

Feature

Why Cubans Protested on July 11

Is this the beginning of the end of fear in Cuba?

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The street demonstrations that broke out all over Cuba on July 11 are an unprecedented event in the more than 60 years since the triumph of the Cuban Revolution. But why now? This essay explores the historic, economic and political factors that help to clarify the causes of Cuba's July 11, considers the role of the United States, and briefly reflects on Cuba's future.

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On Sunday, July 11, Cuba erupted in street protests. Unlike the major street protest that took place in 1994 and was limited to the Malecón, the long multi-lane Havana road facing the Gulf of Mexico, the July 11 outbreak of protest was national in scope. There were protests in many towns and cities, including Santiago de Cuba in the east, Trinidad in the center of the island, as well as Havana in the west. The growing access to social media in the island played an important role in the rapid spread of the protests; no wonder the government immediately suspended access to certain social media sites and brought all telephone calls from abroad to a halt.

The street presence and participation of Black women and men was notable everywhere. This should not be surprising since Black Cubans are far less likely to receive hard currency remittances from abroad even though over 50% of the population receive some degree of financial support through that channel. These remittances have become the key to survival in Cuba, particularly in light of the ever-diminishing number of goods available in the peso-denominated subsidized ration book. Cuban Blacks have also been the victims of institutional racism in the growing tourist industry where “front line” visible jobs are mostly reserved for conventionally attractive white and light skinned women and men.

The demonstrators did not endorse or support any political program or ideology, aside from the general demand for political freedom. The official Cuban press claims that the demonstrations were organized from abroad by right-wing Cubans. But none of the demands associated with the Cuban right-wing were echoed by the demonstrators, like the support for Trump often heard in South Florida and among some dissident circles in Cuba. And no one called for “humanitarian intervention” espoused by Plattistas (Platt Amendment, approved by Congress in 1901 and abolished in 1934, gave the United States the right to militarily intervene in Cuba), such as biologist Ariel Ruiz Urquiola, himself a victim of government repression for his independent ecological activism. The

demonstrators did speak about the scarcity of food, medicine and essential consumer items, repudiated President Díaz-Canel as *singao*—a phrase that in Cuba translates as “fucked” but means a wicked, evil person, and chanted *patria y vida* (fatherland and life). “Patria y Vida” is the title of a very popular and highly polished rap song by a group of Cuban Black rappers (available on YouTube.) I have seen and heard the song more than a dozen times to enjoy it as well as to search for its explicit and implied meanings including in its silences and ambiguities.

“Patria y Vida” counterposes itself to the old Cuban government slogan of “Patria o Muerte” (“Fatherland or Death”). While that slogan may have made sense in the 1960s when Cuba was faced with actual invasions, it borders on the obscene when voiced by second generation bureaucrats. It is certainly high time that the regime’s macho cult of violence and death be challenged, and this song does it very well.

But what does it mean to implicitly repudiate the year 1959, the first year of the successful revolution, as the song does? There was no Soviet style system in Cuba at the time and the year 1959 is not equivalent to the Castro brothers. Many people of a wide variety of political beliefs fought and died to bring about the revolution that overthrew the Batista dictatorship. The song does express many important democratic sentiments against the present Cuban dictatorship, but it is unfortunately silent about the desirable alternative, which leaves room for the worst right-wing, pro-Trump elements in South Florida to rally behind it as if it was theirs.

True to form, President Díaz-Canel called on the “revolutionaries” to be ready for combat and go out and reclaim the streets away from the demonstrators. In fact, it was the uniformed police, *Seguridad del Estado* (the secret police), and *Boinas Negras* (black berets, the special forces) that responded with tear gas, beatings and hundreds of arrests, including several leftist critics of the government. According to a July 21 Reuters report, the authorities had confirmed that they had started the trials of the demonstrators accused of a variety of charges, but denied it according to another press report on July 25. These are summary trials without the benefit of defense counsel, a format generally used for minor violations in Cuba but which in this case involves the possibility of years in prison for those found guilty.

Most of the demonstrations were angry but usually peaceful and only in a few instances did the demonstrators behave violently, as in the case of some looting and a police car that was overturned. This was in clear contrast with the violence frequently displayed by the forces of order. It is worth noting that in calling his followers to take to the streets to combat the demonstrators, Díaz-Canel invoked the more than 60-year-old notion that “the streets belong to the revolutionaries.” Just as the government has always proclaimed that “the universities belong to the revolutionaries” in order to expel students and professors that don’t toe the government’s line. One example is René Fidel González García, a law professor expelled from the University of Oriente. He is a strong critic of government policies, who, far from giving up on his revolutionary ideals, has reaffirmed them on numerous occasions.

But Why Now?

Cuba is in the middle of the most serious economic crisis since the 1990s, when, as a result of the collapse of the Soviet bloc, Cubans suffered innumerable and lengthy blackouts due to the severe shortage of oil, along with endemic malnutrition with its accompanying health problems.

The present economic crisis is due to the pandemic-related decline of tourism, combined with the government’s long term capital disinvestment and inability to maintain production, even at the lower levels of the last five years. Cuba’s GDP (Gross Domestic Product) fell by 11% in 2020 and only rose

by 0.5% in 2019, the year before the pandemic broke out. The annual sugar crop that ended this spring did not even reach 1 million tons, which is below the 1.4 million average of recent years and very far below the 8 million tons in 1989. The recent government attempt to unify the various currencies circulating in Cuba — primarily the CUC, a proxy for the dollar, and the peso — has backfired resulting in serious inflation that was predicted among others by the prominent Cuban economist Carmelo Mesa-Lago. While the CUC is indeed disappearing, the Cuban economy has been virtually dollarized with the constant decline of the value of the peso. While the official exchange rate is 24 pesos to the dollar, the prevailing black market rate is 60 pesos to the dollar, and it is going to get worse due to the lack of tourist dollars. This turn to an ever more expensive dollar, may be somewhat restrained in light of the government's recent shift to the euro as its preferred hard currency.

Worst of all, is the generalized shortage of food, even for those who have divisas, the generic term for hard currencies. The agricultural reforms of the last years aimed at increasing domestic production have not worked because they are inadequate and insufficient, making it impossible for the private farmers and for the usufructuarios (farmers who lease land from the government for 20 year terms renewable for another 20 years) to feed the country. Thus, for example, the government arbitrarily gives bank credits to the farmers for some things but not for others, like for clearing the marabú, an invasive weed that is costly to remove, but an essential task if crops are to grow. Acopio, the state agency in charge of collecting the substantial proportion of the crop that farmers have to sell to the state at prices fixed by the government is notoriously inefficient and wasteful, because the Acopio trucks do not arrive in time to collect their share, or because of the systemic indifference and carelessness that pervade the processes of shipping and storage. This creates huge spoilage and waste that have reduced the quality and quantity of goods available to consumers. It is for reasons such as these that Cuba imports 70% of the food it consumes from various countries including the United States (an exemption to the blockade was carved out in 2001 for the unlimited export of food and medicines to Cuba but with the serious limitation that Cuba has to pay in cash before the goods are shipped to the island.)

The Cuban economist Pedro Monreal has called attention to the overwhelming millions of pesos that the government has dedicated to the construction of tourist hotels (mostly in joint ventures with foreign capital) that even before the pandemic were filled to well below their capacity, while agriculture is starved of government investments. This unilateral choice of priorities by the one-party state is an example of what results from profoundly undemocratic practices. This is not a "flaw" of the Cuban system any more than the relentless pursuit of profit is a "flaw" of American capitalism. Both bureaucracy and the absence of democracy in Cuba and the relentless pursuit of profit in the United States are not defects of but constitutive elements of both systems.

Similarly, oil has become increasingly scarce as Venezuelan oil shipments in exchange for Cuban medical services have declined. There is no doubt that Trump's strengthening of the criminal blockade, which went beyond merely reversing Obama's liberalization during his second period in the White House, has also gravely hurt the island, among other reasons because it has made it more difficult for the Cuban government to use banks abroad, whether American or not, to finance its operations. This is because the U.S. government will punish enterprises who do business with Cuba by blocking them from doing business with the United States. Until the events of July 11, the Biden administration had left almost all of Trump's sanctions untouched. Since then, it has promised to allow for larger remittances and to provide staff for the American consulate in Havana.

While the criminal blockade has been very real and seriously damaging, it has been relatively less important in creating economic havoc than what lies at the very heart of the Cuban economic system: the bureaucratic, inefficient and irrational control and management of the economy by the Cuban government. It is the Cuban government and its "left" allies in the Global North, not the

Cuban people, who continue, as they have for decades, to blame only the blockade.

At the same time, the working class in the urban and rural areas have neither economic incentives nor political incentives in the form of democratic control of their workplaces and society to invest themselves in their work, thus reducing the quantity and quality of production.

Health Situation in Cuba

After the Covid-19 pandemic broke out in the early spring of 2020, Cuba did relatively well during the first year of the pandemic in comparison with other countries in the region. But in the last few months the situation in Cuba, for what are still unclear reasons except for the entry of the Delta variant in the island, made a sharp turn for the worse, and in doing so seriously aggravated the economic and political problems of the country. Thus, as Jessica Domínguez Delgado noted in the Cuban blog El Toque (July 13), until April 12, a little more than a year after the beginning of the pandemic, 467 persons had died among the 87,385 cases that had been diagnosticated as having Covid-19. But only three months later, on July 12, the number of the deceased had reached 1,579 with 224, 914 diagnosed cases (2.5 times as many as in the much longer previous period).

The province of Matanzas and its capital city of the same name located 100 kilometers east of Havana became the epicenter of the pandemic's sudden expansion in Cuba. According to the provincial governor, Matanzas province was 3,000 beds short of the number of patients that needed them. On July 6, a personal friend who lives in the city of Matanzas wrote to me about the dire health situation in the city with a lack of doctors, tests, and oxygen in the midst of collapsing hospitals. My friend wrote that the national government had shown itself incapable of controlling the situation until that very day when it finally formulated a plan of action for the city. The government did finally take a number of measures including sending a substantial number of additional medical personnel, although it is too early to tell at the time of this writing with what results.

Cuban scientists and research institutions deserve a lot of credit for the development of several anti-Covid vaccines. However, the government was responsible for the excessive and unnecessary delay in immunizing people on the island, made worse by its decision to neither procure donations of vaccines from abroad nor join the 190-nation strong COVAX (Covid-19 Vaccines Global Access) sponsored by several international organizations including the World Health Organization (WHO), an organization with which the Cuban government has good relations. Currently only 16% of the population has been fully vaccinated and 30% has received at least one dose of the vaccine.

The medical crisis in the province and capital city of Matanzas fits into a more general pattern of medical scarcity and abandonment as the Cuban government has accelerated its export of medical personnel abroad to strengthen what has been for some time its number one export. This is why the valuable family doctor program introduced in the 1980s has seriously deteriorated. While the Cuban government uses a sliding scale (including some pro bono work) in what it charges its foreign government clients, Cuban doctors get an average of 10 - 25% of what the foreign clients pay the Cuban government. Needless to add, Cuban medical personnel cannot organize independent unions to bargain with the government about the terms of their employment. Nevertheless, going abroad is a desired assignment for most Cuban doctors because they earn a significant amount of hard currency and can purchase foreign goods. However, if they fail to return to Cuba after their assignments are over, they are administratively (i.e., not judicially) punished with a forced exile of 8 years duration.

The Political Context

Earlier this year, the leadership old guard, who fought the Batista regime and are in their late eighties and early nineties, retired from their government positions to give way to the new leadership of Miguel Díaz-Canel (born in 1960) as president and Manuel Marrero Cruz (born in 1963) as prime minister. This new leadership is continuing Raúl Castro's policy of economic and social liberalization without democratization. For example, in 2013 the government liberalized the regulations that controlled the movement of people to make it easier for most Cubans to travel abroad. However, at the same time, the government made it virtually impossible for many dissidents to leave the country, by for example delaying their departure so they could not make it on time to conferences held abroad, and by creating a list of some 200 "regulados" (people subject to regulatory rules) that are not allowed to leave the country at all. It is important to point out that as in the case of other measures adopted by the Cuban government mentioned earlier, these actions continue the policies of Fidel and Raúl Castro, in which political and administrative decisions are made outside of the regime's own judicial system. The same applies to the hundreds of relatively brief detentions that the government of Raúl Castro carried out every year, especially to try to impede public demonstrations not controlled by the government (a police method that only works for previously planned political protests, unlike the ones that took place on July 11).

The One-Party State

The one-party state continues to function as under Fidel and Raúl Castro's rule. In reality, however, the Cuban Communist Party (PCC, its Spanish acronym) is not really a party — that would imply the existence of other parties. Neither is the PCC primarily an electoral party although it does firmly control from the top the periodic so-called elections that always result in the unanimous approval of the political course followed by the authorities.

Sometimes people disillusioned with the existing corrupt parties in Latin America and even in the United States itself, react with indifference if not approval to the Cuban one-party state because they perceive elections as reinforcing corrupt systems. Thus such people think that is better to have one honest political party that works than a corrupt multi-party system that doesn't work. The problem with this type of thinking is that one-party bureaucratic systems do not work well at all, except perhaps to thoroughly repress any opposition. Moreover, corruption sooner or later works its way into the single party system as history has repeatedly shown. In the case of Cuba, Fidel Castro himself warned in a famous speech on November 17, 2005, that the revolution was in greater danger to perish because of endemic corruption than because of the actions of counterrevolutionaries.

The organizational monopoly of the PCC — explicitly sanctioned by the Cuban constitution — affects far more than elections. It extends its power in a highly authoritarian manner to control Cuban society through the so-called mass organizations that function as transmission belts for the decisions taken by the PCC's Political Bureau. For example, the CTC, the official trade union, is the transmission belt that allows the Cuban state to maintain its monopoly of the organization of Cuban workers. Beyond enforcing the prohibition of strikes, the CTC is not an organization for the defense of working class interests as determined by the workers themselves. Rather, it was established to advance what the ruling PCC leadership determines are the workers' best interests.

The same control mechanisms apply to other "mass organizations" such as the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) and to other institutions such as editorial houses, universities and the rest of the educational system. The mass media (radio, television and newspapers) continue to be under the control of the government, guided in their coverage by the "orientations" of the Ideological

Department of the Central Committee of the PCC. There are however, two important exceptions to the state's control of media organs: one, is the internal publications of the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, the Cuban Catholic hierarchy is extremely cautious, and the circulation of its publications is in any case limited to its parishes and other Catholic institutions. A far more important exception is the Internet, which the government has yet been unable to place under its absolute control and remains as the principal vehicle for critical and dissident voices. It was precisely this less than full control of the Internet that made the nationwide politically explosive outbreaks of July 11 possible.

Where is Cuba Going?

Without the benefit of Fidel Castro's presence and the degree of legitimacy retained by the historic leadership, Díaz-Canel and the other new government leaders were politically hit hard by the events of July 11, even though they received the shameful support of most of the broad international Left. The fact that people no longer seem to be afraid may be the single largest threat for the government emerging from the events on July 11. In spite of that blow, the new leadership is on course to continue Raúl Castro's orientation to develop a Cuban version of the Sino-Vietnamese model, which combine a high degree of political authoritarianism with concessions to private and especially foreign capital.

At the same time, the Cuban government leaders will continue to follow inconsistent and even contradictory economic reform policies for fear of losing control to *Cuban* private capital. The government recently authorized the creation of private PYMES (small and medium private enterprises), but it would not be at all surprising if many of the newly created PYMES end up in the hands of important state functionaries turned private capitalists. There is an important government stratum composed of business managers and technicians with ample experience in such sectors as tourism, particularly in the military. The most important among them is the 61-year-old Gen. Alberto Rodríguez López-Calleja, a former son-in-law of Raúl Castro, who is the director of GAESA, the huge military business conglomerate, which includes Gaviota, the principal tourist enterprise in the island. It is significant that he recently became a member of the Political Bureau of the PCC.

Perhaps this younger generation of business military and civilian bureaucrats may try to overcome the rentier mentality that 30 years of ample Soviet assistance created among the Cuban leadership as witnessed the failure to modernize and diversify the sugar industry (as Brazil did) during those relatively prosperous years that ended in 1990. To be sure, the U.S. economic blockade contributed to the rentier mentality by encouraging a day-to-day economic survival attitude rather than of increasing the productivity of the Cuban economy to allow for a more prosperous future.

Finally, what about the United States? Biden is unlikely to do much in his first term to change the United States' imperialist policies towards Cuba that were significantly aggravated by Trump. Whether a possible second Democratic administration in Washington beginning in 2025 will do anything different remains an open question.

There is, however, a paradox underlying the U.S. government's Cuba policy. While U.S. policy is not at present primarily driven by ruling class interests but, rather, by electoral considerations, particularly in the highly contested state of Florida, it is not for that reason necessarily less harsh or, what is more alarming, less durable. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, probably the most politically active business institution in the United States has advocated the resumption of normal business relations with Cuba for many years. Thomas J. Donohue, its long-time director who retired earlier this year, visited Cuba in numerous occasions and met with government leaders there. Big

agribusiness concerns are also interested in doing business with Cuba as are agricultural and other business interests in the South, Southwest and Mountain States represented by both Republican and Democratic politicians. However, it is doubtful that they are inclined to expend a lot of political capital in achieving that goal.

This places a heavy extra burden on the U.S. Left to overcome the deadlock, which clearly favors the indefinite continuation of the blockade, through a new type of campaign that both zeroes in on the grave aggression and injustice committed against the Cuban people without at the same time becoming apologists for the political leadership of the Cuban state.

Be that as it may, people on the Left in the United States have two key tasks. First, they should firmly oppose the criminal economic blockade of Cuba. Second, they should support the democratic rights of the Cuban people rather than an ossified police state, in the same way that they have supported the struggle for human rights, democracy, and radical social and economic change in Colombia and Chile in Latin America as well as Myanmar and Hong Kong in Asia.

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P.S.

• In These Times. July 27, 2021:

<https://inthesetimes.com/article/cuban-revolution-protest-july-united-states>

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