

Challenges to a Post-Castro Cuba

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Fidel Castro is fighting his last battle—one that he cannot win. Death will not elude him. Cuba is witnessing the end of the Fidelista era and the beginning of a Raulista one. Now that power has passed into the hands of the younger brother, questions about Cuba's future remain: What can Raul hope to accomplish within the existing socio-political and economic context of Cuba? More importantly, what options in domestic and foreign affairs are open to Cuba's new leaders? What are the chances that they will be unable or unwilling to exercise any major options at all? Should they fear upsetting the multilevel balance of interests upon which a new government will depend?

Raul faces significant challenges: a non-productive economy highly dependent on Venezuela and other foreign sources, popular unrest, a need to maintain order and discipline among the population, and a need to increase productivity. Raul is critically dependant on the military. Lacking the charisma of his brother, he will also require the support of key party leaders and technocrats within the government bureaucracy.

Of paramount importance is the need for the Raul Castro regime to strike a balance between the need to improve the economy and maintaining political control. Too rapid economic reforms may lead to an unraveling of political control, a possibility feared by Raul, the military, and other allies keen on remaining in power. An initial solution may be to provide more consumer goods to the population, including food, but without any structural economic changes.

The stability of the regime is based primarily on the strength of its institutions. The armed forces are undoubtedly the most vital of the three "legs" on which the revolution stands. The other two, the Communist Party and the security apparatus, are under increased military supervision and serve to control, mobilize, socialize, and indoctrinate the population under increased military supervision. The organization and strength of the bureaucracy that has grown up around these institutions seem to assure the revolution's continuity. A revolt against Raul Castro's rule in the absence of large-scale outside intervention seems unlikely, especially as long as the Cuban armed forces remain loyal to him, which appears highly likely. Created by Raul Castro, they have developed a large measure of professionalism, are thoroughly integrated into the political system, and enjoy

an important and trusted role in the general management and control of the economy. Today, more than 60 percent of major industries and enterprises are in the hands of current or former military officers.

However, opposition and dissident groups and projects have developed in the recent past. The best known is the Varela Project, which gathered more than 11,000 signatures to petition the National Assembly to amend Cuba's laws and permit free elections. For the first time in more than four decades, large numbers of Cubans peacefully mobilized to petition the government. Fidel Castro's response was swift and brutal. He held his own plebiscite to proclaim the permanent and unchanging communist nature of his regime and prohibit the National Assembly from considering such projects. This was followed by the arrest and sentencing to long jail terms of several dozen dissidents, journalists, and librarians, including many members of the Varela project.

While opposition and unhappiness have been growing in Cuba, the dissident groups are weak and usually infiltrated by Cuban state security. Without access to the media, which is totally state-controlled and constantly harassed by the police, these groups find it difficult to organize and operate. Many of their leaders have shown enormous courage in defying the regime. Yet, time and again, the security apparatus has discredited or destroyed them. They do not represent a major threat to the regime.

A consolidated Raul regime will most likely follow the policies of Fidel, offering few new substantive domestic or foreign policy initiatives. Any serious overtures to the US do not seem likely in the near future. Any pro-US action would mean the rejection of one of Fidel Castro's main legacies: anti-Americanism. Pro-US action might create uncertainty within the Raul government, leading to friction and factionalism. It would require the weakening of Cuba's anti-American alliance with radical regimes in Latin America, Iran, and Syria. From Cuba's point of view, the United States has little to offer that is not already in Cuba: American tourists, which Raul neither wants nor needs, American investments which he fears may subvert his highly centralized and controlled economy, and products that he can buy cheaper from other countries. The United States does not have the ability to provide Cuba with the petroleum Venezuela is sending for little or no payment. Recognition by the United States may mean a great victory for Raul and the legitimization of his regime. Yet it's a small prize when compared to the uncertainties that a Cuba-US relation may produce internally and externally among Cuba's allies.

Raul is no Gorbachov or Deng Xiaoping. With his brother alive, and even when he is gone, he is not likely to institute major economic or political reforms. Forty-seven years as Minister of Defense has hardened him; he is more Stalinist than liberal reformer. Whether the Raulista era lasts a long period or not, Cubans seem destined to endure difficult times and a harsh military dictatorship. With increased military control, the transformation of the island into a democratic society will be difficult.

Economic Challenges

A Raul Castro government and others that follow will also face the awesome task of economic reconstruction. Cuba's extreme dependence on Soviet bloc trade and the adaptation of its economy to an unnatural and immense subsidy inflow for nearly four decades created an artificial economy, which has disappeared. Cuba does not have a viable economy of its own. As nearly every category of imports keeps shrinking, a vicious cycle of poverty grips the country. Petroleum from Venezuela's Chavez, tourism, nickel, and remittances from Cuban-Americans are keeping the economy afloat.

Cuba has a weak internal market. Consumption is limited by a severe rationing system. Each month, Cubans received the following amounts from the government: 0.75 pound of beef, 0.50 pound of sausage, 1 pound of chicken, 0.4 pint of oil, and 3 pounds of bananas. Whatever transactions take place outside it is in the illegal black market, which operates with foreign currency and merchandise stolen from state enterprises or received from abroad. The Cuban peso has depreciated considerably, and its purchasing power has dropped. Huge and persistent government deficits, a large and burdensome foreign debt, and the absence of virtually any stabilizing fiscal and monetary policies have accelerated the downward economic spiral.

Production of sugar, Cuba's mainstay export, has dropped to levels comparable to those of the Depression era, and prices of other Cuban commodities, with the exception of nickel, continue their downward trend in international markets.

Legal Problems

In addition to these vexing economic realities, there will be also a maze of legal problems. Obviously, Cuban nationals, Cuban Americans, and foreigners whose properties were confiscated during the early years of the revolution will want to reclaim them or will ask for fair compensation as soon as this becomes feasible. Cubans living abroad await the opportunity to exercise their legal claims before Cuban courts. But this will have to wait until the government is willing to respect the rule of law and to compensate exiles for their losses, which will not likely happen under Raul's regime. Few would want the return of their homes. Most would want compensation, especially of commercial properties confiscated without payment by the Castro regime. The Eastern European and Nicaraguan examples are good indications of the complexities, delays, and uncertainties accompanying the reclamation process.

Cuba's severely damaged infrastructure is also in need of major rebuilding. The outdated electrical grid cannot supply the meager needs of consumers and industry, transportation services are woefully insufficient; communication facilities are obsolete. Sanitary and medical facilities have deteriorated so badly that contagious diseases of epidemic proportions constitute a real menace to the population. Cuba's health system, once the showcase of the regime, has deteriorated significantly, especially after the end of Soviet subsidies. In addition, environmental concerns, such as pollution of bays and rivers, are in need of immediate attention.

The Military and Social Issues

Economic and legal problems are not, however, the only challenges in the nation's future. Another critical problem that a post-Castro Cuba will have to deal with is the continuous power of the military. In the past, Cuba had a strong tradition of militarism. During recent years, the military, as an institution, has acquired unprecedented power. Under any conceivable scenario, the military will continue to be a key, decisive player.

Any immediate significant reduction of the military may be difficult, if not impossible. A powerful and proud institution, the armed forces would see an attempt to undermine their authority as an unacceptable intrusion into military affairs and a threat to their existence. Their control of key economic sectors under the Castro regime will make it more difficult in the future to dislodge them from these activities and limit their role to a strictly military one. Removing the military from the economy and returning them to the barracks will be a major challenge. Reducing the size of the armed forces will be problematic, too. The economy may not be able to absorb the unemployed members of the military, or the government may not be able to retrain them fast enough to occupy civilian positions.

The military role will also be affected by social conflicts that may emerge in a post-Castro period. For the first half-century of the Cuban republic, political violence was an important factor in society. A belief developed in the legitimacy of violence to effect political changes. This violence will probably reemerge with a vengeance in the future. Castro's communist rule has engendered profound hatred and resentments. Political vendettas will be rampant, differences over how to restructure society profound, and factionalism in society and the political process common.

Labor Woes, Racism and the Rule of Law and Migration

A free and restless labor movement will complicate matters for any future government. During the Castro era, the labor movement has remained docile and under continuous government control. Only one unified, Castro-controlled labor organization has been allowed. In a democratic Cuba, labor will not be a passive instrument of any government. Rival labor organizations will develop programs for labor vindication and demand better salaries and welfare for their members. A militant, vociferous, and difficult-to-manage labor movement will surely characterize post-Castro Cuba.

The apparently harmonious race relations of the Castro era may collapse in a free society. There has been a gradual Africanization of the Cuban population over the past several decades. In part because of greater intermarriage, and in part because of the out-migration of more than a million mostly white Cubans, there is greater proportion of blacks and mulattoes in Cuba than ever before. This demographic shift has led to some fear and resentment among whites in the island. On the other hand, blacks feel that they have been left out of the political process, as whites still dominate the higher echelons of the Castro power structure. The dollarization of the economy has accentuated these differences, with blacks receiving fewer dollars from abroad. The potential exists for significant racial tension and even conflict, as these feelings and frustrations are aired in a future democratic and free environment, well beyond the Fidel/Raul era.

One difficult problem for a post-Castro Cuba is acceptance of the law. Every day, Cubans steal from state enterprises, participate in the black market, and engage in all types of illegal activities, including widespread graft and corruption. They do this to survive. Eradication of such necessary vices of today will not be easy in the future, especially since many of these practices predate the Castro era. Developing a value system compatible with a democratic, free-market society will be a complicated and lengthy process.

The unwillingness of Cubans to obey laws will be matched by their unwillingness to sacrifice and endure the difficult years that will follow the end of communism. A whole generation has grown up under the constant exhortations and pressures of the communist leadership to work hard and sacrifice more for society. The young are alienated from the political process and are eager for a better life. Many want to migrate to the United States. If the present rate of request for visas at the US consular office in Havana is any indication, more than two million Cubans want to move permanently to the United States.

Under a US-Cuban normalization of relations, Cubans will be free to visit the United States. As soon as the travel ban is lifted, as many as 500,000 Cubans will come as tourists and stay as illegal immigrants. Others will be claimed as legal immigrants by their relatives who are already naturalized citizens of the United States. Still others will travel to third countries in the hope of eventually entering the United States. A significant emigration from Cuba is certain, posing an added major problem for US immigration authorities in particular and for US policy in general at a time of increasing anti-immigration feelings and legislation and security concerns in the United States.

While many Cubans will want to leave Cuba, few Cuban Americans would abandon their life in the United States and return to the island, especially if Cuba experiences a slow and painful transition period. Although those exiles who are allowed to return will be welcomed initially as business partners and investors, they will be resented, especially as they become involved in domestic politics. Adjusting the views and values of the exile population to those of the island will be a difficult and lengthy process.

Cuba's future is therefore clouded with problems and uncertainties. Almost five decades of communism will surely leave profound scars on Cuban society. As in Eastern Europe and Nicaragua, reconstruction may be slow, painful, and not totally successful.

Unlike these countries, Cuba has at least three unique advantages: proximity to, and a long tradition of close relations with the United States; a major attractiveness to tourists, and a large and wealthy exile population. These three factors could converge to transform Cuba's economy, but only if the future leadership creates the necessary conditions: an open, legally fair economy and a free, tolerant, and responsible political system. Unfortunately, since leadership change will be a lengthy process and the current leadership is unwilling to open up the economy substantially to produce a major beneficial transformation, life in Cuba is likely to remain difficult and improve slowly.