

Perception and the Costs of Waiting

Transition in Cuba

John-Michael McColl

Life in Cuba is about waiting. Waiting for buses, waiting in line at banks, waiting for food. I spent most of my time in Cuba waiting for something. Today, Cubans continue to wait for just about everything, including news of the ailing Fidel Castro. The rest of the world, particularly the exile community in Miami, scrutinizes every image of the aging leader, trying to determine if he is more or less frail and scraping for any information that will give them some indication of how much longer it will be until Castro is confined to the history books. Yet, the truth is that *El Commandante* shuffled off his mortal coil decades ago, when he ceased existing as a man and became an icon. For many, Castro is Cuban communism, pure and simple. They imagine that when he dies, his *revolución* will follow him into oblivion. Some picture a situation similar to the fall of the Berlin Wall, when communism seemingly collapsed overnight. They expect Cubans from Miami and Havana to rush across the water straight into each other's arms. On 24 October, President Bush laid out his plans for the upcoming "transition" in Cuba. Anticipating the day the "Cubans [will] rise up to demand their liberty," President Bush announced the creation of a multi-billion dollar "Freedom Fund" which promises Cubans access to grants, loans, and debt relief to rebuild their country as soon as they oust the undemocratic

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regime.¹ To the U.S. president and everyone else who is planning for this big day, I have a piece of advice: don't hold your breath.

Cuban Socialism: Myth versus Reality.

Cuba is a place that captures people's imaginations and ignites their passions. The mythologizing began back with Christopher Columbus, who famously declared that it was "the most beautiful land that human eyes have ever seen." Today leftists like Ignacio Ramonet, editor of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, continue to believe that Cuba is a Latin American oasis of equality, an island taking a brave stand against U.S. hegemony. Journalists on the other side of the political spectrum, for example, Carlos Montaner, stubbornly insist on treating Cubans as a people held hostage by a ruthless and oppressive regime.² My personal experiences revealed that both camps are right *and* wrong.

When I arrived in Cuba, I was more sympathetic to the island's socialist experiment. When I left, I was more critical of it. Mostly though, I gained an appreciation for its complexity. People see what they want to see, and what I wanted to know was how *Cubans* saw their country.

I went to Cuba thinking it would be my last chance to see a socialist experiment in action. Even when I arrived, my first impression was that the system had passed its "best-before date" a long time ago. The main reason people assume Cuban socialism is on the verge of collapse is because Soviet communism failed so miserably. To many, Cuba seems like a strange throwback from a different era, one that is stubbornly holding out against the widespread triumph of democracy and capitalism. But Cuban socialism is

very different from its Soviet kin; the main difference is that the Cuban variant is not a system maintained by force. Communism was brought to Eastern Europe by force of arms, and it was the secret police and direct military measures that sustained it. In contrast, despite what Cuban exiles say, Cuba is not a police state. In Havana, you may see young people from the countryside standing around in ill-fitting uniforms directing traffic and checking residency permits, but the people they stop are more likely to start an argument than cower in terror. I met Cubans who were frustrated, bored, fed-up, and even disgusted with the political situation in the country. Cubans are not a free people, but they are not a people who live in fear.

By arguing that repressive force does not maintain the regime, I do not mean to deny that repression exists. The regime can be quite vicious, and its most outspoken opponents are frequently rounded up and arrested when their criticisms become too loud. Nonetheless, Cuba's human rights record, though dismal, has actually improved from earlier years when the state was even less tolerant. Homosexuals were singled out for especially cruel and degrading treatment, a phenomenon that culminated in their exodus during the 1980 Mariel Boatlift. Without forgiving its inexcusable sins, we must admit that the Cuban regime has never put down a genuinely popular protest. There has never been a Tiananmen Square, a Prague Spring, or a Hungarian Uprising in Cuba. This is not because Cubans have not had the chance to organize opposition. Eastern Europeans faced the most sophisticated and repressive state apparatuses yet conceived, and they still organized resistance. Rather than facing Soviet tanks, Cuban dissi-

dents enjoy the full support of world's sole superpower. The fact that they have been unable to mobilize popular protests against the Castro regime testifies to the fact that the regime retains widespread acceptance. In part, this is because unlike Eastern Europeans, Cubans feel socialism is their system, not something thrust

ished neighborhoods in countries such as Venezuela, proud of their Olympic medals, and proud of their anti-imperialist foreign policy.

Not only do Cubans revel in their exceptionalism within Latin America, they also see socialism as being in their material self-interest. I remember a

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upon them by outsiders. An old woman once said to me, as we looked out on a crumbling city from the window of her once-grand apartment, "The worst thing about all this is that we've done it to ourselves."³

My professors in Cuba were erudite, eloquent, and critical on any topic except Cuba. When it came to discussing life on the island, they staunchly defended the party line. At the University of Havana, I found that you do not learn much by listening to what people say; you learn by listening to *how* they say it. Cubans believe, and not without reason, that before Castro came to power the island had not fully gained its independence. Indeed, Cuba's heavy economic dependence on the United States limited its sovereignty during its earlier experiment with democracy. In every class, we were told that Cuba's subjugation by colonial powers during most of its history was the direct and unavoidable consequence of capitalism, and that the failures of liberal democracy in Cuba proved that socialism was the only path to national dignity and independence. In Cuba, socialism is made synonymous with patriotism, and Cubans are very patriotic. They are proud to provide doctors to impover-

Jamaican athlete whom the Cubans had brought over on a scholarship. We had been waiting about an hour by the highway, just to watch our bus cruise by because it was full. At that point I made it perfectly clear how I felt about the Cuban public transportation system. My Jamaican friend smiled and replied, "Well, man, at least there *is* a transportation system."⁴ When Cubans look at their capitalist neighbors—Jamaica, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic—they can see that capitalism does not always work. Using a combination of health, economic, and educational indicators, the UN ranks Cuba 50th out of 177 countries in this year's Human Development Index, putting Cuba far ahead of the Dominican Republic (94th) and Jamaica (104th).⁵ People still look to Miami for the good life, but they remember that the free market did not bring the American dream to most Cubans. Instead, Habaneros worry that capitalism will bring them the poverty of Kingston and Port-au-Prince.

The importance of memory was impressed upon me from an old Afro-Cuban man whom I met on my way home from one of mass political rallies that form part of life in Havana. The march

had gone on for hours, and covered several kilometers, but the old man assured me, he would always come out for the revolution. "Before socialism" he told me, "the black people of Cuba were treated like dogs."⁶ It was the revolution that taught him how to read, and how to "live with dignity." While racist attitudes still exist in Cuba, in 1990 Cuba's population of 11 million people included more than 13,000 black physicians. As a point of comparison, the United States, with a population of 300 million (and a black population four times as large as Cuba's), counted just over 20,000 black doctors in the same year.⁷ Afro-Cubans feel that the revolution has vastly improved their position in Cuban society, but more importantly, they feel the return of capitalism threatens all that.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Cuban economy contracted by about 35 percent, forcing the socialist regime to permit a partial economic liberalization that allowed remittances from Cuban exiles in Miami. In the 1990 census, 85 percent of Cuban-Americans listed themselves as white; their remittances flowed disproportionately to white Cubans back on the island.⁸ The result was a widening of the economic gap between white and black Cubans—that had narrowed under socialism. The racial division between those who benefited from economic liberalization, and those who did not, was not lost on the Afro-Cubans I met.

Income inequality along racial lines is just one concern Cubans have about a return to capitalism. Everyone in Cuba, from the urban poor to rural farmers, has become accustomed to free education, free and universal health care, and a guaranteed minimum standard of living. While the minimum standard of liv-

ing is not high, and Cuba's schools and hospitals have seen better days, Cubans remind themselves that everyone else is waiting in the same line, and that at the end of the day, no one is going to starve. In fact, Cubans have become so proud of their meager, yet reliable, social safety net that it is usually the first thing they cite in defense of their revolution. I will never forget what I asked a student I met at the university, "Don't you think it is crazy that you can't even publish an independent student newspaper?" He replied, "Of course, but overall, wouldn't you rather have access to free health care?"⁹ In the eyes of the Cubans, capitalism, which promises the freedom of choice, cannot compare with socialism, which guarantees access to free health care and education. A false dichotomy between these rights is reinforced by the conditions that prevail in neighboring capitalist countries, where government spending has been strictly limited by the conditions attached to the IMF loans.

Another factor that allows Castro to frame the debate over democracy in his own terms is the economic embargo imposed on Cuba by the United States. Castro blames virtually all the dysfunctions of the socialist economy on the U.S. embargo, and a surprising number of Cubans actually believe him. Repressive, sometimes illogical, policies are defended as necessary responses to American aggression. Everything from the silencing of dissidents to a law forbidding Cubans from forming friendships with foreigners is justified as an unfortunate but necessary evil in the struggle for national independence. Today, political freedom is presented to Cubans as a choice between being an American colony under capitalism, or a free and independent nation under socialism.

Transition but no Transformation. Although socialism seems anachronistic to readers in the United States, the discrediting of neoliberalism and the rise of new leftist leaders like Hugo Chávez leads Cubans to believe that the tide of history is with the revolution, not against it. This is not to say that Cubans are blindly devoted to socialism and that its legitimacy will endure indefinitely. Cuban socialism will undoubtedly-

not overthrow Raúl Castro, but it will make it more difficult for him to justify the failings of his own regime and to portray his opponents as threats to national sovereignty. Allowing Americans to visit and do business on the island will not only show Cubans all they have to gain by opening their economy, but will give them a chance to see face-to-face that Americans and their democracy are not as corrupt as they are portrayed. The real

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ly change with the passing of Fidel; Raúl Castro has already indicated that he will take a more pragmatic and less ideological stance. In the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse, he was a crucial advocate for economic liberalization and reform.¹⁰ Last December he declared himself "willing to resolve at the negotiating table the long-standing dispute between the United States and Cuba."¹¹ While many Cubans may not be as inspired by Raúl as they are by his brother, Raúl has clearly consolidated control and the regime is still seen as a legitimate expression of the popular will. The "transition" has already happened, and Raúl Castro is the country's new leader. However, unfortunately for Cuba, he shows no signs of being much of a democrat, or of allowing free and open elections.

In the final analysis, it is clear that Cuba is changing, but not in the way that President Bush and other wishful thinkers envisioned and wanted the transition to happen. By ending the failed embargo of Cuba, the United States may

force behind the counterproductive embargo, the once-invincible Cuban-American Lobby, has been on the decline since their radicalism was revealed by the Elián González saga.¹² Polls show that even their base in Miami is becoming increasingly moderate in their views on Cuba.¹³ U.S. policymakers must take advantage of this political opening to break with a forty-seven-year-old failed policy and end the isolation of the Cuban people.

Conclusion. While dramatic news coverage reminds us that many Cubans are willing to risk everything to seek greener pastures in Miami, it is easy to forget that many more choose to stay, and that they are the ones who will ultimately decide the island's future. It is clear that there will come a day when these Cubans will demand an opening of their politics and their economy. When and how this happens will, and should, depend on a domestic political process within Cuba. For its part, the United States can best

advance the prospects of Cuban democracy by demonstrating that democracy and free markets can actually deliver on their promises of increased prosperity and a more inclusive citizenship for the people of Latin America. With such monumental challenges facing Cuba and the region, it should be clear that nothing will be achieved through a passive approach, sitting and anticipating the death of Fidel Castro. The death of the old *Commandante* will not ignite a popular uprising against his brother, nor will it open the way for American-led democ-

ratization. The United States must attempt to end the half-century stalemate and set Cuba-U.S. relations on a new track now, before Castro's death. By embarking on a new policy of constructive engagement with Cuba, the United States can break the old dynamic that has allowed the Castro family to remain in power for this long. The specifics of such a policy invite further debate, but it is obvious that making plans and waiting for Castro to die is no help to the people of Cuba. What Cubans clearly do not need is more waiting.

NOTES

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4 Interview by author, Cojimar, Cuba, March 2006.

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