

# Rethinking the Cuban Regime: Implications for Transition Paths and Comparative Cases

by Aimel Rios Wong

The purpose of this study is to determine the typology of the Cuban regime, examine the implications for possible transition scenarios and conduct a comparative analysis with similar cases that may provide insightful hints for a transition. To do so, it will examine the existing literature on regime types with an emphasis on that of non-democratic system, in addition to the different phases of the Cuban regime using Linz and Stepan's perspective of regime components as ideology, leadership, mobilization, and pluralism. This study will take a structural-functional approach that will enable to examine how the defining elements performed in the different phases. Analysis of the regime phases will include a discussion on the different interpretations scholars have developed to classify each regime period.

Only by adequately understanding the contemporary nature of the Cuban regime, is it possible to illustrate possible transition scenarios in Cuba. Regime type is fundamental to understanding the perspectives of its potential evolution to a different regime and more importantly, to a democracy. Thus, a characterization of the current stage of the Cuban regime will determine the relevant actors within it and outside of it, its main strengths and weaknesses, and the necessary transformations that distance it from a democratic system.

In addition to determining regime typology, this paper will comparatively study the internal and external conditions that created a potential for transition in regimes that in some way experienced similar conditions to those of contemporary Cuba, such as those of the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe, the Chinese, and various Latin American countries.

## LITERATURE REVIEW ON REGIME-TYOLOGY

The literature on regime-types and democratization is exhaustive and varied. For many years, scholars of the field used a tripartite model of regime types, consisting of democratic, authoritarian, and totalitarian regimes. Linz and Stepan, however, proposed a five ideal-type model of democratic, authoritarian, sultanistic, totalitarian,

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and post-totalitarian regimes that reflected the post-World War II era more adequately. The nature of each regime type may be defined by examining four elements: leadership, ideology, mobilization, and pluralism. It is worth mentioning that regime types are mostly based in principles, and that actual regimes do not fully attain all the characteristics of a single model. In fact, as explained below, most are hybrid regimes often presenting a complex set of characteristics from more than one regime-type that complicates their classification and leads to their sub-categorization under the ideal models of regime types. Consequently, the implications for possible transition paths must take into consideration the distinctive features and possibly hybrid components of the regime.

According to Linz and Stepan, democracies reinforce extensive economical, societal, and organizational pluralist autonomy consistent with “societal corporatism.” They profess an extensive intellectual commitment to citizenship, respect citizens’ individual rights, and the rule of law. Democracies place high value on low regime mobilization and high citizen participation via autonomously generated organization of civil society and competing political parties guaranteed by a system of law. Finally, they exercise free, periodic elections within constitutional limits and the rule of law.<sup>1</sup>

There are, however, several hybrid models of democratic regimes. Many countries settle for illiberal versions of democracy, in which the system does not fully seek to protect the rule of law, separation of powers, and basic liberties of speech, assembly, religion, and property.<sup>2</sup> They may also become delegative democracies, in which through clean, but highly emotional elections a majority forms and empowers a leader that typically present itself as above political parties and organized interests in a system of very weak or nonexistent horizontal accountability.<sup>3</sup> In addition, there may be hybrid regimes that combine democratic and authoritarian elements. These regimes are deliberately *pseudodemocratic*, where formally democratic political institutions, such as multiparty electoral competition, mask the reality of authoritarian domination.<sup>4</sup>

The literature on non-democratic regimes has long included discussions on the nature of authoritarian regimes. Linz and Stepan argue that authoritarianism possesses limited and irresponsible political pluralism, and often quite extensive social and economic pluralism. Authoritarian regimes do not possess an elaborate and guiding ideology, and only exercise political mobilization at some point in their development. Its leaders exercise power within formally ill-defined but actually quite predictable norms.<sup>5</sup>

There may be subtypes of this model, such as bureaucratic-authoritarianism. This typology of regime has as its principal social base the upper bourgeoisie and is directed by specialists in technology and coercion. Moreover, it involves the political and economic exclusion of the popular sectors, suppresses basic rights of citizenship

for much of the population, and increases transnationalization of the productive structure and the depolitization of social issues.<sup>6</sup>

Sultanistic regimes can be characterized by the following words: personal, corrupt, destructive, and chaotic. These regimes, in which the ruler operates primarily based on personal discretion, were identified as a distinct typology after multiple existences of such rule.<sup>7</sup> In sultanistic regimes, economic and social pluralism is subject to unpredictable and despotic intervention from the sultan's despotic power. This regime type has no guiding ideology, but rather an extreme glorification of the ruler and a highly arbitrary manipulation of symbols. It involves occasional, low and ceremonial mobilization led by coercive and clientelist methods without permanent organization. Sultanistic leaders are highly personalistic and arbitrary. They possess strong dynastic tendencies and its staff's position derives from their purely personal submission to the ruler.<sup>8</sup> Sultanistic regimes are different from authoritarian regimes and other forms of non-democratic rule in the rulers' overall conception of politics, the structure of power, and the relation to the social structure, the economy, and the subjects of the sultanistic rule.

Another type of non-democratic regime is totalitarianism. Totalitarian regimes have an "exclusive, autonomous, and more or less intellectually elaborate ideology with which the ruling group or leader, and the party serving the leaders, identify and which they use as a basis for policies or manipulate to legitimize them."<sup>9</sup> The guiding ideology goes beyond a particular program or definition of the boundaries of legitimate political action to provide a reachable utopia. Totalitarian systems encourage, demand, reward, and channel citizen mobilization for political and collective tasks through a vast network of regime-created, party-led obligatory organizations for political and collective mobilization that belittles private life.

Totalitarian leaders, rarely charismatic, rule with undefined limits and great unpredictability and rise to power from success and commitment in the party. They concentrate vast amounts of power and are object of a cult of personality. It is worth mentioning that even though such a leader is highly probable in a totalitarian system, his existence is not necessary for regime stability. As Linz points out, succession crisis that were thought to threaten the stability and survival of a totalitarian regime "have not led to their downfall or breakdown even when they have been very critical for them."<sup>10</sup> Thus, changes in the relationship between leadership, ideology, and mobilization are the elements likely to offer the best clue for the construction of the typology of totalitarian regimes, as well as for their consolidation, stability, change, and possibly even their breakdown.

Finally, Linz and Stepan conceptualized post-totalitarianism as a regime type that requires the pre-existence of a totalitarian state. Post-totalitarianism may emerge and evolve as the result of three distinct but interconnected processes. Firstly, they come about as a result of deliberate policies of the rulers to soften or reform the totalitarian system (detotalitarianism by choice). Secondly, they emerge from the internal erosion of the structures of the totalitarian regime and of the cadres' ideological belief in the system (detotalitarianism by decay). Thirdly, they manifest

through the creation of social, cultural, and even economic spaces that resist or escape totalitarian control (detotalitarianism by societal conquest).<sup>11</sup>

In post-totalitarian regimes, although there is almost no political pluralism because the party still monopolizes power, a “second economy” may exist with the overwhelming presence of the state. Post-totalitarian regimes experience a higher degree of social pluralism that is simultaneously a source of regime vulnerability and a dynamic source of strength for the growing democratic opposition. Ideology exists as part of social reality, but decision-making is based on pragmatic consensus rather than on ideology. Post-totalitarian regimes, in contrast to totalitarian ones, exhibit a decrease in the interest of mobilization, which conduces to boredom, withdrawal, and ultimately privatization of the population. Finally, while totalitarian leaders are often charismatic, rule with undefined limits and great unpredictability, and rise to power from success and commitment in the party, post-totalitarian leaders are rarely charismatic, emphasize personal security and may rise to power from the state apparatus rather than solely from the party organization.<sup>12</sup>

## THE HISTORICAL ERA OF THE CUBAN REGIME

The historical process in which the Cuban nation embarked in 1959 has been anything but monolithic. In fact, it is difficult to imagine a political regime whose internal dynamics have remained static and managed to survive for so long. The forthcoming analysis will discuss the various changes experienced by the Cuban regime through its more than fifty years of existence.

### *The Radical Experiment (1959-1970):*

Charismatic authority, vanguard politics, the closing of pluralism, and the emergence of the politics of mass mobilization characterized the first phase in the historical era of the regime. Those elements served the revolutionary government's attempt at creating a *sui generis* model of socialism in Cuba, and at record speed achieve economic development and industrialization.

Shortly after the triumph of the Revolution on January 1, 1959, Cuban politics began to acquire the contours of a one-party system with a nationalist character. The consolidation of this nationalist revolution led Cuba to socialism, an alliance with the Soviet Union and permanent hostility towards the United States. By 1961, the revolution had radicalized and consolidated around the charismatic figure of Fidel Castro. For the sake of survival as a nation, unity behind the maximum leader would be iron handedly enforced from then on, as the dynamics of Fidel-motherland-revolution became the basis for governance and legitimacy.<sup>13</sup>

Accordingly, during the 1960s revolutionary Cuba embarked in a period of “radical experiment” of national economic development and the transformation of society under socialism. Cuba was not to follow the traditional frameworks of previous social revolutions, Fidel Castro stated; it would create a *sui generis* socialism, based on the socialization of all means of production, rapid industrialization, and the creation of a new man that would selflessly dedicate to tasks that the revolution

would demand of him.

The new socialist model redefined the concept of pluralism. All political organizations but those that were part of the government were banned, and in 1965, its leadership created the Cuban Communist Party as the only legally recognized political party. The nationalization of all foreign and Cuban-owned businesses signaled a disappearance of private economic activity in the hands of the state. The press, sports, and other expressions of cultural life also acquired a “revolutionary” meaning.<sup>14</sup>

The remaking of society as a radical experiment brought in another characteristic that dominated the Cuban regime since its initial years: popular mobilization. Mobilizing a large part of the population was necessary to link revolutionary transformation, elite control, and political mobilization. The regime established a number of mass organizations to protect the government from foreign and counterrevolutionary threats and attacks, provide a means for the state to influence, shape, and control the society, and to mobilize the population for any purpose. These included the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR) and the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), and the newly transformed Confederation of Cuban Workers (CTC).<sup>15</sup>

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At the expense of vigilance, the mass mobilization system sacrificed organizational autonomy and adaptability and became an extension of the political style of Fidel Castro. The top leadership of the mass organizations served at Fidel Castro’s discretion; he determined the concerns of the organizations more than by the people themselves.<sup>16</sup> In fact, charismatic authority and popular mobilization crystallized the politics of the new Cuba.<sup>17</sup> Unity for the sake of defending national sovereignty required unconditional support to Fidel Castro, who required the mobilization of the Cuban people in defending the nation and developing the economy. Under this political dynamic, dissent was intolerable, and equitable with treason.

Developing the economy was the main priority of the revolution. Economic success was the only avenue for the radical experiment. Fidel Castro and other revolutionary leaders set an unprecedented goal for the Cuban economy: producing 10 million metric tons of sugar during the 1970 sugar harvest. To succeed, workers from all sectors and occupations were to contribute to achieving the sugar production goal. In spite of such efforts, Cuban workers did not respond as desired to moral incentives and appeals to work for the collective good of society. They covertly sabotaged production through absenteeism, foot-dragging, and even breaking machinery to halt production entirely. Economic production fell below the

set targets during 1967-1970. Cuba did not achieve its 10 million tons of sugar and the effort destroyed the rest of its economy.<sup>18</sup>

Economic failure, however, did not just occur for ideological reasons. Fidel Castro clearly overestimated his ability to remake society; learning at a very high cost the limits of his charisma.<sup>19</sup> Cuba had to abandon its aspiration of establishing a sui generis socialism and was forced to look to the institutionalized systems of Eastern Europe and the USSR for models.

*The Institutionalization Phase (1970-1985):*

The second phase of the Cuban regime was characterized by an effort to institutionalize Fidel Castro's charisma in the dynamics of the organizations of the Revolution, such as the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) and the mass mobilization organizations.

During the 1970s, the government focused on economic recovery and on seeking more technical assistance from the USSR and Eastern European socialist countries. From the early 1970s until the mid-1980s, the revolutionary leadership implemented certain market oriented reforms and mechanisms within state enterprises, such as employee bonuses, the authorization of private farmers markets, credit lines, and the opportunity to open bank accounts and accumulate interest rates, to enhance productivity. In effect, the regime sought to abandon the inspired principles of increasing working production through moral incentives and competition among workers and economic sectors in Cuba and embraced the use of material incentives based on a market economy as employed by Eastern bloc countries.

In 1975, the regime established a communist constitution that declared Cuba an atheist state and the PCC as the vanguard party of society. Moreover, it called for a National Assembly of the People's Power whose representatives would in turn elect members to the Council of States and Ministers. Once established, the National Assembly of the People's Power unanimously elected Fidel Castro as the President of the Council of State and Minister, and his brother Raul as its First Vice-President. As a result, by the late 1970s, Fidel Castro had delegated considerable power to about eighteen members of the Council of State and Ministers, thus moving the government away from the absolute predominance of a single individual toward a more oligarchic rule.<sup>20</sup>

The chief claim to legitimate rule in Cuba, though, derived not from elections but from the quality of the rulers and the way they ruled in the image of their

maximum leader. The pervasive domination of charismatic versus institutionalized governance would prove detrimental in making the PCC, or any other state institution or official, the most relevant actor within the regime, as will be demonstrated.

Pluralism continued to be bound to exist within the Revolution. As in the radical experiment, political autonomy continued to be rare, and political competition remained very limited, since opposition to prevailing policies and ideology was impossible. All political mobilizations were conducted by and for organizations loyal to the regime because there was no legal organized opposition allowed.<sup>21</sup>

By the mid-1980s, the effects of the market-oriented reforms introduced in the early 1970s had alarmed the top revolutionary leaders, including Fidel Castro. In 1986, he publicly denounced the proliferation of corruption and the rise of profiteers among rank-and-file workers, managers, and even among high-level government officials. Castro denounced a lack of proletariat conscience among workers, and emphasized the need to increase ideological education to workers, new party cadres, and intermediary officials of mass mobilization organizations. The relative economic liberalization and decentralization that occurred during the institutionalization process ran counter to the precepts of the revolution. Thus, Fidel Castro sanctioned a new program of “moral renewal” and economic restructuring: a rectification process based on the return to correct proletariat conscience.

#### *The Rectification Phase (1986-1990):*

The rectification process curbed the market-oriented reforms that were implemented during the institutionalization phase and reaffirmed the central role of the PCC. It emphasized the importance of correct proletariat conscience and mass mobilization as levers to achieve savings and improve productivity. In addition, it was characterized by the preeminence of Fidel Castro’s charismatic leadership and a reversal to the practices of the radical experiment.

Ideologically speaking, the rectification process evoked the radical experiment of the 1960s.<sup>22</sup> Despite its rhetoric, though, the government aggressively pursued Western economic ties and initiated new forms of economic capitalist ownership, such as signing joint venture agreements with Western companies and increasing the number of *sociedades anónimas*, state agencies that operated with semi-autonomy from day-to-day budgetary constraints at home and abroad, for profit and hard currency. As Eckstein points out, the process of rectification in actuality deviated from and even contradicted its ideological rhetoric. On one hand, the government resurrected past moral principles; on the other, it implemented certain reforms and allowed market-oriented practices that undermined revolutionary gains. Government policies aimed at obtaining hard currency and address fiscal and political concerns. Ideology was not the driving force of the rectification process.<sup>23</sup>

Although the PCC had acquired the basic profile of the old communist parties of Eastern Europe and USSR by the mid-1980s, it did not achieve the institutionalization necessary to steer politics in a different direction. Fidel Castro



remained at the center of Cuban politics and the party had not been able to institutionalize his charisma. The fact that the rectification process was an initiative of Fidel Castro and not of the PCC was testimony to its institutional weakness. The PCC still depended on Fidel Castro and thus could not challenge his authority or the logic of the process that he sought to bring about.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, mass mobilization organizations aptly responded to Fidel's call to rectify negative tendencies within the Revolution.

As in previous phases, the rectification process failed to acknowledge pluralism outside the revolution. The impossibility to challenge the monopolistic authority of the party and leadership of Fidel Castro led workers, party cadres, and even high-level government officials to use indirect methods of resistance and protest, including foot-dragging, work absenteeism, corruption, and a wide range of other illicit activities as modes of channeling their discontent. The need for elite allegiance resulted in the tolerance of illicit behavior among high-ranking officials. Maintaining elite unity behind the maximum leader was necessary at all costs; any attempt against it was severely punished.

In addition to the aforementioned problems, the international scenario became fully unfavorable to the Cuban regime. The fall of communism in Eastern Europe and the USSR altered the balance of power against the Cuban revolution, and delivered such a severe political and economic blow that the regime was forced to shift its priorities and focus on its political survival like never before.

## **FITTING THE HISTORICAL ERA IN REGIME TYPOLOGY**

Cuban scholars divert when in determining the typology of the Cuban regime during its historical phases. Perez-Stable contends that during the institutionalization and rectification periods the regime fit the model of mobilizational authoritarianism, concluding that the process of institutionalization "never reached an irreversible momentum."<sup>25</sup>

In turn, Mesa Lago states that the Cuban regime had become totalitarian after 1961 and did not experience any qualitative changes of sufficient magnitude during the subsequent years to classify it as a different regime type.<sup>26</sup> Dominguez argues that the radical experiment during the 1960s made Cuba a totalitarian regime that consolidated its institutions in the 1970s and 1980s, becoming a bureaucratic socialist system.<sup>27</sup>

In contrast, Mujal-Leon and Busby argue that during the institutionalization period the Cuban regime had reached a deeply intertwined relation with the Soviet Union; and, as it assumed its part in the socialist division of labor, it began to experience a transition towards early post-totalitarianism. However, the authors believe that Fidel Castro's foundational and personalistic leadership, the continued vitality of regime ideology, and institutional weakness truncated such transition.<sup>28</sup>

I contend Mujal-Leon and Busby's interpretation precisely for the very factors that they account for the truncation of a post-totalitarian transformation. The preeminence of a vital and guiding ideology, the charismatic leadership of Fidel



Castro, a lack of social and economic pluralism, and continued reliance on high levels of mass mobilization do not substantiate any evidence to believe that a transition to post-totalitarianism was underway. Moreover, the market-oriented reforms that began in the 1970s took place within the boundaries of totalitarianism and were neither irrational nor inconsistent with the regime's ideology and its *sui generis* socialism.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the Cuban regime was totalitarian during its historical phase and the changes that took place occurred within the same regime type. On the other hand, the transformations that occurred in the 1990s altered state-society dynamics so dramatically, that they are worth analyzing as to advance our discussion on the present nature of the regime and the prospects for transition paths.

## THE CONTEMPORARY ERA OF THE CUBAN REGIME

In 1990, the crisis created by the collapse of the Soviet Union led Fidel Castro to declare a "Special Period in Times of Peace," in which Cubans were called to make unprecedented sacrifices to "save the revolution." This event marks the beginning of what I refer to as the contemporary era of the regime, which encompasses the present. The first phase of the contemporary era was the Special Period. It is important to note that the year chosen as the end of the Special Period reflects the analytical purposes of this paper rather than the actual date in which the profound political, economic, and social crisis ended.

### *The Special Period (1991-2006)*

As a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba lost \$4 billion in annual subsidies or the equivalent of nearly 30 percent of its GDP. From 1989 to 1993, Cuba's real GDP dropped by nearly 35 percent. Open unemployment and underemployment accounted for only 40 percent of the economically active population in 1994, even as the official unemployment statistics showed unemployment at less than 10 percent.<sup>30</sup> Fuel scarcity resulted in six to eight hours of daily blackouts, transportation problems, and factory stoppages. As a result, in 1994, hundreds of Cubans staged a spontaneous demonstration in Havana's boardwalk, the largest defiance to the regime in thirty years. Although a Tiananmen Square scenario did not occur, Cubans sent a clear message of discontent to the regime.<sup>31</sup>

In August 1993, Fidel Castro responded by announcing a package of measures

that included legalizing the possession and use of dollars, including remittances, authorizing certain types of self-employment, the conversion of state farms into cooperatives, allowing greater foreign investment, encouraging joint ventures, and establishing free trade zones.<sup>32</sup> The FAR received more control over the economy, extending its role from agricultural production to the management of joint ventures with foreign investors in the profitable tourism sector.

While these changes made the Cuban regime resemble an authoritarian system, its continued reliance on a guiding ideology and mass mobilization and the pervasive lack of pluralism strongly refute such characterization. Mujal Leon and Busby's categorization of the regime as charismatic post-totalitarian more aptly describes the regime's evolution in the realms of leadership, mobilization, ideology, and pluralism.

Under this unique version of post-totalitarianism, Fidel Castro, as the charismatic founder of the regime, retained broad power and influence. No one

within the elite questioned either his role or, ultimately, his decisions, including regime reformers. Fidel Castro continued to exercise a military-like form of authority over the PCC, the FAR, and the mass mobilization organizations, which he used to mobilize the Cuban population and to transmit ideological directives.<sup>33</sup> Even though Castro tried to keep ideological deviation within narrow bands, signs of erosion became visible within Cuban society. To survive in contemporary Cuba Cubans had to constantly break the law and its ideological underpinnings. As the gap between socialist promise and performance widened, the

regime lost more of its credibility and legitimacy.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, the sustained commitment of Fidel Castro and his inner circle of loyalists to the utopian vision remained far greater than one would expect in a post-totalitarian regime.

The Special Period partially conformed to a decline in the willingness and capacity of the regime to mobilize the population. Cubans, especially the younger generation, became increasingly apolitical, and more concerned with finding food and earning a living by any means than with ideological principles or mobilization.<sup>35</sup> Efforts to mobilize the population declined between 1993 and 1996, which reflected an adjustment to the economic crisis and the decision of the regime to focus on the stabilization of the economic situation.

In 2000, the regime saw the Elian Gonzalez case as an opportunity to renew its mobilizational efforts, especially among the younger generation that had come to political maturity during the Special Period. Thousands of Cubans marched weekly as Fidel Castro declared the Elian saga a "battle of ideas." The mobilization exercises suggested that Castro still had the endurance and personal capacity to use the state apparatus mobilize the population.<sup>36</sup>

Pluralism remained incipient and very vulnerable during this phase, which is concordant with the characteristics of an early post-totalitarian regime. Economic

pluralism substantially expanded since the early 1990s in comparison to previous regime phases. Between 1989 and 1999, the self-employment sector increased from 5 to almost 25 percent of the work force. These measures opened space for new economic actors and correspond to the expected changes of a transition to post-totalitarianism in which economic pluralism precedes political pluralism. As Leon points out, “self employment in particular exemplified the influence of civil society over the state, in which the micro-systems of personal relations began to affect the implementation of public policies and, given the context of the economic crisis, also forced the state to modify its institutions. Indeed, the state allowed those who continue to benefit from its protection to obtain exceptionally high incomes-to be officially sanctioned profiteers.”<sup>37</sup>

The Special Period gave rise to what Fernandez calls a proto-civil society, that is, “the increasing visibility and number of small and not-so small groups voicing different interests and expressing diverse identities within and without the framework of the Party/State.”<sup>38</sup> The plethora of social, cultural, and even economic spaces and organizations that emerged and resisted or escaped state control indicate that in the charismatic post-totalitarian phase of the regime, detotalitarianization occurred by decay and societal conquest. The Catholic Church became the most important civil society organization in Cuba. The visit of Pope John Paul II in January 1998 revitalized the Church and allowed it to develop a stronger presence in Cuban society.<sup>39</sup>

Political pluralism remained nonexistent. The PCC continued to be the only legal party, and the regime alternated between outright repression and more subtle forms of intimidation against dissidents. In spite of this, independent trade unions, peasant organizations, press associations, and even political parties made an appearance in the 1990s. Undoubtedly, contemporary Cuban society began to exhibit signs of pluralism by societal conquest unimaginable in earlier phases of the Revolution.

During the Special Period, the regime the regime sought to rely like never before on Fidel Castro’s charismatic leadership and power. As his health visibly deteriorated, a post-Fidel regime became increasingly imminent, raising the expectation in and out of the island as to what would happen once Fidel Castro would not be the leader.

#### *The Raulista Phase (2006-Present):*

On July 2006, the Cuban regime entered its latest phase after the peaceful and well orchestrated transfer of powers from Fidel Castro to Raul Castro. Since then, the regime has experienced further detotalitarianization, which positions it to a more consolidated post-totalitarian model. More importantly, this is the first regime phase that does not exhibit a charismatic leadership in the daily management of state affairs. In turn, the current leadership seems more preoccupied in institutionalization, decentralization, and pragmatic decision-making rather than an ideology and mass mobilizations.

The change to a more managerial style of leadership brings the regime closer to

a classic model of post-totalitarianism. With the absence of charismatic leadership, Raul Castro has had to stress the need for strengthening the state's institutions and patterns of governance and improving economic production to legitimize his rule. In March 2009, as part of this cabinet reshuffling, Raul Castro changed nine cabinet positions, including key figures and long-time Fidel loyalists Foreign Affairs Minister Felipe Perez Roque and Executive Secretary of the Council of State and Ministers Carlos Lage. These changes revealed a move towards greater institutionalism and a change in the nature of the regime. Three of the new ministers previously were deputies of their respective ministries, which indicate that they were chosen on the basis of their career experiences and professional qualifications. According to Linz and Stepan, a sign of consolidated post-totalitarianism is the rise to leadership positions from the state apparatus rather than from the party by means of personal loyalties and ideological purity.

In 2008, Raul Castro sent an explicit sign that reflected the post-totalitarian turn of the regime by stating that "Socialism is equality of rights and opportunities, not of income. Equality is not egalitarianism," referring to his decision to eliminate salary caps and calculate salaries as a function of what is produced and the quality of services.<sup>40</sup> Since the new phase of the regime began, the official discourse, the recent leadership changes, and the absence of Fidel Castro from managing the everyday affairs of the state indicate have started to further erode the classic utopian ideology. They represent an incipient detotalitarianization by choice.

Since July 2006, the mobilizational element of the regime has decreased to its lowest levels since the triumph of the revolution. While mass mobilization organizations have continued their vigilance functions, the changes of the 1990s eroded their ability to serve as regime watchdogs. From this point on, mass mobilization has become symbolic at best. The government has organized mass rallies only to mark holidays and historic anniversaries of the revolutionary fight. As mobilization has declined since July 2006, the values of Cuban society have increasingly privatized, as it would occur in a post-totalitarian regime.

Pluralism has continued to be incipient but has expanded since July 2006, which is yet another sign of post-totalitarianism. Weeks after officially becoming President in February 2008, Raul Castro's government allowed Cubans to stay in hotels previously destined for tourists only, buy cell phones, computers, and other electronic equipment previously prohibited to ordinary citizens. The government lifted the cap in salaries, allowed workers to earn over time and hold more than one official job, and increased pensions to retirees. Moreover, it issued new licenses for private taxi drivers, which had been suspended since the late 1990s, and authorized people to build their own houses as a practical solution to the terrible housing conditions existing in the country, worsened by three hurricanes in August and September 2008.<sup>41</sup> Although the regime has not renounced to maintaining a central role in the economic sphere, it has began to open space for new economic actors, a characteristic of post-totalitarianism, in which economic pluralism precedes political pluralism.

Social pluralism remains fragile in the *Raulista* phase, although slowly moving towards greater detotalitarianization, at times by regime decay and at times by societal conquest. The regime has maintained the reins of power at the macro level but has continued to face increasing difficulty sustaining legitimacy and governability at the micro level. The Catholic Church has continued its efforts to maintain good relations with the government. More significantly, Raul Castro has offered conciliatory gestures to the Catholic Church and other religious groups, which in itself represents an acknowledgment of the importance these institutions have gained as civil actors. Political pluralism, as expected in a post-totalitarian system, remains nonexistent. The PCC is the only legal party, and the regime alternates between repression and more subtle forms of intimidation against dissidents, such short-term arrests and acts of repudiation.

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**THE REGIME HAS MAINTAINED THE REINS OF POWER AT THE MACRO LEVEL BUT HAS CONTINUED TO FACE INCREASING DIFFICULTY SUSTAINING LEGITIMACY AND GOVERNABILITY AT THE MICRO LEVEL.**

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In the charismatic post-totalitarian era of the regime, detotalitarianism occurred by decay and by societal conquest. As a result of the crisis, the structures of the totalitarian regime and the cadres' ideological belief in the system significantly eroded. Moreover, a plethora of social, cultural, and even economic spaces and organizations emerged that resisted or escaped totalitarian control. The regime did not undergo detotalitarianism by choice, as it was at all times unwilling to accept its decay.

Fidel Castro has not fully exited the political scene in Cuban politics, and through his writings, public appearances, and influence on his younger brother and his contemporary generation in the PCC and the FAR, thus causing a slowing down effect on the process of detotalitarianization by choice. Detotalitarianization by decay and by societal conquest also continue to unfold, and more importantly, they may occur at a faster rate and play a more decisive role once the fidelista faction, and possibly Raul Castro too, are completely out of the political scene. A generational change may trigger structural reforms by the younger PCC cadres and FAR officers, mainly economic, which could shift the regime to a mature post-totalitarian stage, in which all dimensions of post-totalitarianism would change except that politically the leading role of the official party would still be sacrosanct.

## **REGIME IMPLICATIONS FOR POSSIBLE TRANSITION PATHS**

The unique features of Cuban post-totalitarianism have profound implications for the transition paths available for Cuba. According to Linz and Stepan, the most likely regime transition in early post-totalitarianism is mass uprising which, if not repressed, could lead to regime collapse and an interim government. The collapse scenario would probably require both a sharp rupture within the regime elite and a breakdown in the regime's repressive ability.

This option, however, is not likely to occur in Cuba, at least while the Castros are alive and involved in managing the daily affairs of the state. In a regime that has successfully maintained unity and cohesiveness of the ruling elite; sharp cleavages

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**WITHOUT THE HISTORIC LEADERS OF THE REVOLUTION AT THE REALM OF POWER, THE MILITARY LEADERSHIP WOULD BE EVER MORE INTERESTED IN MAINTAINING LEGITIMACY AND POPULARITY AND THUS MAY NOT RESORT TO MASS REPRESSION OF THE POPULATION.**

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will be very unlikely to emerge in the short term. There will not be a rapid breakdown of the regime's repressive ability. As the experience of the Special Period demonstrated, social and economic crisis and an emigration crisis are not sufficient conditions for mass protests to emerge and cause a regime collapse.

In the post-Fidel and Raul Castro era, however, ruptures within the ruling elite are more likely to emerge, in which case spontaneous protests may take on a new significance. Without the historic leaders of the revolution at the realm of power, the military leadership would be ever more interested in maintaining legitimacy and popularity and thus may not resort to mass repression of the population. A post-totalitarian regime, confronted with a serious crisis, could collapse if the option of repression is unavailable.

A more likely scenario would lead the regime toward the consolidation of post-totalitarianism, which would then evolve toward the adoption of deeper and structural economic and institutional reforms that, in turn, could produce a transition to authoritarianism or democracy. Linz and Stepan argue that if transition occurs from an early post-totalitarian regime, the successor regime is likely to be authoritarian or controlled by leaders emerging out of the previous regime.<sup>42</sup> However, the regime is still in control of most economic, social, and political spaces and that civil society is weak and disorganized and thus far has been unable to convey an alternative project around which either ordinary Cubans or regime moderates could mobilize. Several actors within and outside the regime will play crucial roles in this transition scenario. Within the regime, the main actors will be the FAR and the PCC. Outside of it are the Catholic Church, the democratic opposition, and the exile community.<sup>43</sup>

The FAR is positioned to emerge as the most relevant player within the regime. In addition to exercising the monopoly over the means of coercion, military officers have long taken the position of a civic soldier, which involves their active participation in both civilian and military affairs. Since the 1990s, armed forces officials control the most profitable joint venture enterprises, which has enhanced their resources and their influence. Moreover, the FAR is the foundational institution in the sui generis nature of the Cuban regime. FAR officers have always been in the top ranks of the government-Raul Castro being the perfect case in point. FAR



members currently hold four of the ten vice-presidencies of the Council of State and Ministers, and nine of the twenty-three Politburo seats.<sup>44</sup>

Military control of the repressive and intelligence apparatus, the economy, and the government leaves the PCC as “the weakest link” of the two relevant actors within the regime. Unlike the FAR, the PCC did not make the Revolution. The PCC did not emerge as a united institution until 1965, and it never institutionalized and gained administrative and managerial expertise. In a more consolidated post-totalitarian phase of the regime, the PCC may find its legitimacy and influence further debilitated.

The importance of the PCC may be known as soon as its Sixth Congress takes place. Unfortunately, the event, which was set to occur in October 2009, was postponed until further notice. Although there have been indications of possible discrepancies and possibly factions within the party, it is likely that the debates at this long overdue gathering will focus on the pace and substance of economic reform, administrative decentralization, institutionalization, and demands for greater debate within socialism; all of which Raul Castro has called for since becoming president. More anticipated is that the party leadership will decide whether Fidel Castro will remain as Party First Secretary, the only position to which he did not resign. It is possible that in renewing its top leadership, the PCC will engage in redefining its role. However, this is an unlikely scenario as long as the PCC Politburo is controlled by the *históricos*, the orthodox and older generation in the party-state system. Without Fidel Castro’s authority, resourcefulness, and the *históricos* in control, cleavages between party and military leaders could prove to be among the most likely destabilizing forces in post-totalitarian Cuba.

Once such breaches develop, actors outside of the regime may have a greater role and space to play in Cuban politics. The Catholic Church will probably not take an overt political role, but its calls for national reconciliation and justice will undoubtedly place it as a crucial intermediary organization that will provide a bridge between regime reformers and an incipient political opposition.

The longer the regime remains within the boundaries of post-totalitarianism, the weaker it will get, and the more time there may be for a democratic opposition and a civil society to take root on the island. Political opposition groups, such as human rights organizations, will thus be likely to proliferate, strengthen, and their scope of activity and membership will increase.

For its part, the diaspora will become an increasingly important actor, not just in economic terms but also in constructing the new polity and identity. As the historic generation of Cubans, both in the island and in the diaspora physically disappear, and US policy towards Cuba shifts towards engagement with the regime, new opportunities for political change may open in Cuba that may allow younger generations of exiles, not as intransigent as their predecessors, to focus on exploiting political opportunities within the island.

## COMPARATIVE CASES



In addition to analyzing the implications of post-totalitarianism for transition paths and the possible transition scenarios, it is relevant to study other regimes that underwent similar conditions to those of contemporary Cuba, such as those of the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe, the Chinese, and those in Latin America.

*Central and Eastern European Transitions:*

The East European transition cases provide another point of reference. Except in Poland, the first half of the 1980s was a time of stability in this region, with far more examples of dissidence than of organized and effective opposition.<sup>45</sup> By 1989, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Bulgaria had transitioned to post-totalitarianism.<sup>46</sup> Within a few years, however, the region experienced an extraordinary democratic transformation. The opposition in these countries played a crucial role in the transition to democracy, which indicates that is a good policy to provide any support that could strengthen those individuals and organizations that are part of the internal Cuban opposition movement.

However, there are significant differences between the Cuban regime and the Central and Eastern European communist states. These countries, with the exception of Yugoslavia, were under communist rule by military force of the Soviet Union. In a clear contrast with Cuba, nationalist movements in Central and Eastern Europe were the basis of the resistance against communism, which lacked internal legitimacy.

*The Chinese Experience:*

China shares with Cuba the experience of a nationalist and communist revolution that achieved power after a civil war. China experienced a transition from totalitarianism under charismatic leaders to what Weller called responsive authoritarianism.<sup>47</sup> In this respect, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Congress of December 1978 may suggest a possible model for the PCC to stage a new path when it convenes for its Sixth Congress. The CCP Congress of December 1978 is considered a major turning point in modern Chinese political history, as the party corrected the mistakes of the Cultural Revolution, promoted modernization, giving economics preeminence over ideology in the decision making process.<sup>48</sup> While Raul Castro may be no Deng Xiaoping, there is plenty of evidence that he is interested in implementing Chinese-style economic reforms a la cubana.

In addition, China has taken significant steps towards capitalism, while retaining single-party regimes that carefully coexist with a rising middle class and emerging civil societies. Thus, China serves as an example of how a hegemonic party-state engages in economic reform while maintaining firm political control.

*Latin American Experiences:*

The Cuban regime always stamped a *sui generis* character to its socialist project, mainly centered on the charismatic figure of Fidel Castro and his use of nationalism to affirm identity, a very similar element to the phenomenon of *caudillismo*

experienced elsewhere in Latin America. The dominant role of the FAR in Cuba draws comparison with the Latin American military dictatorships.

The Nicaraguan experience provides some useful insights. Cuba and Nicaragua share the experience of intertwined nationalist and communist revolutions that came into power after defeating a dictator. When the Sandinistas lost their election in Nicaragua, they only conceded the right to rule for the continued right to control the military, and thereby retaining considerable informal political influence. The Nicaraguan case suggests that the armed forces are likely to be a relevant actor to be reckoned with by any future Cuban government.<sup>49</sup>

The main difference between the Cuban regime and other non-democratic systems in Latin America is that the former does not allow pluralistic views within the regime, and has successfully squashed any initiative of economic and social pluralism. Without the Castros at the realm of power, a softening stance of the United States vis-à-vis the regime, and the rise of neo-populist governments in Latin America that acquiesce to the regime, a future Cuban elite could steer towards a more traditional Latin American style of authoritarianism composed of limited pluralism, pervasive clientelism, and partially-free elections.

## CONCLUSION

The Cuban regime, against all odds, has remained in power for over fifty years. By analyzing the evolutionist nature of its characteristics during its different phases, this study disproved the conventional wisdom about the static and monolithic nature of the Cuban Revolution, and provided fresh insights into the historical and contemporary phase of the regime. While the regime did not experience out-of-type change during its historical phase, remaining totalitarian, the crisis caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union prompted changes that led to its evolution into post-totalitarianism, initially with a charismatic component, and currently towards a consolidated, early stage.

Democratic transition from an early post-totalitarian regime, however, is not the most likely scenario, unless ruptures within the regime occur or its repressive capability breaks down and mass uprisings could bring the regime to its collapse. This is not a probable scenario, given that there the regime effectively practices unity and its repressive apparatus is firmly in place. A more likely scenario is the regime's post-totalitarian consolidation and its subsequent evolution toward the adoption of deeper and structural economic and institutional reforms that, in turn, could produce a transition to authoritarianism or democracy. In addition, similar regime and transition cases, especially the Chinese experience, suggest that the most likely scenario includes the adoption of market-oriented economic reforms while maintaining party-state hegemony.

The prospects for a transition to democracy leave little room for celebration. Having said this, I believe that by gaining a better understanding of the past and current regime dynamics, and its relevant actors, those interested in seeing a transition to democracy in Cuba may be better educated to assist in such task. Finally,

this study leaves room for further research and expansion, especially considering that events may unfold in Cuba in the near future that may once more lead to a regime transformation.

## Notes

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- <sup>5</sup> Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995): 38-100, 293-343.
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- <sup>9</sup> Juan Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*. (London: Lynne Renne Publishers, Inc. 2000): 70.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 75.
- <sup>11</sup> Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995): 38-100, 293-343.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 44-45.
- <sup>13</sup> Marifeli Perez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution: Origins, Course, and Legacy, 2nd Ed.* (Oxford University Press 1999): 174-198.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>15</sup> Jorge I. Domínguez, *Cuba: Order and Revolution*, (Harvard University Press, 1978): 208.
- <sup>16</sup> Susan Eckstein, *Back From the Future: Cuba Under Castro* (Routledge, Ed. Oxford University Press, 2003): 20.
- <sup>17</sup> Marifeli Perez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution: Origins, Course, and Legacy, 2nd Ed.* (Oxford University Press 1999): 174-198.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>19</sup> Susan Eckstein, *Back From the Future: Cuba Under Castro* (Routledge, Ed. Oxford University Press, 2003): 39.
- <sup>20</sup> Jorge I. Domínguez, *Cuba: Order and Revolution*, (Harvard University Press, 1978): 338.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>22</sup> Marifeli Perez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution: Origins, Course, and Legacy, 2nd Ed.* (Oxford University Press 1999): 153.
- <sup>23</sup> Susan Eckstein, *Back From the Future: Cuba Under Castro* (Routledge, Ed. Oxford University Press, 2003): 71.
- <sup>24</sup> Marifeli Perez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution: Origins, Course, and Legacy, 2nd Ed.* (Oxford University Press 1999): 174-198; Susan Eckstein, *Back from the future: Cuba under Castro*, (Routledge, Ed. Oxford University Press 2003).
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>26</sup> Carmelo Mesa-Lago, "¿Cambio de régimen o cambios en el régimen? Aspectos políticos y economicos." *Encuentro de la Cultura Cubana*, nos. 6/7 (1997): 7-23.
- <sup>27</sup> Jorge I. Domínguez, *Cuba: Order and Revolution*, (Harvard University Press, 1978).
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- <sup>29</sup> Susan Eckstein, *Back From the Future: Cuba Under Castro* (Routledge, Ed. Oxford University Press 2003).
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- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 225-240.
- <sup>40</sup> BBC Mundo, "Cuba: El Fin del Salario Comunista." June 12, 2008, available at: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/latin\\_america/newsid\\_7449000/7449705.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/latin_america/newsid_7449000/7449705.stm).
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