

# POLITICAL PRISONERS IN CONTEMPORARY SPAIN

**Santiago Sierra**

Universal recourse to the penitentiary institution is in itself an indicator of the failure and powerlessness of societies to build a healthy environment of coexistence that respects personal sovereignty. The presence of political prisoners inside prisons is also the touchstone that discredits any government that tries to define itself as democratic. Consequently, no government recognizes its existence, disguising it with criminal descriptions such as attacks to the public order, terrorism, rebellion, etc.

Spanish state is not an exception. When in 2016 Arnaldo Otegui, the abertzale leader, described himself as a “political prisoner” after several years in prison, Rafael Catalá, the Justice Minister, said that “in a democracy there aren’t political prisoners” and that in Spain “there haven’t been any for many years”. However, a superficial look at the Spanish prisons allows us to identify many people who have been condemned for their ideas, especially in the abertzale and anarchist movements, although it has not been something exclusive of this.

The criteria to define a prisoner as political is not clear and not everyone agrees with it. In Spain these criteria have been even more confusing due to the Francoist tradition and the prolongation of nationalist conflicts after the Transition, which has generated a context where almost any activity (exercise of freedom of expression and assembly, militancy in revolutionary organizations, struggle for the rights of prisoners, etc.) can be classified as a crime of “terrorism”. The approval of the Citizen Security Law, also known significantly as the “Gag Rule”, has greatly expanded the alleged crimes to include opinions and acts of disobedience, such as collective attempts to paralyze the evictions.

Our purpose through this series that we have been publishing over the past year is to make visible the existence of such political prisoners in the Spanish state, despite what is institutionally maintained. Without focusing on any particular ideology, because it is a question of demonstrating that contemporary Spanish political prisoners embrace a wide range of political positions, especially left-wing, but with a very clear selection criteria: people imprisoned for trying to make their ideas public and effective without any kind of violence. Surely, not all the political prisoners are included in this project, but through this selection of very clear examples we want to record their existence and denounce the laws and their distorted application, but above all the social alienation that allows and justifies this reality and looks the other way.

Santiago Sierra and Ediciones El Garaje S.L.  
Special edition of 500 copies by Helga de Alvear Gallery to ARCO Madrid Art Fair February 2018.



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28021 Madrid  
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ISBN: 978-84-947949-3-3  
Depósito legal: M-35933-2017  
Impreso: Estudios Gráficos Europeos, S.A.

**GARAJE**

Production: Estudio Santiago Sierra S.L. (Sabela Llerena and Luis Navarro).  
Graphic design: Sabela Llerena.



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