

4. Stephen Massey

“Institutional Contradictions and Transnational Cleavages: The Cuban Revolution and the Challenge of Democratic Transition”

I. Introduction

A decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Communist Cuba continues to defy history. Cuba's survival is remarkable given that the island suffered a 50 percent reduction in economic activity between 1991-1993 as a direct result of the Soviet collapse. Data on gross national product and growth rates for developing and developed countries compiled by the World Bank (and published in *World Tables* and *World Development Report*) do not show contractions in economic activity for any country over a three-year period that approach the magnitude of Cuba's. Thus, in the wake of the Soviet demise, it was reasonable to predict that Cuba would be the next domino to fall.

Since 1991, the warring predictions of Cuba's dubious future have been described and debated in the halls of academia and in countless journal articles. There is no need to restate those well-worn arguments here. However, there are two points worth making that reveal the complexity of the changing Revolution at the dawn of the twenty-first century. First, the response of the Cuban regime since 1991 has created a series of mounting contradictions that challenge the ideological authenticity of the Revolution. These contradictions have important implications for the strength and resilience of the Cuban regime, both now and in the future. Secondly, Cuba's national cleavages leave it vulnerable to profound social and political chaos, which will become especially dangerous with the death of Fidel Castro. Castro's death, whenever it may occur, will elicit a response from a sizable exile community that will raise profound questions about the definition of the island's polity. Together with the pressures of globalization, the emergence of a 'stateness' problem in post-Castro Cuba threatens to create cleavages within the system that will test the resilience of the Revolution unlike ever before. The coexistence of centralization and fragmentation, of nationalism and transnationalism, will be key sources of turbulence confronting the post-Castro leadership.

II. *Mounting Contradictions and Regime Resilience*

The Cuban Revolution cannot be separated from Fidel Castro, who has the incredulous honor of running the longest dictatorship of the twentieth century. Castro's anti-American and anti-capitalist crusade closed a chapter of national humiliation and exploitation that began in 1898 and ended in 1959. For over forty years, Castro has benefited from accidents of history and geography; perhaps even more important than decades of Soviet assistance is the continued presence of the regime's loyal archenemy just ninety miles from Havana. The intensity of nationalist rhetoric, the extent of violence, the constant theme of conflict, and the divine appeal to the legacy of the Revolution's spiritual leader, Ernesto Che Guevarra – each of these strategies has emboldened Castro and pandered to the latent *macho* spirit of the Cuban people (Thomas 1485). Cubans are proud of the Revolution's remarkable education and healthcare achievements, the ruin of the old political elite, and the end of corruption and *gangsterismo*.

Thus, Cuba is unlike the former Soviet empire in Eastern Europe, where states had their origins in foreign domination by the U.S.S.R. and were themselves led by second- or third-generation communist leaders who lacked real political legitimacy (Suchlicki 236). Within the Soviet empire, the consolidation of party-state administrative structures gave the Warsaw Pact countries a high degree of regional commonality and dependence upon a central hegemon. These were not domestically-produced experiments rooted in a social revolution advanced by the people. Soviet troops altered domestic politics in three important cases – during the GDR riots of 1953, during Hungary's Revolution in 1956, and after the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia in 1968. The presence of foreign combat troops, controlled by a

Communist hegemon that proved willing to use force, thwarted independent political developments in Soviet East Central Europe (Linz and Stepan 238). When Gorbachev made his momentous December 1988 announcement that the Soviet Union was prepared to remove its forces from Eastern Europe, he irreversibly altered power relationships across the Warsaw Pact countries in a way that weakened Communist governments and emboldened democratic opposition movements.

No such situation exists in Cuba, where a strong military and the original revolutionary leader dominate the country. Not unlike Mao and Tito, Castro did not rise to power on the coattails of a Red Army, but instead through his own efforts. And unlike many former Soviet leaders, Castro is not perceived as a corrupt politician who yields financial advantages from his position. Like its Chinese and Vietnamese counterparts, the Cuban Revolution grew out of indigenous guerilla movements in response to international influences, and the strength of its system derives from the domestic sources of its original consolidation. Among the Cuban people, there remains a strong belief in the efficacy of the state security services and an overwhelming fear of their repressive capabilities. There is nothing in Cuba that represents a coherent, well-organized opposition of the sort found in Eastern Europe during the 1980s. Mass migration has purged Cuba of its most ardent critics, and what remains is a largely loyal or ambivalent population that supports Cuba's Revolution and its historical position.

Whereas political pluralism, mobilization and leadership in Cuba approximate a classic totalitarian paradigm, post-Cold War realities have challenged the coherence of the regime's guiding ideology. As emergency measures during the 1990s hardened into fixed policies, and as friends became enemies, Cuba drifted slowly away from its totalitarian model. The problem for Castro was that every effort at justification proved self-contradictory. The infusion of foreign capital to build luxury hotels in segregated tourist zones, together with the establishment of select stores for purchasing overseas foodstuffs with U.S. dollars, demonstrated the ascent of a society of 'haves' and 'have-nots'. These reforms, which benefit mainly those who work in the tourist sector and those who have generous relatives abroad, challenge the ideology of extreme egalitarianism. Meanwhile, living standards for average (dollarless) Cubans remain at a depressed level compared with 1990 (CIA World Factbook, 2000). Signs everywhere point to the decomposition of the social fabric and economic infrastructure that have long been the pillars of the Revolution. Growing public dependence upon the informal economy, the erosion of Cuba's healthcare and education systems, and widespread underemployment tangibly demonstrate that the system worked imperfectly only with financial and ideological support from external powers.

Popular disaffection with the Revolution, however, is remarkably nowhere near the level that characterized the post-totalitarian regimes of Eastern Europe during the 1980s. What distinguishes the Soviet system was the extent to which its leaders were willing to sacrifice ideology in the course of economic transformation. *Glasnost* and *perestroika* undermined the ideological foundation upon which the Soviet Union rested, calling into question the justification for the preservation of the Soviet system. From Havana, Castro criticized Gorbachev's policies as sympathetic to global capitalism and Western imperialism. After 1991, Castro advanced only the reforms necessary to preserve Revolutionary ideology and defend the island from the continued American threat. Today's Cuban Revolution is not the dying regime that the Soviet leadership encountered in the mid-1980s.

III. Penetrating the Regime: Stateness and Post-Castro Cuba

A key variable, of course, is the sustainability of an ideology that is contradicted at every turn. While most Cubans today overlook these contradictions, there is no guarantee that complacency will be sustained after Castro's death. Few post-totalitarian regimes have been able to devise a smooth system of transition, and Castro's death will commence a period of

unparalleled regime uncertainty. For the first time, the Cuban people will be forced to consider the sustainability of a system that for four decades has been so closely aligned with a single individual.

It is plausible that that the pressures confronting post-Castro Cuba will be so large as to require an opening for autonomous collective action. History has shown that when totalitarian governments signal that they are lowering the costs of civic engagement, they quickly discover that former political and social identities reemerge and expand the public space for contestation (O'Donnell and Schmitter 49). Cuba, however, has no pre-totalitarian experience with democracy, and the extent of the Communist Party's domination of national politics has prevented the development of the sort of independent political movements that existed elsewhere in Latin America and Eastern Europe *before* transitions began. There are no individuals or institutions within Cuba that have emerged with the credibility and popular support necessary to challenge the omnipotence of the regime. The legacy of over forty years of state penetration and civic repression makes such an outburst from below unlikely.

The response of nearly one million Cuban exiles, however, *will* figure prominently in the continued transformation of the Cuban system. Many Cuban-Americans look forward to Castro's death with much anticipation, falsely believing that this single event will be the signal that the Revolution has permanently collapsed. Cuban-Americans will likely use Castro's death as a springboard for their own political and economic agendas, thereby exposing a 'stateness' problem that has been masked during the Castro period. The ongoing struggle between Cubans and "Anglos" in Miami is a manifestation of their desire to retain their collective identity as part of the Cuban nation. After attaining economic success, reinforced by their critical mass in South Florida, the exiles imposed their political power and cultural values on that community, thus creating a genuinely Cuban enclave within the United States. In many respects, Little Havana is the conservative version of Cuban nationalism, while the island is the radical left counterpart. The exiles' intransigent nationalism has the same historic roots that prevail on the island.

In short, the crisis of regime following Castro's death will occur simultaneously with profound disagreements about what should constitute the Cuban polity. This will not be a territorial question, but rather a question of nationhood. The potential clash between attempts to define the Cuban 'nation' and the process of transforming the regime to accommodate a post-Fidel scenario will be key to the island's eventual transition. In order to survive, the regime will have to proceed with a coherent and transparent program of national unification. Nation-building policies, which are usually aimed at increasing cultural homogeneity, will become problematic in a post-Castro Cuba because many Cuban exiles will seek to influence the 'new' regime. Whether or not these individuals are included in the concept of the Cuban 'nation' will be a question that post-Castro nation-builders will need to confront early on. Deep-rooted antagonisms between Cubans on the island and Cuban expatriates, together with ties of kinship that link islanders with family members abroad, will challenge any attempt to define Cuba's national identity.

The pressures of globalization will only exacerbate these tensions. Like developing states elsewhere, the post-Castro government will confront the growing global contradictions between interconnectedness and fragmentation. As the Cuban economy is de-linked from culture and politics, and as Cuban exiles demand inclusion, the potential for a cycle of violence and discord becomes evermore perilous. On the one hand, a future slump in Cuba's economy will call for expanded integration with global market structures and international financial institutions. The temptation for economic recovery that this option promises will be too strong for the post-Castro leadership to ignore. On the other hand, a piecemeal approach to global integration, which is the current strategy, will only become more cumbersome as international investors seek to use Castro's death as an opening for

enlarged, unregulated investment on the island. If the post-Castro government becomes a spokesman for global economic forces rather than a protector of its own population and culture against these demanding and unexplainable changes, the Cuban state will quickly become alienated. Moreover, any notion that the post-Castro leadership is 'selling out' to foreign investors will undermine the regime's legitimacy. Ironically, the termination of the American embargo and the infusion of U.S. investment after Castro's death could cripple the Cuban system.

Conclusions

Whether Cuba will undergo a transition to democracy is a question that will define the island's development during this century. For Cubans today, the options – not open to them under the present regime – range from a slow transition in a post-Castro Cuba to fundamental political and economic chaos (Falk 627). The coexistence of nationalism and transnationalism will create profound difficulties in Cuba not unlike those experienced elsewhere in post-totalitarian systems. A so-called 'Balkanization' of the Cuban system could ignite suppressed nationalist sentiment, both on the island and among exiles. While ethnic tension is not the underlying problem, tensions that run equally deep could quickly surface. Among both islanders and exiles, the forces of cultural pride, heritage, and nationalism – together with contrasting notions about Cuba's future – will create a landscape prone to suspicion and antagonism. As sub-national and extra-national groups search for new political identities, they will question the status quo in an unprecedented way. This crisis of identity will fundamentally decide how post-Castro Cuba will define itself and its polity. As nationalism intensifies and the state becomes disjointed, the prospects for an immediate and peaceful transition to democracy on the island will erode.

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