example, continues to live in exile in Lusaka, Zambia. He was a part of the Panther 21 situation in April of 1969, when the Panthers were charged with moving to blow up the Botanical Gardens and a few other department stores. But after two years of a legal process and, I think, eight months of trial, they were acquitted within an hour. Of course, by that time, you know, Michael Tabor was long gone, he was already in Africa. But Sundiata spent all of the time during that legal process incarcerated, and he continues to be incarcerated.

*Asha Bandele:* You cannot talk about black political prisoners in America without talking about the Black Panther Party. The overwhelming majority of black political prisoners in this country were members of the Black Panther Party. And so if we are going to talk about April 1999 and who is incarcerated today, we have to talk about what the climate was on October 15, 1966, when the Black Panther Party came into being.

Then, as now, the Black Panther Party was initially informed by the murder and the brutality of police in Oakland, California. I don't know what his name was, it might have been Amadou Diallo, it might have been Anthony Baez. But that's what initiated the Black Panther Party back then. Then, as now, what was happening throughout the country was that you had a sheriff in the South named Bull Connor. Now we have a mayor named Rudy Giuliani. And I'm struggling to understand the substantive difference between the two of them.

Sometimes people think that the Black Panther Party was a bunch of extremists and therefore the people who became political prisoners were also extreme, were also crazy. But political prisoners are just like you and me. They don't think wild things, they think children ought to eat three times a day. They think the people ought to have a decent education, decent housing, and those were the things that people were struggling for back in the day. They were a gang. I grew up thinking that. I know there are people in here my age who grew up thinking that. Malcolm X, just out of control, didn't know what he was,

hated everybody. Those were the things I was raised thinking.

The work that is going to make political prisoners free is not, cannot, and has never been done by one or two people. The reason Nelson Mandela is out of prison is because an entire world said he ought to be out of prison. In 1992, when I went to South Africa, I went as a guest of the Pan Africanist Congress [PAC] and if you remember what was happening, Herb Boyd wrote about it and covered it, there were great divisions between the PAC and between the ANC [African National Congress]. You had whole neighborhoods, this was the ANC neighborhood, this was the Bhutelezi neighborhood, and this was the PAC, you know, everything was broken up like that. But I tell you what, it wasn't one of them who didn't believe Mandela ought to not be out of prison. It wasn't one of them that wasn't calling, and a lot of the people didn't have work and a lot of the people were abusing alcohol and even in a drunken stupor, I'm not being metaphorical, this is what I saw, in a drunken stupor. Those people said, we are glad the brother is home, bring the rest home, bring everybody home. And I'm trying to figure out how we get to do that with our own Mandelas right here, [Sundiata Acoli, and Sekou Odinga, Matula Shakur]. That's what the work really is at this point. It's how we make this seem like an urgent issue to all of us all the time. We have never had a mass movement in this country. Black people did not move en masse to stop slavery. We didn't move en masse to stop lynching. We didn't move en masse in the 1960s. How many people in the Black Panther Party, at most, the best estimates, 10,000? What does that represent in terms of the percentage? And so I've come here to ask people what we are willing to do about it.

*Safiya Bukhari:* When I joined the party I think my work from the very beginning was

around the issue of political prisoners. I joined when Huey Newton was in prison in California, the 21 was busted on in April 2, 1969, which was my nineteenth birthday. So for years I couldn't even celebrate my birthday because the issue of political prisoners was there.

And then the New Haven 9 were in prison, the Panthers were going to prison all over the country, so there was a need to form even [at] that point a national committee for the defense of political prisoners. And that was part of my work in the party. After organizing in the street around the basic issues or learning how to organize and be an activist, learning the issues and everything else, I was given the responsibility to form a national body. The United States government had tried to siphon off the work that we were doing in the communities—organizing around indecent housing and lack of quality education, lack of food, and the free breakfast program—by arresting people all over the country, putting them in prison, setting high bails and sending them off to prison, so our work became freeing our political prisoners instead of working to organize the community.

The issue of political prisoners, from the very beginning of my involvement as a political person, at the age of nineteen, was a major issue that I was involved with. One of the things I say to youth now is when I joined the party at nineteen, it was around the issue of political prisoners. When I went underground, it was around the issue of political prisoners. When I had got involved in the Black Liberation Army, it was around freeing members of the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army who were already incarcerated in this country.

Political prisoners do not come out of a vacuum and they didn't decide to become political prisoners. They didn't make a conscious decision that I'm going out there to do something and then go to prison, they didn't do that.

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Some of them, very real, some of them are not there because they did anything other than stand up for freedom. One of the things that we are hearing in the community all the time is they are in prison they must have done something. They [are] in prison in the United States because they dare to stand up and speak out. And they dared to make a conscious decision that I am not going to sit quietly and be okay while leaving a society in existence so that my children will have to come along and go through the same thing that I went through. I know that was my decision.

What we are talking about is a whole society, a whole society that is geared to make sure that those same slaves that they brought here to work their fields and to create the society and to build the institutions of their society don't become human beings in the eyes of the people. And if they strive to become human beings and make a decision that our children are not going to be subject to the same kind of thing, then they become political prisoners. Either because they dare to not just speak out but go and take an active role in the liberation of their communities, an active role in the defense of their community against police brutality and police murder and all the other things that the police do under the cover of the blue shield, the badge that they call their badge of courage.

And we can talk about amnesty for IRA [Irish Republican Army] prisoners in Ireland like Mayor Dinkins said about Joe Dougherty when he was here in the United States. If we can talk about their rights, and that they should be treated as prisoners of war, then we

should be talking about Matula Shakur, Sekou Odinga, Assata Shakur, Sundiata Acoli, and the New York 3.

Nelson Mandela was just not a politician, he was also a member of a liberation army in South Africa. So if you say it's okay for them, why is it not okay for us here? We are involved in that same liberation struggle we were involved with when we were brought over here as slaves in shackles 300 years ago. That same racial struggle is still in effect today. If you don't think it's in effect, then go back there and tell that man who was dragged behind the car in Texas that we are not involved in, or we should not be involved in, the liberation struggle. Put him back together again and tell him that. Tell him that we should forget. Tell him like they tell us about the Holocaust. That never again will it happen and we'll stand up and make sure it won't happen.

All of this is what brings us to 1999. It

actually brought us to 1996 when we started working on the Jericho movement. We have figured that we have to build a movement strong enough to address the issue of amnesty and freedom for our political prisoners. And raise the issue and educate our community about the fact that these people are there and what they are there for and

how long they are there and that they are human beings, they are not just names on a plate. These are human beings who are fathers and mothers, who have grandparents, who are wives and lovers, you know. And these are human beings that have made a commitment, who made a decision to stand

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up and do something. They are still in prison and the United States and Clinton dares to talk about reconciliation! How can you reconcile if you haven't dealt with the issue itself? And if you are talking about doing something about racism in this country, let's deal with the real issues here, let's deal with the real issues that continue to permeate our society.

Thirty years ago we should have had a Jericho Legal Defense Fund. Every time a political prisoner was captured, arrested, framed, somebody could have been there to support them, to be there as a representative. We have people in prison who never had anything but a court-appointed attorney and have been in the hole for nine years, Geronimo spent a lot of years in the hole. Right now we have people in the hole in New York and Marion, Illinois, and in Colorado, all over the country. And they don't have attorneys. Well, Jericho Legal Defense Fund is designed to make sure they have attorneys.

We need people to do the work of freeing political prisoners in this country. We need people willing to do the work, of building that amnesty campaign. I just want to say one thing about Leonard Peltier. Leonard Peltier has been in agony for over a year now because they took him to a hospital in Springsville, Missouri, and did an operation

on him. He developed lockjaw as a result of that operation they did in that hospital. He cannot eat, he eats through a straw. The Mayo Clinic has said that they will do work on him, they can help him, but these federal prisons have said they will not send him out of the prison even though they had sent him to this hospital, even though they said in a press conference on March 1 that there is nothing they can do for him, he has to stay in pain. So we need support for that, we need people to write letters, we need people to make a plea for humanitarian support for Leonard Peltier. By the same token, Tom Manning, another political prisoner, is suffering from severe arthritis and is in constant pain to the point that he's on crutches now and they won't take him out to the hospital either.

And so we have these cases and we have the same thing that happened with Matula Shakur with his glaucoma. It took a campaign to make sure that he gets medical care. And we need that. We have a medical project that's in, but we need other people to support Dr. Allen Bergman, who is a former political prisoner and his wife, Barbara Zeller, who is heading up that medical project, Jericho Medical Project. But we need other people to support that work.

Thank you. Free our political prisoners.