

Dr. King and Sundiata Acoli: Both Victims of United States Political Repression

- On the birthdays of Dr. King and political prisoner Sundiata Acoli, Conference of Black Lawyers calls for the release of all U.S. Political Prisoners

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As we continue our Human Rights agenda, we pay tribute to **Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.** who would have celebrated his 82nd birthday on January 15th. Dr. King gave his life fighting for human rights. Although he is hailed by most as a "civil rights" leader, Dr. King's focus was in the arena of *human rights* prior to his assassination. As Michelle Alexander notes in her book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration In The Age of Colorblindness*, "Dr. King's basic message of the Poor People's Movement in 1968 was that the time had come for racial justice advocates to shift from a civil rights to a human rights paradigm, and that the real work of movement building had only just begun." A human rights approach, Dr. King believed, would offer far greater hope for those of us determined to create a thriving, multiracial, multiethnic democracy free from racial hierarchy than the civil rights model had provided to date. Sundiata Acoli, another human rights advocate of the same era, turned 74 years old on January 14, 2011.

Sundiata Acoli has been a political prisoner languishing in U.S. prisons for close to 38 years (since May 2, 1973). The two men have more in common: both were targets of U.S. government's COINTELPRO repression because of their political beliefs, acts and associations. COINTELPRO consisted of a series of covert actions directed against domestic dissident groups, targeting them as perceived threats to "domestic tranquility." People viewed as dissidents, Communists, or anti-establishment were at risk of prosecution, persecution or both.

The Civil Rights Movement was a primary target of such misconduct. In an official memorandum dated March, 1968, the following long-range goals of the COINTELPRO against Blacks were outlined: (1) to prevent the "coalition of militant black nationalist groups," which might be the first step toward a real "Mau Mau" in America; (2) to prevent the rise of a "messiah" who could "unify and electrify" the movement, naming specially Martin Luther King, Stokely Carmichael, and Elijah Muhammad; (3) to prevent groups and leaders from gaining "respectability: by discrediting them to the "responsible" Negro community, to the white community and the "liberals" (the distinction is the Bureau's), and to "Negro radicals"; and (4) to prevent the long range growth of these organizations, especially among youth, by developing specific tactics to "prevent" these groups from recruiting young people."

In response to pressure from a broad spectrum of the American public, a Congressional subcommittee, popularly known as the Church Committee, was formed to investigate and study the FBI's covert action programs. The Church Committee documented the FBI's effort to discredit Dr. King by disclosing confidential information that was obtained from wiretaps and microphones targeted against him.

Many of today's U.S. political prisoners were incarcerated as a direct result of COINTELPRO's illegal activities. They were targeted because of their political beliefs and/or actions. Unlike those convicted and sentenced for similar crimes, they were given much harsher sentences and routinely denied parole. Mr. Acoli's continued incarceration is based on his past political association and writings. The New Jersey parole board does not intend to release this 74 year old man who has a warm, supportive and loving family, hundreds of friends and supporters. His continued incarceration violates International human rights laws, among them the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD).

As we remember the life of Dr. King, let us be mindful of how passionately Dr. King fought for justice for everyone. In his name, let us not forget those courageous human rights advocates who languish in U.S. prisons.

National Conference of Black Lawyers' website: <http://www.ncbl.org>.