

The Cuban Revolution 50 Years On

Castro's Socialism in Crisis

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Half a century after the Castro revolution, the island is poised at another historic turning point. Sociologist Aurelio Alonso sums up Cuba's dilemma as "putting chaos behind us without falling prey to the law of the jungle". Fidel Castro officially handed over power last year, having been "provisionally" absent since July 2006 for health reasons. But he remains first secretary of the Cuban Communist Party (CCP) until the next congress, which Raul Castro, his brother, says will take place in autumn 2009.

The politics is unscripted. "I'm not leaving. I simply wish to fight via ideas. I'll continue to write under the title 'Thoughts of Comrade Fidel'. Perhaps people will listen to me. I'll be discreet". That's how the commander-in-chief spelt it out when he announced his retirement on February 19 last year. Five days later, at his investiture, Raul Castro asked the National Assembly to consult his older brother on major strategic issues like defence, international relations and socio-economic development.

Cuban deputies endorsed the proposal with a unanimous show of hands. For some observers, that vote gave Fidel a veto, which explains the slowness of reforms. Since then, the former president has plied the media with fertile "thoughts". Raul's inheritance is a delicate matter.

The new administration has already faced unforeseen problems - the rising cost of basic foodstuffs, three destructive cyclones (in 2008, cyclones Gustav, Ike and Paloma damaged 400,000 homes, leaving 200,000 people without shelter for a time and devastating more than 55,000 hectares of arable land), the global credit crunch, faltering domestic growth - on top of structural issues, like import-dependence, low productivity, a dual peso and over-centralized bureaucracy.

Financial options to push through changes announced in 2007 aimed at modernizing infrastructure are limited. During 2008, foodstuff and oil imports amounted to at least \$5bn, or half Cuba's current export potential, including sales of services to Venezuela. Significant measures already under way include: decentralized food distribution; reclamation of land allotted to peasant farmers but not cultivated; import substitution applied to private growers; and new wage scales.

Some economists believe that productivity should be "freed up" like Vietnam's. They claim that the present system cannot serve as a stage for development. The economist Pedro Monreal speaks of the need for "economic, social and political rebirth". However, supporting private-sector initiatives and expansion of the market economy could further widen unpopular social divides. Salaries remain too low - as Raul has publicly acknowledged - while the informal economy and the black market thrive. Market reforms of the 1990s destabilized society and created new class divisions.

The sociologist Mayra Espina says that "the proportion of urban poor without adequate basic provision grew from 6.3 per cent in 1988 to 20 per cent in 2000". She comments: "Both the urban and the rural lower middle classes have profited from the informal economy, from working for themselves and the growth of distribution channels... One sees activities which operate like small businesses with an employer, employees, family involvement and even an apprentice system".

Social equality achieved during the early days of the revolution has slipped back, although it remains rooted in society. Before the present crisis, the welfare state guaranteed people enough to eat, as well as free education, healthcare and social security, full employment and access to cultural facilities. Racial integration was also happening. The crisis has sapped these achievements.

There has never been such a wide gap between young people and the old revolutionaries. Recent generations have known only the “special period” following the break-up of the Soviet bloc in 1991, a society which doesn’t compare with that of their elders. They view the Batista regime as faraway history taught from school books. The prosperous 1980s, which allowed their parents to improve their lot, have also passed into folklore.

With educational standards falling, teachers have quit to take up better-paid jobs in the private sector. Some replacements, so-called “young masters”, are teachers with little experience and only basic training. “The teaching profession is a disaster”, claimed a participant in a public debate staged by the review *Temas*, echoing Alfredo Guevara, director of the Festival of Latin-American Cinema and a veteran Fidelista, who spoke at a Cuban Union of Artists and Writers (CUAW) conference of “absurd criteria and practices controlling education”.

Why are so many young people uninterested in politics? “It makes me sick,” says one, appalled by daily exhortations and directions from the country’s leaders. The widespread belief that career prospects don’t match qualifications explains why many graduates attempt to leave the island. One student poured out his worries to the president of the National Assembly, Ricardo Alarcon, in a highly publicized encounter in February 2008. Key questions included why he needed permission to travel abroad and why open internet access wasn’t allowed.

The American historian Michelle Chase believes that the main bugbear is lack of debate and institutional paralysis. Students and researchers stress the need for “power to the people”. A 2007 public meeting held at Havana University to discuss the October Revolution attracted some 600 students. As the revolution’s children, they still accept the concept of socialism, rereading classic Marxist texts. But, sign of the times, not one among them called him or herself a Fidelista.

By publicly recognizing that the system isn’t working, that salaries are too low, that “structural change” is necessary, Raul has raised much hope. By asking fellow countrymen to take part in a wide-ranging national debate, the new president has also opened up space for differences to be discussed. Although no summary has been made public, activists favour a more participative and democratic socialism. Ordinary citizens - first and foremost those who oppose the regime - are demanding improvements to daily life. Things must change, but when and how?

“Cuba is in crisis and is on the move,” comments Ariel Dacal, a young researcher. For two years, current malfunctions and past achievements have been under the microscope. In January 2007, while Fidel was convalescing, a TV programme endorsing 1970s censorship provoked a group petition where, for the first time, the internet was used as the means of expression. The text, signed by many well-known names in the world of politics and culture (including Alfredo Guevara and Mariela Castro, Raul’s daughter) as well as top clerics (Monsignor Carlos Manuel de Cespedes), led to a lecture series and a book critical of the “leaden years”.

In a wholly new way, notes Desiderio Navarro, publisher of the revue *Cristerios*, “a public domain was created which attacked the shortcomings of the mainstream press”. Similar debates were held last April at the annual conference of the NUCW, at the Havana book fair, in meetings organised by the review *Temas*, or in places like the Martin Luther King Centre. Cuban-language texts were posted on the Barcelona-based radical *Kaosenlared* website, allowing feedback on a scale previously unknown.

So what is the debate all about, and where are the main differences? Activists, researchers, intellectuals and student groups are attempting to thrash out an alternative socialism. This includes casting a leery eye on today's socialism and on the legacy of the Soviet bloc's collapse - analysis of which, as the writer Ambrosio Fornet recalls, has been suppressed "so as not to threaten unity or provide ammunition for the enemy". But that has meant a "sham unity".

Alfredo Guevara deplores "the transformation of ideas into rituals, ceremonies, endless discussion - a technique used throughout history by bureaucrats and opportunists".

Two major issues lie at the heart of the debate. First, the state of the economy. Secondly, the absence of participatory democracy.

Why is the economy not working? What is the relationship between the state and the market in an economy where socialism replaces communism? What lessons can Cuba draw from China's and — more importantly — Vietnam's experience? Replies differ between those who still see themselves as Fidelistas and those who are Raulistas. If they don't necessarily represent their mentors, they certainly express the real differences between those leading the nation.

Ever the pragmatist, Raul stresses the need to get the economy out of its current rut and to improve agricultural productivity (more than half of arable land is uncultivated), while pushing for a better-organized public service, more respectful of institutions often short-circuited by his elder brother. His intention is to perpetuate the system by economic reform, preparing it to survive post-Castroism.

That explains the interest in Vietnam, which borrowed from capitalism the elements that work, like the market economy, without questioning the status quo and one-party rule. But it's unlikely that Cubans would accept the social costs involved after so many tough years. When the case for shock treatment has been discarded, the idea of a slow, gradual transition begins to take shape. However, Raul is 77 years old and his days are numbered.

Market reforms are opposed by some because of the threat they might pose to the system. Fidel has never hidden his dislike for "capitalist mechanisms" and what he sees as their political consequences. He has always stressed the importance of individual and social action.

The political analyst Juan Valdes Paz sets out the differences. "For some, the revolution is a continuing series of leaps forward which, to make progress, must attempt the impossible. This is a very strong strain of thought, perhaps the revolution's strongest legacy. Others are more realistic: they understand that certain scenarios are too difficult. It's an absorbing debate between utopian Marxists and more down-to-earth activists focused on concrete objectives in the present circumstances."

Significantly, Cuba Socialista, the political and theoretical organ of CCP's central committee, has republished two of Fidel's historic speeches. One from 1988, "still very applicable" according to the review's editor, underlines the importance of national security and of the ideological battleground: "Now and then people ask if we shouldn't concentrate all our energy, all our efforts, all our resources, into building socialism and into developing the country... But that would be a serious delusion, even a criminal one, because (the battle) is the price that our country must pay for its revolution, its liberty and its independence." The Cuban economy was already in difficulty when this was written.

Who really rules Cuba? This sulphurous question is spread about sotto voce. Fidel has declared that he is not, and won't be, the leader of any "faction". Yet the November 19, 2008 front page of the CCP daily Granma was revealing. The banner headline proclaimed in large red type: "Fidel receives

Hu Jintao". At the bottom of the page a heading in much smaller black type signalled the meeting of Cuban and Chinese presidents: "Official discussions between Raul and Hu Jintao". Given the control exercised by the CCP central committee on its newspaper, this was unlikely to have been a simple layout error.

Separate groups within the state apparatus are not easily identified. The revolutionary armed forces (RAF) play a central role; Raul was their minister for almost half a century. Directly or indirectly, they account for two-thirds of the island's economy. The military elite have tried many versions of capitalism and you might well think that they are on the side of reform. But it's better not to generalize.

One union boss underlined the risks associated with China's phenomenal growth: "unequal wealth distribution, human misery, a marked difference between urban and rural areas, environmental degradation". Celia Hart, a Fidel apologist, said in August 2008 that she feared "Cuba following China's lead". (Hart, daughter of two key actors in the Cuban revolution, Armando Hart and Haydee Santamaria, was expelled from the CCP. She died in a road accident on 9 September 2008.)

A top Cuban official quotes the former Polish prime minister, Tadeusz Mazowiecki: "Nobody had experience of the transition between socialism and capitalism. If I'd known it would lead to 18 per cent unemployment, I would perhaps have proceeded with more caution."

Although no one proposes political change, there is a tangible desire for participative democracy, for self-regulated socialism, a new openness to influences from the Latin-American left.

"People attack bureaucratic institutions and want greater participation by all classes," comments Juan Valdes Paz. With intellectuals muscling in, this demand is backed by a critique of the CCP's role. "The party can't control the state," one activist says, "that's for the people to do." Aurelio Alonso spells it out: "Our socialism is too state-based, very bureaucratic, with a very low participation rate by ordinary people in the decision-making process." Agenda items for the sixth CCP congress, scheduled for the end of 2009, have been posted on the Kaosenlared website for the first time. Called "Cuba needs participative and democratic socialism", the proposals by "Cuban Communists and revolutionaries" are promoted by Pedro Campos, a former diplomat who once worked for the interior ministry. Campos lives in poverty and normally declines to be interviewed, but he did agree to meet us. Those without internet access get hold of his 13 "proposals" condemning authoritarian state socialism by calling at his home.

Signatories petition for the creation of workers' councils, for an electoral system which encourages a more participative democracy, for the legal system to be cleared of political influence, for foreign "aid" financing subversive activities to be illegal, and for the right of freedom both of association and expression. The list is completed by popular demands like abolishing exit permits and allowing open access to the internet.

Faced with change - including the arrival of Barack Obama at the White House - political positions evolve almost imperceptibly. Rafael Hernandez, publisher of the review *Temas*, asks "how can we rebuild consensus"? Any break at the top could imperil the whole system. How to replace Fidel's Law, the voice of the charismatic leader ("irreplaceable" according to Raul)? By a more collegial approach the new president answers, while insisting that the institutions still work perfectly well. He has already ostracized the "taliban", young zealots who surrounded Fidel in his final years as president.

It remains unclear whether the old guard, hanging on to key posts, can reshape their own revolution or whether they will just attempt to sit tight. Today's leaders are, if anything, older than their

predecessors. Some critics believe that new faces will be needed to make change credible. History has yet to be split between those living on borrowed time and those impatient for reform.

P.S.

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