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THE SECRETS OF CASTRO'S STAYING POWER

Jorge I. Domínguez

How Cuban Communism Survives

SHORTLY AFTER the fall of the Berlin Wall it became common in Washington and Miami to bet on the date that Fidel Castro would fall. Those bets were based on the premise that the Cuban regime could not survive without Soviet support. Gone was the Soviet economic subsidy worth no less than one-sixth of the island's total gross product; gone were the weapons transfers, free of charge. From 1989 to 1992 the Cuban economy contracted sharply, with imports shrinking from \$8.1 billion to \$2.2 billion. Yet the Cuban regime remains with Fidel Castro firmly at its helm. How has Cuban communism managed to survive?

Besides the fact that communism in Cuba was not guaranteed by Soviet tanks, Cuba is clearly different from the regimes of Eastern Europe. As early as the spring of 1990 the Cuban people understood that communism was reversible. Cubans had already witnessed its collapse elsewhere, and they were feeling the negative economic effects. A public opinion poll taken at that time showed that only one-fifth of respondents said that the food supply was good and only one-tenth could say the same of the quality of transportation. Such results make the poll credible, and therefore we ought also to believe that three-quarters of the respondents thought health services were good and that four-fifths believed the same about their schools. Cubans supported their regime because they made differentiated judgments about its performance. They understood its many failings but they could also identify its successes.

Equally important, Cubans felt free enough to tell a pollster their many criticisms of government policy. For many years

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the Cuban government has permitted, and even stimulated, forms of citizen complaint to expose corruption and mismanagement, allowing local governments to channel these grievances to the center. The pollsters tapped into this freedom to criticize specific, malperforming services. This modest but important political space has remained Havana's safety valve, and U.S. observers often err in their assessments of Cuba because they do not understand its full significance.

Research undertaken by Cuban scholars at the end of the 1980s shows also that Cubans do not accord much weight to the Communist Party as an institution but think highly of individuals who are Communist Party members. In elections to the municipal assembly in which at least two candidates had been nominated, fewer than one in ten voters reported choosing a candidate because he or she belonged to the party. Instead voters gave varied reasons: a good neighbor, a good worker, etc. It turned out, however, that many of these "good citizens" were in fact party members. Unlike their East European counterparts, these Cubans had not turned in their party cards. Although the regime was vulnerable because the party as an institution was not held in higher regard, it was nonetheless strengthened by the personal qualities of its members.

Criticism of or noncompliance with certain government policies has existed alongside significant tolerance by the regime. At the same time, the regime has earned vital public support for many of its programs and has honored important promises to its citizens. For example, when the regime vowed to rely on voluntary compliance in its efforts to promote membership in peasant cooperatives, it continued to do so even after participation slipped from its initially strong response.

Cubans have disagreed with some of their government's policies over the years; there is fertile ground in which to plant the seeds of opposition. But to understand why the Castro regime has endured it is important to focus on facts rarely reported outside Cuba: even among its critics, the regime may be considered inept on many but not all policies; it is not uniformly oppressive, and many of those who belong to the party are good folks.

Lesson from Eastern Europe: Don't Reform

CUBAN LEADERS have learned several lessons from the attempted reforms that eventually undermined other communist regimes. Lesson no. 1: undertake as few political reforms as possible. Lesson no. 2: get rid of deadwood in the party early on, before you are forced to do so. Lesson no. 3: deal harshly with potential or evident disloyalty. Lesson no. 4: do not allow a formal opposition to organize.

Following these rules, Cuba has averted the patterns that led to the demise of other communist regimes. One such pattern in Europe was the emergence of reformers within the party who ousted the old guard and then led in forming a political opening. In East Germany the makers of the transition wielded power only briefly before they themselves were swept out by elections. In Hungary the process of reform occurred over a period of years but, at the key opening, the reformers again lost out. Another pattern evident in Poland and Nicaragua (as well as in Pinochet's Chile and Marcos' Philippines) might be called "spectacular leadership error": rulers confident that they had substantial public support called a national election, which they promptly lost.

Not surprisingly, Castro's own political reforms have been minimal. He has taken steps to eliminate discrimination against religious believers and to broaden the Communist Party's appeal, and a new electoral law authorizes direct elections for National Assembly deputies and Provincial Assembly delegates. But the number of candidates in these elections equals the number of posts, nominating procedures make it impossible for an opposition candidate or party to operate, and partisan electoral campaigning remains illegal.

Cuba's official media has flooded the country with the "bad news" from Europe's old communist regimes: the breakup of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia; the outbreak of civil wars; the increase in unemployment and inflation; the elimination of various consumer subsidies; and the increase of common crime. The message to ordinary Cubans is clear: the transition to capitalism is long and painful. Elites receive a more specific message: look at what happened to Mikhail Gorbachev and other reformers; the path of reformist concessions has no end—critics and opponents are never satisfied and will always demand more. For Cuban leaders, therefore, the images on the television screens tell them to close

ranks and prevent reforms that might weaken the regime politically.

A related task has been to rejuvenate the leadership under President Castro and his brother Raúl, the armed forces minister. Until 1980 not one member of the party's Political Bureau was dismissed—this since its founding in 1965. In contrast, by the end of the Fourth Communist Party Congress in

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1991 only five of those who were members in 1975 still remained. In the interim many of Cuba’s most important officials were dismissed; some were disgraced.

Among those disgraced, three stand out. Humberto Pérez, the architect of Cuba’s economic recovery in the 1970s, was dismissed in 1985 for excessive reliance on market mechanisms. Carlos Aldana, former party secretary for ideology and international relations and among the most pragmatic and open-minded of the senior leadership, was dismissed in 1991 for corruption and negligence of duty. Worse still was the fate of Division General Arnaldo Ochoa, a highly decorated war hero for his military campaigns in the Horn of Africa in 1977–78, who was executed before a firing squad in 1989 on corruption and drug-trafficking charges. Such trials—alongside the Nuremberg-style trials that Miami radio stations promise await them—leave Cuba’s army officers loyal to the regime, grateful for their perks and unmotivated to revolt.

The government subsequently reversed its very modest political opening of the 1980s that had allowed the semi-legal formation of small human rights and opposition groups. Since 1991 many human rights and opposition activists have been arrested and sentenced to tough prison terms for their crimes of opinion and peaceful association, seeking to exercise their rights under Cuba’s constitution. Since 1991 the Cuban interior ministry has authorized and organized “rapid reaction brigades” to harass and at times to beat up dissidents. These brigades are officially described as the spontaneous response of outraged citizens to those who defame the government, the Communist Party and their leaders. This officially sponsored violence is also intended to have a deterrent effect, intimidating those who might join the feeble opposition.

Cuba’s opposition has been hit especially hard by the economy’s catastrophic decline. For any individual to survive it takes longer to stand in line for breakfast; it takes longer to stand in line before dinner. Private automobile transportation has come to a virtual standstill. It takes much longer to walk or to bicycle to work. After such a “normal” day’s travail, walking or bicycling to an evening political meeting becomes less thinkable. Economic hardship, which affects government officials far less, has further weakened Cuba’s already enfeebled and always incohesive opposition groups.

In short, the Castro brothers have ruled over and dismantled an excessively stable oligarchy. Mid-level cadres most fear the “certainty” that reform communism in Cuba would in due course lead to their own personal demise. Harsh penalties are meted out to those elites and ordinary citizens who do not toe the official line. Although many abroad expected that economic hardship would increase support for opposition groups, the short-term effects of this hardship have weakened and disorganized them, making it easier for the regime to endure. These factors have enabled Cuba’s regime to resist the fate of its erstwhile European allies. Cuba’s would-be Boris Yeltsins have thus far been cowed. Its would-be Violeta Chamorros and Václav Havels are in prison or in Miami.

The Black Market’s Helping Hand

CASTRO HAS ADJUSTED to the collapse of his communist partners by dramatically lowering Cuba’s standard of living. Cuba’s leadership seeks simply to persevere, proud but poor. The regime could survive for an indefinite period at this level of hardship. There is no serious prospect of economic improvement unless major changes are undertaken. But Castro is not so rigid and dogmatic that he will never change; backed into a corner, even now Cuba has already begun a transition toward freer markets.

This ability to adjust to circumstances helps explain the regime’s durability. In the long run, the free-market transition will lay the foundation for Cuba’s future, no matter who rules the nation or what form the government takes. Some of this transition has occurred within the framework of the formal economy. The regime has set aside a cornerstone: in the early 1960s it expropriated all foreign property; in the early 1990s it welcomes private foreign investment under attractive terms.

Such investment is notable in the tourist sector, but it can also be found in agriculture, manufacturing assembly plants and risk contracts for petroleum exploration. Like their total value, the number of investment projects is small but rising.

This trend has occurred mainly in the export sector. But the government has also liberalized regulations to permit the private contracting of certain services. Some state enterprises that export goods and services have been semiprivatized—that is, they operate as private firms with the state as sole shareholder. It would be but a small additional step to permit their full privatization, leaving them in the hands of former government and party cadres. This move cleverly anticipates the do-it-yourself privatization underway in the former Soviet Union or the last-minute reward to the faithful undertaken by the Sandinistas in Nicaragua in 1990. But whatever the motivation, these changes extend the scope of Cuba's market economy.

The rise of the illegal market economy is more important in understanding how ordinary citizens have adjusted to economic adversity. The black market's present dimensions are difficult to gauge. Some illegal markets depend on theft, but many others represent markets at their best. For example, state agriculture has never developed an efficient food distribution system. Even today crops sometimes rot unharvested in the fields. Behaving illegally but efficiently, peasants and commercial intermediaries connect with urban consumers to bring supply and demand into balance.

These illegal markets have become the regime's "secret agent" in the adjustment process, although the official position is to denounce and repress them. Recurrence to illegal markets is commonplace, and the survival of ordinary Cuban families (and even the families of government officials and party members) has increasingly come to depend on them. It is difficult to live simply on what the regime's ration card allocates, and the black market enables ordinary Cubans to supplement their diets. It also makes food or other consumer riots less likely. As a result the regime's survival has come to rest on them as well, and these illegal markets are in fact tolerated.

Illegal markets are financed by the central bank, as the government's reliance on printing paper money to finance its own deficit creates considerable excess liquidity. As money in circulation increases, however, so does inflation. Because prices in the formal economy are repressed, inflation so far accelerates only in illegal markets. In this fashion, however, the state is

losing effective control over both macroeconomic policy and the economic behavior of its citizens. The very process that has helped the regime to endure since 1989 may contribute to its weakening in the years ahead. But whether inflation in illegal markets eventually becomes a factor in bringing down the regime will depend on possible changes in Cuban domestic politics as well as in U.S. policies.

Washington's Unwitting Support

THE CASTRO REGIME endures in part because its enemies unwittingly help it to survive. U.S. policies provide ample fodder for Cuban hardliners, help censor information Cuban-Americans could provide relatives on the island and prevent ordinary Cubans from learning about the outside world.

Examples abound of how Washington unintentionally bolsters the Castro regime. On a daily basis Miami radio stations, and occasionally the U.S. government's own Radio Martí, frighten Cuban citizens with the prospect of the return of exiles who will demand property restitution. Washington prevents A.T.&T. from activating a new telephone link to the island on a normal commercial basis and prohibits the export of communications equipment such as fax machines and electronic mail. In the late 1970s Castro's regime entered one of its most unstable episodes after opening Cuba's borders to international tourism; but in 1982 the Reagan administration helped Havana regain control of its borders by making it illegal for U.S. citizens to spend money in Cuba, thus stopping U.S. tourism cold. Continuing U.S. military maneuvers and overflights constantly remind Cubans of the possibility of a U.S. threat, making it easier for Castro to call for sacrifices to defend the homeland.

Most helpful to Cuba's hardliners has been the so-called Cuban Democracy Act, which Congress enacted in the fall of 1992 in the midst of partisan competition for Florida's electoral votes. The act's only significant measure has been to mandate penalties on U.S. firms whose third-country subsidiaries trade with Cuba. Since that trade was mostly in foodstuffs, Cuban leaders should now find it easier to blame food shortages on Washington. Prior to the Cuban Democracy Act Castro's regime had become internationally isolated. It has since been able to construct a large and heterogeneous coal-

tion to defend itself. U.S. penalties on firms in third countries have provoked protests from nearly all the major U.S. allies and trading partners. In late 1992, for the first time since it began in 1960, the U.S. trade embargo was overwhelmingly condemned by the U.N. General Assembly, with the only U.S. support coming from Israel and Romania.

The Cuban Democracy Act's most likely result will simply be Cuban firms buying from non-U.S. subsidiaries. The act is politically counterproductive and economically ineffective. The United States has resurfaced as a credible international enemy, threatening Cuba once again, this time with starvation. What better gift could Cuban hardliners have received?

A New Course for U.S. Policy

THE CLINTON administration should take the initiative—regardless of what Castro does—to facilitate a peaceful political transition in Cuba. A more active U.S. policy is needed to reduce the likelihood of internal violence and to help open a wider political space for organized opposition to form. Cuban leaders have long experience in administering repression and adjusting to hardship. What they do not know how to deal with is openness and peace.

First, Washington might defang Castro's nationalist appeals if it ceased war games around Cuba. Confidence-building measures would reassure the island's citizens against U.S. attack, making it harder for Castro to ask for sacrifices. Second, the United States should also stop assisting Cuba's censorship of information: allow A.T.&T.'s telephone link on a commercial basis; permit the sale of fax machines and other communications equipment; lift regulations impeding U.S. citizens from traveling to Cuba; foster academic, cultural and artistic exchanges; arrange for the opening of news bureaus in Havana and Washington; nurture technical cooperation between U.S. and Cuban institutions to protect migratory species, clean up pollution in the Straits of Florida and exchange information on hurricane tracking. The fact of such cooperation should be broadcast to Cubans.

To remove aspects of the U.S. embargo beyond communications would require reciprocal changes in Cuba. But having demonstrated a willingness to lift restrictions in one area, the United States could use the remainder of the embargo as an active instrument of negotiation to bring about further open-

ing. Such U.S. policies would at last permit the more normal unfolding of a political process in Cuba, permitting some officials and party members to advocate more openly a redirection of policies. They would also allow regime opponents to build on the evident discontent and galloping inflation in illegal markets. A more varied politics could become possible in Cuba—at first simply as tendencies within the Communist Party—but only if U.S. policy changes so that Cubans who seek change would no longer be vulnerable to the accusation that they are traitors to the homeland.

A common objection to this approach is that only coercion works to force open a communist regime. This objection is irrelevant in Cuba's case. These proposed changes are remarkably modest and, in effect, would realign policy toward Cuba with what Reagan administration policy had been toward various other communist regimes.

The United States permitted U.S. tourists to visit Poland, Nicaraguan exiles to telephone Managua and Chinese students to buy fax machines (prior to the Tiananmen Square revolt). It developed an extensive system of confidence-building military measures with the Soviet Union as well as many academic and cultural exchanges. Along with coercive measures, these modest policies contributed to political openings in communist regimes.

There is another alternative for the Clinton administration: to ignore Cuba. It no longer matters as an international issue. Cuba looks increasingly like just another island in the Caribbean. Its focus is now on luring tourists, not deploying troops to Angola and Ethiopia or military advisers to Nicaragua and the Congo. Cuba's relations with Russia no longer threaten U.S. security, although minor annoyances remain (the port of call for the former Soviet Navy at Cienfuegos and the electronic intelligence facility at Lourdes). Cuban support for insurgencies has virtually ended, except for residues of past entanglements. Its goal is no longer to foster revolution but rather to attract private foreign investment. Trade with Canada has become more important than relations with Tajikistan. The regime is happy when its malcontents emigrate and hopes only for their remittances in the future.

“Cuba looks increasingly like just another island in the Caribbean.”

For domestic political reasons, however, change in U.S. policy seems unlikely. Although the Cuban-American community is in fact divided about evenly, only right-wing lobbies are well organized politically. In early 1993 they retained a lock on U.S. policy that made Cuba appear to be among the most important issues on the U.S. agenda. While neglecting Cuba would be better than unwittingly bolstering its hardliners, U.S. interests would best be served if Cuba were to accomplish a peaceful transition toward a more open society and polity.

Castro Could Well Endure

WHY, THEN, has Fidel Castro survived so long in power? For the very reasons he may continue to do so for many more years, unless U.S. policies change to make opposition politics at long last possible in Cuba. Heir to an authentic social revolution, ordinary Cubans remain free enough to voice complaints while they distinguish carefully between what they do and do not like, and whom they do and do not respect. Cuba's civil society is no longer as weak as it once was, but opposition to the regime has been weakened disproportionately by economic duress and remains hampered by a lack of leadership and organization to capitalize on current social and economic hardships. The state remains strongly repressive but is now assisted by illegal markets that have enabled Cubans to adjust to economic decline.

Never before have so many Cubans expressed their disapproval of the communist system. Unofficial but reliable reports indicate that in the December 1992 municipal elections one-fifth to one-quarter of all votes cast—and up to a third in Havana—were blank or null ballots, a fivefold increase from previous elections. Such results may presage the beginning of a long-expected political transition in Cuba. Only by undertaking major political changes can Cuba's leaders hope to recapture the consent of the population. But those changes are nowhere in sight.

Those Cubans in the opposition must organize far more effectively than they ever have. As long as citizens express their dissidence through lawful channels, the regime will not tumble. But beyond repression and fear, an important barrier to the growth of organized opposition is that many opposing the regime do not wish to "commit treason" or to become "the party of the United States." To create the necessary polit-

ical space for an organized opposition to grow—and perhaps eventually to triumph—Washington must moderate those policies that monopolize opposition to the regime and fuel the regime's hardliners.

Cuban leaders could stabilize their political system by undertaking careful changes of their own. They could legalize the black market to improve efficiency and production; they could decentralize power to energize those local political institutions that retain significant public support precisely because they are close and responsive to the needs of ordinary citizens. Such a strategy would not require political liberalization—Cuba would retain a one-party system. It would not return Cuba's economy to its pre-1989 circumstances; it would not reestablish the regime's full legitimacy. Such changes, however, could stem the economy's decline and even bring back some growth; they could make it more likely that ordinary citizens would remain allegiant enough for the regime to survive.

Castro may yet consolidate his style of socialism in Cuba. Even at this late hour, the regime remains in power because it retains the allegiance of enough of its people and the reluctant partnership of many U.S. allies. These circumstances prevail in part because Washington's rigid opposition continues to allow Castro to rally citizens to defend what many Cubans are able to recognize as the regime's legitimate successes. The United States has been a staunch enemy of Fidel Castro, but with an enemy like this one, he may not need friends. 