

## NOTES ON THE CURRENT SITUATION IN CUBA

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Watching the sunset from Miami Beach the other day and thinking of friends who might be looking at the exact same spectacle from the Malecón in Havana, I could understand why one might think little has changed since Fidel Castro ceded power five years ago. The distance remains huge compared with the actual miles. And if the change I wanted was for Cuba to become a capitalist democracy, even more so.

Yet, it is clear much has changed inside Cuba, and with the Obama administration's people-to-people policies, and Raúl Castro's acceptance of them, the distance is narrowing across the great divide.

Take Mother's Day as one small example. All along Galiano vendors were selling heart-shaped balloons, cards and other gifts for mom. The vendors were new and what they were selling certainly did not come from Cuba. The merchandise came from Miami, in relative bulk.

Remember, twenty years ago it was difficult even to make a phone call across the straits and those who emigrated were branded traitors, worms and scum. And just a few years ago travel and remittances were severely restricted on this end by the Bush administration.

### WHAT HAS CHANGED

What is most important in terms of change in Cuba since Fidel Castro ceded power, after the mixing with the Diaspora, is the leadership's and official media's focus. From blaming the outside world for all the country's problems to looking within for answers; from blaming the new rich within to blaming the bureaucracy, in effect the system; from marching hard

and chanting anti-U.S. slogans to working hard and debating domestic issues; from demanding unanimity in the face of the enemy to criticizing unanimity and praising diversity, albeit within clear limits; from enforcing equalitarianism to promoting reward for individual initiative; from imposing restriction after restriction to lifting some; from the state can do everything to we need a strong non-state sector at least in agriculture, the building trades, small-scale production, transportation and retail services; from outlawing the private use of labor to encouraging it up to a point; from control of all decisions and resources at the national level to granting more power and revenue to provincial and municipal governments.

There is no need to list all the political and economic changes Raúl has begun and proposed at this distinguished gathering, nor point out that less than a decade ago they were all but unthinkable and opinions expressed in letters to the *Granma* today would have landed their authors in very big trouble indeed. And yes, they are just a first step and have met tremendous resistance within the bureaucracy and to some extent the population.

### HOW ARE CUBANS FEELING ABOUT ALL THIS?

Their expectations are rising. When the government loosens up a regulation, all of a sudden the remaining ones appear much more onerous and absurd.

A tour earlier this year around the country revealed that farmers and the new self-employed are relatively upbeat, they see a future of sorts, while state workers and pensioners, at least those without significant alternative incomes or bonuses, are not. Reforms un-

derway include many losing their jobs, demands they work harder and are inevitably inflationary. The troopers see others getting ahead while they remain stuck in the mire. Some believe, and some are skeptical, when it comes to the government's pledge that austerity this time around will lead to higher wages, a stronger peso and better life.

Two years ago my beloved Avenida de la Libertad in Camagüey boasted only a few dark, dingy and barebones, hole-in-the wall state outlets. Last year I was thrilled to discover a few bicycle-peddling produce vendors had actually been allowed to set up shop. This year the vendors were lost in the crowd. Every colonial-style living room window and tall portal looking out on the broad sidewalk and on both sides of the avenue was rented to someone selling or repairing something.

So what's my take on what is taking place in Cuba? What's the broad sweep, as they say in my profession?

It makes good sense to think in military terms when one responds to that question; given the "new" 15-member political bureau includes five active duty generals, two retired generals (Raúl Castro and Adel Yzquierdo Rodríguez) and a Comandante of the Revolution (Ramiro Valdés Menéndez).

The University of Colorado's Conflict Research Consortium defines strategic retreat as follows:

When confronted with a losing situation, the losing party accepts defeat in a way which allows them to preserve as much of their resources, (both moral and physical) as possible...

Classically, this term refers to military retreats and the regrouping of forces. Since military confrontations are commonly thought of as consisting of a series of battles, it is generally considered to be good planning to retreat before one is completely defeated. The concept applies equally well, however, to political and economic struggles...

That sure sounds like Raúl Castro's explanation of his opening to private initiative in the main report to the just-concluded party Congress.

The growth of the non-public sector of the economy, far from an alleged privatization of the social property as some theoreticians would have us believe, is to become an active element facilitating the

construction of socialism in Cuba since it will allow the State to focus on raising the efficiency of the basic means of production, which are the property of the entire people, while relieving itself from the management of activities that are not strategic for the country.

This, on the other hand, will make it easier for the State to continue ensuring healthcare and education services free of charge and on equal footing to all of the people and their adequate protection through the Social Welfare System...

So why retreat?

1. The most obvious answers are that Fidel Castro is no longer able to spin his magic on a daily basis and the entire world, with the exception of North Korea, now recognizes command economics is a recipe for failure, a recognition increasingly shared by Cubans from the grassroots on up.
2. After twenty years of crisis and the stratification of Cuban society the old model simply does not fit the new social realities. Fidel, with his Battle of Ideas, tried to repress those realities, Raúl accepts them and wants to work with them.
3. The government's command and control has steadily deteriorated, along with health care and education, in part because of low wages. This was most visibly and tragically demonstrated by the deaths of the 26 psychiatric patients in late 2009 and then Zapata in 2010. The population is increasingly critical of blatant stupidities, general incompetence, opportunism, corruption, waste and over regulation. Youth continue to vote with their feet.
4. Cuba faces a debt crisis, and new creditors such as China, Brazil, Algeria, Qatar, Iran and Russia want assurances they will be paid, especially as Cuba seeks new funds for its development projects.
5. Changes in Latin America and the Caribbean and the region's relations with Cuba and the United States provide more space to carry out reforms.

Now back to The University of Colorado's Conflict Research Consortium definition of strategic retreat. It continues that those who carry out the retreat, "then set about the task of building their power base

so that they can raise the issue more successfully in the future. This may involve the development of efforts to expand their coalition of supporters, define the moral justifications underlying their goals, build enthusiasm among their current supporters, and strengthen their resource base.”

That fits in nicely with Raúl’s tactical alliance with the Catholic Church, his calling for term limits and affirmative action, economic reforms and plans for deepwater drilling, oil refineries, the Mariel port and golf course real-estate. Thus his measures to ease restrictions on daily life, tame the bureaucracy and the three public discussions he has orchestrated over the last 4 years. “It is necessary to continue eradicating any prejudice that prevents bringing all Cubans together, like brothers and sisters, in virtue and in the defense of our Revolution, be them believers or not,” he said at the Congress. Raúl then went on to praise work with the Roman Catholic Church and its role in the prisoner release.”With this action, we have favored the consolidation of the most precious legacy of our history and the revolutionary process: the unity of our nation.”

This brings me to another way of looking at the current situation in Cuba. The battle for the hearts and minds of the Grey Zone, a concept developed as Eastern Europe collapsed to describe those working within the system who nevertheless wanted change.

It is safe to say that after twenty years of crisis and being paid less than what’s required even for barebones survival, the majority of Cubans make up the Grey Zone. They want change, but not necessarily the same changes we might want. Their natural leaders are the professionals, intellectuals, artists and other cultural figures who are increasingly speaking out, but mostly within the context of the nationalist revolutionary project.

The Bush administration pushed away the Grey Zone. Obama’s policies aim to woe the Grey Zone. Raúl is out to keep the Grey Zone in the fold even as he carries out an economic policy that hurts, at least in the short term, and changes much of the social contract established under Fidel. He wants socialism

to work and become more user friendly, not to junk it.

He is carrying out a strategic retreat, not surrendering.

### **IS CUBA EGYPT, TUNISIA, YEMEN, BAHRAIN, SYRIA OR LIBYA?**

In the 1990s everyone wanted to know if Cuba would soon go the way of European Communism. These days that’s been replaced by the Middle East and North Africa. After all, like those countries, Cuba has an autocratic government with its top leaders in power for decades. But that is where the comparison ends.

1. There is no significant Internet or satellite TV penetration;
2. The demographics are completely different;
3. It is relatively easy for young people to emigrate;
4. There is relatively good free health and education for all;
5. The police do not systematically brutalize and bloody the population;
6. The leaders are not stealing the oil wealth and fooling around at European casinos;
7. You are allowed to have sex and party;
8. Women are relatively liberated;
9. There is no developed business class; and
10. The United States does not have diplomatic and economic relations with Cuba.

Earlier this year I sat at a coffee shop overlooking Victoriano Garzón Avenue in Santiago. It was a Saturday night, when the avenue is closed for a huge street party. I watched tens of thousands of the city’s youth dance the night away. These young people could have decided to turn their fiesta into a protest in a matter of minutes. They didn’t. “No one is desperate here,” one reveler said when I asked why they hadn’t. “Our leaders are not demented, brutal and greedy fools, they know how to appease the masses,” his female companion quipped. For the first time in its history most of Santiago now has running water 24 hours a day.