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Eusebio Mujal-León

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# Can Cuba Change?

## TENSIONS IN THE REGIME

*Eusebio Mujal-León*

*Eusebio Mujal-León is associate professor of government at Georgetown University and director of the Cuba XXI Project there. His books include Communism and Political Change in Spain (1983), European Socialism and the Conflict in Central America (1989), and The USSR and Latin America (1989). He is working on a book about regime change in Cuba.*

Fifty years ago, Fidel Castro seized power in Cuba. Against all odds, he and his Revolution have endured, outlasting no fewer than ten U.S. presidents and surviving the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Finally, in February 2008, he formally turned power over to his younger brother, Raúl Castro. The succession took place so uneventfully that one observer characterized it as “Fidel Castro’s final victory.”<sup>1</sup> A victory it certainly was, at least with respect to those who had anticipated that without the charismatic leader at the helm, the regime would immediately collapse. But history did not end when Raúl Castro became president. Neither did the clock stop on the considerable problems that he inherited from his brother, nor on the profound challenges that he faced in managing the transition from a highly personalized system of rule while also trying to rouse Cuba’s economy from its state-induced coma and satisfy pent-up popular demands.

Change in Cuba did not begin when Fidel Castro stepped aside. It had been underway since the early 1990s, when the collapse of the Soviet Union effectively ended the Cuban “socialist” experiment. This disaster resulted in a drop of 30 to 40 percent in GDP and introduced what Fidel Castro called the “special period in a time of peace.” The regime sought to palliate the social consequences of this economic earthquake while searching for new trade and investment partners and straining to maintain internal order. Its survival strategy involved major adjustments in economic and social policies. Among these were the “dollarization” of the economy and the introduction of a dual currency; the granting of

permits to engage in limited self-employment; the reopening of farmers' markets; the search for foreign capital and the creation of numerous joint-venture companies (many of them run by officers of the Revolutionary Armed Forces [FAR]); the encouragement of tourism and remittances from Cubans living abroad; and the direction of investment away from social programs and toward those sectors that would likely prove most attractive to foreign investors.

The reforms of the "special period" allowed the Cuban Revolution to survive, but they also transformed the structure of the economy and society. One major effect was the reintroduction of capitalism. Quite evidently, capitalism had never entirely disappeared from the island. For one thing, as in all other state-centered economies, it was visible in the informal sector or underground economy, whose size was (and continues to be) substantial. Moreover, although expropriations during the 1960s had effectively ended entrepreneurial capitalism in Cuba, the Revolution created a system of state-monopoly capitalism wherein the perks of ownership passed to those who controlled economic enterprises through the state. The "special period" added impetus to this process by tossing an alliance with foreign investors into the mix. The joint-venture companies created enclaves of (protected) capitalism. The strategy of enclave capitalism and reliance on remittances from Cubans overseas magnified social inequalities based on who had access to dollars and other resources.

The reforms of the "special period" also had contradictory effects on the Cuban state. The emergence of joint ventures increased state discretionary power by creating a new pool of jobs and benefits to be doled out to favored recipients.<sup>2</sup> That military personnel administered most of these joint-venture companies only added to the perception of an interlocking elite involved in a "protection racket." Although these measures helped the regime to survive and reinforced the loyalty of the ruling coalition, they also weakened the capacities of the Cuban state. Collaboration between the ubiquitous *Comités de Defensa de la Revolución* and the security forces ensured control and prevented dissidence from becoming opposition. Vertical control of information impeded horizontal communication and hindered the development of associational life and activity. So did the day-to-day struggles that millions of Cubans faced to obtain food, medicine, and other scarce items. Yet the Cuban state of the 1990s was but a pale shadow of what it had once been. Though its cadres still evidenced "totalitarian" aspirations, their reach exceeded their grasp. Mobilization became episodic, and social spending declined. There were growing deficits in health care, education, transport, and housing—the vaunted "social gains" of the Revolution.

For students of democratization, the fundamental questions regarding Cuba relate to the nature of the regime and to identifying cases and themes that provide the greatest analytical leverage for comparison. Within a

few years of his January 1959 takeover, Fidel Castro had consolidated a totalitarian regime in which the state controlled all spheres of cultural, economic, and social life. The drive to create a New Man and to embark on a rapid transition to communism reflected this utopian and totalitarian imperative. There are distinctive aspects of the Cuban case, however. For one thing, the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) did not make the Revolution. Instead it was the rebel army under the leadership of Fidel Castro that led this process. A unified Communist Party was not created until 1965. The PCC did not hold its first congress until 1975. Only in the 1990s did a new generation of PCC leaders assume real power in provincial and municipal organizations. Even today, the Party is the weaker link in the political-military chain that rules Cuba.

### **Points of Comparison**

Relative to other twentieth-century totalitarian experiments, the Cuban regime has developed a special mix of control, mobilization, and harassment. Since the crushing of internal opposition in the 1960s, the regime has created a system of “vertical” controls that concentrate power in the hands of the state and “disempower” and “direct” society, while in the process diminishing alternative or horizontal information flows, contacts, organizations, and solidarity networks. The linchpin in this system has been provided by the *Comités de Defensa de la Revolución*, a network of neighborhood controls that works closely with the Ministry of the Interior and whose innovative aspect has been the use of citizens to spy on and control other citizens.<sup>3</sup> The mix of social control and coercion by security forces draws added strength from Cuba’s island status, as well as from the absence of the many opponents who have chosen “exit” over “voice” (nearly 15 percent of Cubans live outside their country). The low-intensity “civil war” between Cuba South and Cuba North (as we might refer to the zones whose respective capitals are Havana and Miami) and the “cold war” with the United States reinforced the militarization of Cuban society and further justified control and repression.

The Cuban regime has evolved over the past fifteen years, moving from full totalitarianism to what a coauthor and I have called elsewhere a more transitional “charismatic post-totalitarianism.”<sup>4</sup> The state and regime saw their capacity decline after the 1990s, while disbelief in the reigning ideology grew. Yet Fidel Castro’s “charismatic” authority retained its force even as elites and society alike progressively realized that the post-Castro era and a different style of rule lay around the corner. Since Fidel Castro fell ill in 2006, the trend toward posttotalitarianism has deepened, and the pending question now is whether the Cuban regime will “mature” into this phase, or move toward another regime type.

If Cuba is undergoing a process of regime transition, what other experiences might provide insights into this process? One set of references

includes the Portuguese and Spanish transitions that started the “third wave” of democratization in the 1970s. The Spanish model of “negotiated settlement” resulted from the decomposition of an authoritarian regime and its transition to a parliamentary democracy in the context of an emerging European “space.”<sup>5</sup> Neither the nature of the Castro regime nor the characteristics of Cuba (with its weak civil society and heroic but atomized opposition) suggest that the Spanish case is relevant at this point. For now, if Spain offers parameters for comparison, these might involve the experience of the late 1940s. At that time, the early authoritarian regime of Francisco Franco was isolated, reeling from the defeat of its Axis allies, and suffering from 1946 onward under a UN-sanctioned embargo. How the Spanish regime survived this crisis might be usefully compared with the Cuban experience in the 1990s. For its part, the Portuguese experience of the 1970s, where the dynamic of colonial adventure gone sour fueled the rise of praetorianism, offers insights into the connection between Cuba’s military disengagement from the Angolan Civil War and the rise of discontent among sectors of the Cuban military during the 1980s.

The East European cases provide another point of reference from which to examine the issue of regime change in Cuba. Again, the contrasts seem more marked than the similarities. The first major difference lies in how nationalism fueled the East European struggle against Soviet imperialism. Although the intensity of this sentiment varied from case to case, nationalism came down squarely on the side of those who favored regime change. This was certainly the case in Poland, where nationalism, the Catholic Church, and the autonomous labor movement associated with Solidarity formed an early wedge that eventually brought forth democracy. This process took ten years, and included the imposition of martial law and a “military” coup, led by General Wojciech Jaruzelski, to uphold Communist rule. By contrast, Fidel Castro and the new regime that he brought to his country always presented themselves as the standard-bearers of Cuban nationalism and as the true heirs of independence hero José Martí (1853–95).

If we set the nationalist variable aside, the Central and East European experiences look more relevant. Except in Poland, the first half of the 1980s was a time of stability, with far more examples of dissidence than of organized or effective opposition. Very few appreciated the significance of the Helsinki Accords or Charter 77, and even fewer knew of the obscure playwright Václav Havel. Within a few years, however, the region underwent an extraordinary democratic transformation. The demise of the highly institutionalized and relatively prosperous German Democratic Republic offers a particularly interesting point of reference. There, late-blooming civic organizations, combined with images and information from West German television and an unexpected and uncontrollable emigration crisis, brought the rule of the communist Social

Unity Party to an end. The apparent strength and capacity of the Cuban state notwithstanding, one of its weaknesses lies in the realm of emigration. The East European cases also suggest that there is a “tipping point” at which the level of economic development, civic organization, and the emergence of a political alternative coincide.

The cases of China and Vietnam offer another set of comparative vantage points from which to analyze the Cuban experience. Those two Asian countries share with Cuba the experience of intertwined nationalist and communist revolutions that gained power after a civil war. Totalitarian regimes under charismatic leaders have given way to what some have called (in the case of China) “responsive authoritarianism.”<sup>6</sup> Both countries have taken significant steps toward capitalism, while retaining single-party regimes that coexist warily with rising middle classes and emerging civil societies. This compares with a Cuban regime whose economic reforms are still incipient. While Raúl Castro may not be Deng Xiaoping, there is plenty of evidence (including a month-long study trip to China that he took in 1997) that he is interested in the implementation of Chinese-style economic reforms. How far the younger Castro is prepared to go in that direction is unclear. The asymmetries between Cuba and China are evident, and Raúl Castro is undoubtedly fearful lest conditions for a Cuban Tiananmen develop. Whatever the case, if the Cuban regime successfully navigates between the Scylla of immobility and the Charybdis of upheaval, comparisons with these Asian experiences may shed light on how a hegemonic party-state engages in economic reform while maintaining firm political control.

How does the Cuban experience compare with other cases closer to home, in Latin America? Certainly the Cold War framed the Cuban Revolution and afforded it unique opportunities, but *fidelismo* always had an idiosyncratic and highly personal quality which, in some ways, differed only in degree from the *caudillismo* (or even extreme presidentialism) found elsewhere in Latin America. The role of the military in Cuba has striking intraregional parallels, as does Fidel Castro’s penchant for using nationalism both to affirm identity and to direct attention away from economic failures and mismanagement. The Cuban Revolution of 1959, like the Mexican Revolution of 1910, harnessed nationalism to a revolutionary project. The effort to create a party-state was reinforced in the Cuban case by a messianic vision and the adoption of a fully statist strategy and elaborate system of controls, though with a similar network of clients.

The strongest singularity of the Cuban case relative to Latin America lies in the absence of political pluralism within the ruling coalition and the concerted effort to destroy anything resembling an independent economy or civil society. Might the Cuban state and polity become more like those of its neighbors? The Cold War is over, and the United States plays a much less hegemonic role in Western Hemispheric affairs than it did in

earlier decades. This reality, combined with the physical passing of Fidel Castro and the emergence of new Latin American populist movements eager to construct “authoritarian democracies,” could provide additional hints of the Cuban future. Only time will tell if Cuba will follow the path blazed by Mexico’s long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party during its period of hegemony, or the less institutionalized, semimilitary model of Venezuela under Hugo Chávez. What should not be discounted is that a future Cuban elite might eventually try to flesh out a more “Latin American” style of leadership, complete with limited pluralism, pervasive clientelism, and semicontested elections.

### The Fidelista Coalition

The Party and the army (or more precisely, the PCC and the FAR) have long been the focus of power in Cuba—the interlocking and occasionally interchangeable core of what can be termed the *partido fidelista*. Although the PCC is the formal “vanguard” of society, it has for some time been the weaker of the two partners. Despite a renewal of its cadres and an increase in its role since the 1990s, the Party has not made administration and management its forte. Its greatest effectiveness comes instead from its work in ensuring ideological orthodoxy and control. The FAR is the heir of the guerrilla movement that made the Revolution. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the armed forces assumed major responsibility for implementing the Castro regime’s survival strategy. The FAR is not one but rather several organizations, and its constituent parts will bear close watching over the next few years. On the one hand, the FAR is a professional army that is highly regarded by the population. Since 1989, the FAR has also run the Interior Ministry, whose image and resonance are rather less benign. Officers of the FAR are also involved in the lucrative joint-ventures sector. The most important of these well-placed soldiers is General Julio Casas Regueiro, who is currently defense minister but who used to direct a holding company which, along with the other FAR-run enterprises, accounted for almost 90 percent of Cuba’s exports and 60 percent of its tourism earnings.

After nearly fifty years in power, the *fidelista* coalition is undergoing realignment. This is not the first time there has been flux within the leadership, but never before has the post-Castro era loomed so obviously near. The inevitability of this generational change is underscored by the septuagenarian status of those whom the 77-year-old Raúl Castro—he is Fidel’s junior by almost five years—has named to top posts in the Council of State and the newly appointed Standing Committee of the Politburo.

The Cuban power elite comprises several groups. One combines veterans of the old insurgent days in the Sierra Maestra mountains along the southeast coast with serving senior officers in the FAR. The former imbued the Revolution with its original *esprit*, while the latter are closely

aligned with their mentor and leader. Officers of the FAR have always served in the top ranks of the party-state. Since Raúl Castro took over the presidency, however, he has increased their number and influence. Taken together, this group supports economic reforms, but does not want political liberalization. The second group of “reformists” includes technocrats and has support among the provincial Party secretaries, whose careers date from the 1990s and who now make up almost a third of the Politburo. The most touted “reformist” is Carlos Lage, a member of the Politburo, vice-president of the Council of State, and executive secretary of the Council of Ministers. The technocrats do not have much of an independent power base, but Lage is well regarded within the PCC and in the economic ministries. This group supports the implementation of deeper and faster economic reforms and might eventually become advocates of political liberalization. The last group consists of the “hard-liners” within the ruling coalition. They favor tight limits on economic reform and oppose any political opening. Their leading figure is José Ramón Machado Ventura, vice-president of the Council of State and a well-known advocate of communist orthodoxy.

### **Raulismo in Power**

Raúl Castro has been at the center of power in Cuba since 1959, and has played a crucial role in the consolidation of the Revolution. If Fidel Castro was the magnetic force, the man of broad vision and intuitions, then it was his brother who made things work. Castroism is the joint product of siblings who have had their fair share of quarrels, but who are joined by a loyalty that runs far deeper than ideology.<sup>7</sup> Only when they both pass from the scene will the Castro era truly have come to an end. Raúl Castro is thus a pivotal, Janus-like figure linked both to the past and future of the Cuban Revolution. While he cannot inherit the full mantle of charismatic authority from his brother, he retains decisive authority within the collegial leadership. At the same time, Raúl cannot govern as Fidel did, largely ignoring the mundane questions of economic performance and administrative challenges.

Over the past two years, Raúl has provided a clear sense of his priorities. His speech of 26 July 2007 set the tone. In it, he spoke of the need to “change concepts and methods which were appropriate at one point but have been surpassed by life itself.” Just what the phrase “change concepts and methods” means is, of course, subject to interpretation. By no stretch of the imagination, however, does it signify any intention to jettison the revolutionary project or engage in political liberalization. It does mean a new emphasis on productivity and performance as well as paying much greater attention to the institutionalization of regime structures.

The younger Castro is undoubtedly more serious than his brother about institutions and, particularly, about the need to consolidate the authority



and credibility of the Communist Party. Fidel paid lip service to this goal, but his tendency toward micromanagement and improvisation generally triumphed. Raúl exhibits a different leadership style. He is not prone to lengthy speeches or to high-profile visibility. He has practiced a collective style of leadership, calling on other *comandantes* or Machado Ventura to be the public face of the regime and even bringing longtime rival Ramiro Valdés into the Politburo. During the Sixth Central Committee Plenum in April 2008, Raúl called on the Party to extend its presence outside the workplace and into neighborhoods and mass organizations. In short, he was telling the Party that it needed to become proactive in dealing with citizen demands.

Another aspect of *raulismo* has been to emphasize administrative reform and decentralization. In his July 2008 address to the National Assembly, he promised to reorganize the central administration, reducing the number of agencies and redistributing their functions. Perhaps inspired by recent Chinese initiatives at the local level, Raúl has also urged greater decentralization so “local initiative can be effective and viable.” The calls for increased productivity, efficiency, and discipline have been other hallmarks of the *raulista* platform. His speeches are replete with references to “systematic rigor, order, and discipline,” calls for “rationality and efficiency,” and references to the need for “more organization, more systematic and effective work.” Subsidies and entitlements, he declared, have become “irrational and unsustainable.”<sup>8</sup> Raúl has advocated open “debate and criticism”—though only “if guided by sensible purposes and views [that] are uttered with responsibility.”<sup>9</sup>

These remarks underscore that Cuba’s new president is no liberal. At most, his comments mean that debate should take place within firm boundaries. His 26 July 2007 speech unleashed a barrage of meetings in workplaces and neighborhoods where citizens were asked to air their grievances and problems, but the impact of these sessions was absorbed within Party and mass organizations, and failed to generate much public debate. The official daily, *Granma*, remains unreadable and uninformative. More open in identifying problems has been *Juventud Rebelde* (the organ of the the PCC’s youth wing, the Union of Young Communists or UJC), along with semiofficial outlets such as *Temas* and *La Jiribilla*, though even the lively exchanges in their pages never stray too far from the dominant canon.

There are signs of broader debate and willingness to discuss problems more openly. The April 2008 congress of the National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists featured sharp criticisms of cultural restrictions and the educational system. Two months before that, wide circulation was given to a video showing a student at the Universidad de Ciencias Informáticas challenging National Assembly president Ricardo Alarcón to justify controls on Internet access and foreign travel as well as the dual-currency system that pays people in Cuban pesos but forces them to buy

basic goods with far costlier “convertible” pesos.<sup>10</sup> What all this means and where it is leading are not clear. More than ten years ago, after another period of relative *apertura* (opening), Raúl Castro lambasted a number of reformist intellectuals as “fifth columnists” and thereby ushered in a new period of orthodoxy and retrenchment.<sup>11</sup> Will the same thing hap-

pen again? The meetings and assemblies leading up to the Sixth PCC Congress in late 2009 will provide clear evidence of how far intellectuals and reformist sectors will be able to expand the boundaries of intra-Party debate.

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In the economic sphere, *raulismo* has been about greater efficiency and increased production. In the political arena, the objective has been to prepare the generational transition while maintaining unity and discipline. Although Raúl occasionally sounds more like a manager than a politician, he is more aptly described

as a military professional for whom the FAR and PCC are functionally equivalent organizations founded on discipline and unity. The regime’s survival prospects will be much greater if the *fidelistas* (and post-*fidelistas*) coalitions remain united, and if Raúl is able to “institutionalize” boundaries for containing intraregime debate. His more collegial style has not prevented Raúl from placing his people in the top leadership ranks. If we exclude Raúl and other members of the early revolutionary generation from the count, FAR members now hold two of the six vice-presidencies of the new elected Council of State and six of the two-dozen Politburo seats. The group of young hard-liners, known as *los talibanes*, whom Fidel Castro promoted in the late 1990s have lost much ground. UJC leaders Hassan Pérez Casabona and Otto Rivero have been demoted, and Carlos Valenciaga, Fidel Castro’s personal secretary, recently lost his seat on the Council of State. Further changes in the government are likely to be announced when the National Assembly meets for its December 2008 session.

So far, the scope and pace of economic reforms appear limited and gradual enough to preserve broad consensus within the leadership. Who, after all, will dispute the need to increase agricultural production and efficiency? But partial measures are unlikely to resolve the core problems of the Cuban economy. Might advocates of deeper and farther-reaching reforms emerge? It is impossible to say, as the inner workings of elite circles remain deliberately opaque. We may have received a clue when, in July 2008, Raúl Castro declared that “unanimity” was “usually fictitious.”<sup>12</sup> Here the elder brother may be part of the explanation. At the time of the handover, it was thought that a terminally ill Fidel would “fade away” as in the song famously mentioned by Douglas MacArthur. But this has not

occurred. If anything, since mid-2008 the longtime *máximo líder* of the Cuban Revolution has been unusually visible and voluble, issuing pointed *reflexiones* via the pages (or sometimes just the webpages) of *Granma*. In June, he declared: “I am not nor will I ever be the head of any faction or group. No one can deduce, therefore, that there are struggles within the Party.”<sup>13</sup> The following weeks coincided with a slowdown in the pace of reforms, while a pair of major July 2008 speeches featured Raúl Castro asking for patience and emphasizing the “limited resources” at hand. This was before hurricanes Gustav and Ike devastated the island in late August and early September, causing up to US\$10 billion in damages and adding greater urgency to economic reform.

We do not know if Fidel Castro’s “reflections” are merely the musings of an old and crotchety former ruler, but even so, they probably strike a sympathetic chord among the hard-liners within the leadership. Less direct evidence of political effervescence may be found in the constant references that Cuban leaders make to the vulnerabilities of the Revolution. It was Fidel who first prominently raised this issue in a November 2005 speech at the University of Havana:

Can the revolutionary process be [made] irreversible, or not? Which are the ideas or the degree of conscience that would make the reversal of the revolutionary process impossible? When those who were the forerunners, the veterans, start disappearing and making room for new generations of leaders, what will be done and how will it be accomplished? After all, we have been witnesses to many errors, and we didn’t notice.<sup>14</sup>

Many others, including Raúl Castro, have continued to repeat the questions, suggesting that they nag at the leadership.

If debates emerge prior to the Sixth Congress, they will probably focus on the pace and substance of economic reform, administrative decentralization, and the demands for greater debate “within socialism.” So far, we have seen mostly hints of these debates, but they are undoubtedly taking place among the top elite, within various think tanks, and between and within assorted ministries. The most public contribution to the debate so far came in the form of a document called “Cuba Needs a Participative and Democratic Socialism” that appeared over the signatures of several Party members whose standing and significance within the PCC are unclear. Published online on 17 August 2008 at the Spanish-based *kaosenlared.net*, the manifesto contains a stinging criticism of the Cuban status quo, labeling it a “failed centralized and authoritarian” system. “The majority of Cubans,” the document went on, “are frustrated, alienated and have lost hope, and the new (unmotivated) generations do not feel the same commitment as previous ones toward this ‘poor socialism without perspectives.’” This has created a “rare species of ‘revolutionary situation’ that could come apart without warning and whose evolution could be capitalized on by the enemy.”<sup>15</sup>

Cuba has been characterized by an intrusive state whose elites have atomized society, controlled and reorganized it, and channeled participation vertically through a host of mass organizations. This process has eliminated political competition, destroyed economic society, and rendered civil society weak and ineffective. Over the past decade, Cuban society has not quite “resurrected” itself (in the evocative phrase of Enrique Baloyra), but neither has it remained immobile.<sup>16</sup> Multiple civic networks and associations have developed, though it is by no means easy to “disentangle” which are “oppositional, dissident, and non-oppositional sectors and activities.”<sup>17</sup> Few groups are independent. Most stand in some relation to the state, even while seeking margins of autonomy from it. Even the Catholic Church, probably the best-organized civic organization on the island, affirms its political neutrality and has opted for negotiation, if not accommodation, with the regime.<sup>18</sup>

At the same time, the Varela Project’s success (achieved despite systematic official harassment) at collecting more than 25,000 signatures to petition for a national referendum to add political, civil, and property rights to the constitution suggests that political contestation has grown. So does the expanded role of the Federation of Latin American Rural Women (FLAMUR)—founded in 1996—which has embarked on a campaign to collect signatures for a petition against the dual currency. A modest but noticeable increase in civil disobedience has taken place over the past decade.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, human rights groups and opposition organizations remain isolated, weak, and subject to constant harassment. They confront daunting obstacles not only in making their views known but in connecting with ordinary citizens. As Dagoberto Valdés has noted: “In Cuba there are political opponents, there are dissidents, there are other groups of an incipient civil society, but there is also . . . much civic and political illiteracy that does not permit social and political actors to define themselves and to focus on their own role.”<sup>20</sup>

## The Challenges Ahead

There are obvious reasons why the state of public opinion in Cuba is difficult to assess. A number of independent polls taken over the past few years provide a partial glimpse, however. Gallup interviewed a thousand Cubans in Havana and Santiago de Cuba in September 2006, just after Fidel Castro fell ill. Only 26 percent of the respondents said that they were satisfied with their freedom to choose what to do with their lives (the average for Latin America as a whole was 79 percent). Cuba’s healthcare and educational systems, by contrast, drew satisfaction scores of 75 and 78 percent, respectively. Asked about the country’s leadership, 49 percent approved, 39 percent voiced disapproval, and 13 percent did not answer.<sup>21</sup> A Freedom House report based on nearly 180 in-depth interviews carried out in five Cuban provinces in April 2008 presented

a more nuanced and gloomier picture. The report found Cubans at once disillusioned and apathetic; filled with a sense of powerlessness and a fear of change; evidencing deep distrust of one another and the government; and also apparently resigned to self-censorship. Few knew much about dissident or opposition groups. Nor did respondents expect much in the way of political change. With the exception of artists and intellectuals in the group, few of the respondents expressed concern about the absence of civil and political rights. Most respondents were critical of limits on freedom of movement within the island and of restrictions on their ability to travel outside the country. Overall the report suggests that there is substantial unhappiness among Cubans, but that it is accompanied by a deep sense of resignation.<sup>22</sup>

For now, Raúl's greatest challenge is economic—he must find a way to jump-start the economy and satisfy pent-up demands generated by nearly fifty years of *fidelismo*. Some of the measures announced so far are cosmetic or psychological: They aim to raise morale by ending some of the “absurd” restrictions (the word is Raúl's) that weigh on Cubans every day. Thus is it now permitted to buy cellphones, DVDs, motorcycles, and household appliances. Moreover, all Cubans may now stay at their island's tourist and resort hotels—so long as they pay the full rate in hard currency. Although such measures benefit only a select few who have ready money, the changes send a signal of normalization. Still pending are proposals to make exit visas cheaper and easier to obtain, to facilitate foreign travel, and to allow freedom of movement within the island.

As to deeper structural problems, the focus of government efforts has been on agriculture. Official figures state that between 1998 and 2007, the amount of land under cultivation fell by a third. Cuba now imports nearly 85 percent of its food. Decree Laws 259 and 282 (approved in June and August 2008, respectively) now permit the distribution of state land to state farms, cooperatives, and private individuals (private landowners control less than a fifth of arable land yet account for almost three-fifths of Cuba's annual yield). It is far from evident that this legislation will make Cuban agriculture more productive. And even if the law works as intended, agriculture is only one part of the equation. In the coming months, we shall see how *raulismo* addresses the problem of salaries and links these to increased productivity, while also tackling the troubles inherent in a dual-currency system where the 25-to-1 value advantage of convertible over ordinary pesos has created stark inequalities based on access to dollars.

As difficult as the economic challenges may be, there are others of equal, if not greater importance. The Cuban Revolution has always exuded a sense of moral superiority. What many knew but would not admit is now discussed publicly and with matter-of-fact candor: The system does not work. A recent article in *Cuba Socialista* admitted as much when it insisted that, even after fifty years of Revolution, the “transition to socialism” could take more than a century.<sup>23</sup> The Revolution's moral claims

are corroded by the manifold inequalities that pervade daily life. Income disparities are real and growing. There may not be political liberties, but capitalism is alive and well in the joint ventures and on El Malecón, Havana's bustling seawall and associated promenade with its many hustlers. The only difference is the absence of a legal system to contain or regulate their activities. No one can live on his or her monthly salary, and the result is that people regularly shirk their duties or steal what is ostensibly public property. Cubans were once proud of the "social gains" of the Revolution, but it now turns out that the health and educational systems have deep-seated problems. There are not enough medicines or doctors in the country, but the Cuban state earns hard cash for the 25,000 physicians it exports to Hugo Chávez's Venezuela.

### **Stability and Disenchantment**

Paradox and contradiction characterize the current situation in Cuba. Regime strength is coincident with fragility. Stability sits alongside growing disenchantment, albeit not yet pressures for change. For now, Raúl Castro is firmly entrenched in power. The regime may not excel at generating economic growth or harnessing productive forces, but it has few rivals in its resolute capacity to exert political and social control. The ubiquitous *Comités de Defensa de la Revolución* have begun to fray, but civil society and the private economy remain weak, dissidence and contestation are still limited, and people fear change. There is no visible alternative to the established order, but accumulated inefficiencies and incapacities have stifled hope for a better future. This may not be a recipe for revolution, but Cuban society has suffered an "anthropological lesion"—to borrow a phrase from Santiago de Cuba's retired Catholic archbishop Pedro Meurice Estiu—that exhortations to greater efficiency and discipline cannot cure.

Over the next few years, major changes will inevitably occur within Cuba's aging leadership. The new leaders will have neither the authority nor the legitimacy of the Castro brothers, and it would not be surprising if the process of leadership succession were to exacerbate conflicts within the elite. The armed forces are key; no ruling coalition can hope to succeed without them. Once Raúl Castro and the other senior generals pass from the scene, what will happen to the FAR? Will it gracefully cede power to a new civilian Communist Party elite? Will significant generational differences emerge within the officer corps? Will the FAR leadership stake out reserved domains within whose boundaries it will continue to exercise broad control? Will the protocapitalist groups that have gestated within the FAR since the beginning of the "special period" become the embryo of a future middle class?

We are in the antechamber of the post-Castro era, but there is no crystal ball that allows us to predict the future. There are several possible scenarios.

The first scenario involves a collapse of the regime. Such an outcome is probable only if a major emigration crisis or natural disaster overwhelms the capacity of the state and results in a massive breakdown of public order.

The second scenario envisions a return to the mobilizational strategies and orthodox policies of the past. Whether any successor to the brothers Castro would have the authority and capacity to compel such a change is doubtful.

Most probably the future lies somewhere between these first two scenarios. Thus a third scenario involves a posttotalitarian consolidation, or perhaps an evolution toward some variant of authoritarianism. This would include a relaxation of controls (but with continued harassment of dissidents and opponents), expanded but gradual economic reforms, and broader debate within the ruling elite. In the longer term, this option could lead to the emergence of a middle class closely enmeshed with and dependent upon a developmental state. Though China and Vietnam might be examples in this regard, it should be noted that both countries are larger, more self-sufficient, and less easily penetrated than Cuba. Even if it has been isolated for the past fifty years, Cuban society has maintained many links (familial, social, and psychological) with its neighbors, including the sizeable émigré community in the United States. Key elements of scenario number three would be the continued unity of the elite and its success in addressing Cuba's myriad economic problems. The existence of sizeable petroleum reserves in the Gulf of Mexico might help to solve some of these problems, while also lessening dependence on Hugo Chávez. Were Cuba to become awash in oil—a far from certain prospect given that the size of the reserves has not even been independently confirmed yet—it would almost certainly fall prey to the curse of the petrostate.<sup>24</sup> The third scenario also assumes that Cuban society remains inert, largely acquiescing to the restrictions imposed by the ruling elite.

The fourth and final scenario represents the democratic option. This scenario assumes the development (if not necessarily the ascendance) of a sizeable “reformist” sector within the regime that would be willing to negotiate a new balance of power with the political opposition and the representatives of mass social movements and independent civil society. Though difficult to imagine under present circumstances, the probability of this last scenario will increase once the post-Castro era definitively arrives. In the absence of the Castro brothers, internecine conflicts within the ruling coalition are far more likely. Fissiparous tendencies within the military may also emerge, with more professional officers distancing themselves from their more “political” or “entrepreneurial” counterparts. A more organized and emboldened civil society, advancing from narrower economic and social demands toward more explicitly political claims, would provide a social base for mobilization and protest.

Just seven years ago, in May 2002, the Republic of Cuba celebrated



its centennial. In its brief history, Cuba has experienced truncated sovereignty, external dependency, corrupt and venal governments, and its fair share of dictatorships. Only fleetingly, between 1940 and 1952, did Cuba enjoy democracy. Adding to its troubles, over the past fifty years Cuba has become a deeply fractured nation.

This history weighs heavily on the present. It is a legacy that can be overcome only if Cubans rebuild their sense of community, recover their voice, learn to tolerate difference and, in the process, reclaim their citizenship. The process of national reconstruction and restoration will not be easy. External actors (including Cubans living outside the island) can surely contribute to this effort, but primary and ultimate responsibility for success in this undertaking lies in the hands of Cubans within Cuba. It is on their shoulders that a democratic future rests.

## NOTES

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1. Julia Sweig, “Fidel’s Final Victory,” *Foreign Affairs* 86 (January–February 2007): 86–104.

2. Javier Corrales, “The Gatekeeper State: Limited Economic Reforms and Regime Survival in Cuba, 1989–2002,” *Latin American Research Review* 39 (June 2004): 35–65.

3. Josep M. Colomer, “Watching Neighbors: The Cuban Model of Social Control,” *Cuban Studies* 31 (2000): 118–38.

4. Eusebio Mujal-León and Joshua Busby, “Much Ado about Something? Regime Change in Cuba,” *Problems of Post-Communism*, November–December 2001, 6–18.

5. Juan J. Linz, “An Authoritarian Regime: Spain,” in Erik Allardt and Yrjö Littunen, eds., *Cleavages, Ideologies and Party Systems: Contributions to Comparative Political Sociology* (Helsinki: Westermarck Society, 1964), 291–341.

6. Robert Weller, “Responsive Authoritarianism,” in Bruce Gilley and Larry Diamond, eds., *Political Change in China: Comparisons with Taiwan* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2008), 117–33.

7. Brian Latell, *After Fidel: The Inside Story of Castro’s Regime and Cuba’s Next Leader* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

8. See [www.granma.cubaweb.cu/2008/02/24/nacional/artic36.html](http://www.granma.cubaweb.cu/2008/02/24/nacional/artic36.html).

9. See [www.granma.cubaweb.cu/2008/02/24/nacional/artic36.html](http://www.granma.cubaweb.cu/2008/02/24/nacional/artic36.html).

10. See <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=862625216710039760>. There was speculation that Alarcón had been “set up” by rivals in the leadership.

11. See his address to the March 1996 Central Committee Plenum in *Granma*, 27 March 1996. Julio Carranza Valdés (one of the academics who participated in the debates of the



early 1990s and was dismissed from his position at the Centro de Estudios sobre América) returned to the charge recently, affirming that “historic socialism” had failed because it had not understood the importance of democratic values and intellectual freedom. “El Compromiso de la ciencia y la ciencia del compromiso,” *Temas*, January–March 2008, 143–54.

12. See [www.cubasocialista.cu/texto/0098770raul.html](http://www.cubasocialista.cu/texto/0098770raul.html).

13. See [www.granma.cu/espanol/2008/junio/sabado21/laverdad.html](http://www.granma.cu/espanol/2008/junio/sabado21/laverdad.html). In his *reflexión* of 20 September 2008, Fidel Castro took a swipe at those (perhaps within the military) who use “capitalist methods in their quest for revenues that permit them to administer resources and pretend to be efficient.”

14. See [www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/2005/ing/171105i.html](http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/2005/ing/171105i.html).

15. The manifesto is available in Spanish at [www.kaosenlared.net/noticia/cuba-necesita-socialismo-participativo-democratico-propuestas-programa](http://www.kaosenlared.net/noticia/cuba-necesita-socialismo-participativo-democratico-propuestas-programa).

16. Enrique Baloyra, “Socialist Transitions and Prospects for Change in Cuba,” in Enrique Baloyra and James Morris, eds., *Conflict and Change in Cuba* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 38.

17. Margaret Crahan and Ariel Armony, “Does Civil Society Exist in Cuba?” Available at <http://cubainfo.fiu.edu/Documents/CrahanDoesCivilSocietyExistInCuba.pdf>.

18. See the interview with Jaime Cardinal Ortega in *Temas*, January–March 2008, 125. The retirements of Archbishop Pedro Meurice Estiu and Bishop José Siro from the dioceses of Santiago de Cuba and Pinar del Rio, respectively, inclined the balance toward the more “accommodationist” wing of the Catholic hierarchy.

19. For an excellent account, see Xavier Utset, “The Cuban Democracy Movement: An Analytical Overview,” 16 June 2008. Available at <http://cubainfo.fiu.edu/documents/Utset%20Cuban%20Democracy%20Movement%20June%202008.pdf>.

20. See <http://cubacatolica.blogcindario.com/2007/05/00170-la-cuba-que-sueno-entrevista-a-dagoberto-valdes-fundador-y-exdirector-de-vitral.html>.

21. Gallup’s Costa Rican affiliate, the Consultoria Interdisciplinaria en Desarrollo (CID), conducted the poll. See [www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/brlatinamericara/300.php](http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/brlatinamericara/300.php).

22. See [www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=383&report=69](http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=383&report=69).

23. See Terry Lynn Karl, *The Paradox of Plenty: Oil Booms and Petro-States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).