

# POSSIBLE POLITICAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN CUBA IN THE LIGHT OF SOME THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICALLY COMPARATIVE ELEMENTS

Vegard Bye

One of the intriguing aspects of on-going transformations in Cuba is that absolutely nothing is said about their intended objective. Observers are mostly left to speculate about the direction in which the country is heading—apart from some general language with very little informative value of “updating socialism.” There is a long list of mostly economic reform decisions implying a certain retreat from state monopoly and the easing of some important restrictions. But no development model has been presented, either at the 6<sup>th</sup> Communist Party Congress in 2011 or afterwards.

The aim of this article is to interpret these changes against the backdrop of existing transition literature, both theoretical as well as empirically-drawn from other transition cases over the last decades. The literature to which we refer has the common characteristic that there is a movement towards market economy; Soviet-style planning systems are simply no longer a reference point in today’s world. This of course does not rule out mixed economies, e.g., the Nordic social democratic model. Politically, there is a distinction between discussing transitions towards liberal-democratic market economies, on the one hand, versus what we could call authoritarian market models (most often dominated by state capitalism) on the other. In both cases, the emphasis may also vary between a structural approach, what we normal-

ly associate with political economy analysis, and more actor-oriented approach, actors being institutions or individuals.

There is little doubt that Cuba is slowly moving towards a more market-dominated economy, although the degree of state retreat is still uncertain. The 2011 Party Congress established very clearly that plan rather than market should have the upper hand in the economy. In reality, it is highly questionable how much leverage the central planning system still has. But the market economy is still to a large degree unofficial and even illegal as central planning becomes increasingly irrelevant. The big question is whether movement is toward a brand of capitalism with more liberal-democratic characteristics or some kind of state-dominated capitalism with a continuation of authoritarian political structures. In the article we will look at the characteristics of transitions of both liberal-democratic and authoritarian character, and discuss to what extent present change processes in Cuba coincide with either of them.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS

The world has seen some impressive moves from totalitarian and authoritarian to democratic regimes over the last 30–40 years. This is what Samuel P. Huntington refers to as “the third wave of democratizations,”<sup>1</sup> or what we will call the political economy

---

1. Samuel P. Huntington (1991). *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Twentieth Century* (University of Oklahoma Press).

of liberal-democratic transitions: the extensive democratization process taking place particularly in Southern Europe, Latin America and in the former USSR and Eastern Europe (although the latter in many cases has ended up as what we refer to as authoritarian market transition). But also Africa and Asia have been affected by this trend.

Some authors like Haggard & Kaufman are mostly concerned with structuralist approaches of what is often called “authoritarian withdrawal,”<sup>2</sup> most often understood as a consequence of economic (and social) crises leading to the loss of social support and thereby social protest. In such cases, the sitting regime is left with the alternative of easing its authoritarian control and giving way to more democracy, or strengthening repression. There is no doubt that Cuba finds itself in an economic and social crisis. Most observers would claim that the regime’s social support is clearly not as solid as it had been. What we have seen little of until now is social protest. But we cannot rule it out as a consequence of a gradual reduction in authoritarian control. However, the relevance of Haggard & Kaufman’s analysis in the Cuban case is limited because it deals primarily with crises emerging in developing countries that already have well-developed market economies. It focuses on the struggle between conflicting socio-economic elites mobilizing support for their respective projects, with emphasis on how economic policies affect different social groups. Another important factor in their analysis is how politics is structured by representative institutions and the state itself, in order to derive political or policy outcomes from economic cleavages and interests. The applicability of this element is difficult to judge in the Cuban case.

What may be relevant for the Cuban case is the thesis that authoritarian regimes are more dependent than democracies on their capacity to deliver material resources to key supporters. While key supporters of the Cuban regime within the power sphere may be offered increasing privileges, a contradiction is in-

creasing between them (e.g., the military) and the traditional supporters of the revolution outside of the power sphere (the poorest segments of the population, including many Afro-Cubans). Also relevant for Cuba is the differentiation that Haggard & Kaufman make between different kinds of authoritarian regimes, where it is claimed that “dominant party regimes” (when compared to military governments) possess greater political resources for the management of political conflict, and they are therefore more likely to persist through economic crises. This can definitely be confirmed in the case of Cuba up till now. The question is whether the party is capable of maintaining this position much longer.

Most studies of transition to liberal democratic regimes tend to focus more on the role of actors—both social groups and institutions—than on structural aspects of the economy. One of the classical contributions to the comparative study of democratic transitions is that by Juan L. Linz and Alfred Stepan.<sup>3</sup> Their analysis defines five arenas considered to be necessary for a consolidated democracy. This is worth discussing in the case of Cuba.

The first arena to study in Cuba would be what Linz & Stepan refer to as an institutionalized *economic society*: norms, institutions and regulations that mediate between state and market. Market economy and ownership diversity capable of producing the independence and liveliness of civil society will make crucial contributions to a democracy. This is a hot issue to study in today’s Cuba. The economic society is not yet well institutionalized, but the process has started, and its further evolution will be decisive for the regime outcome.

The second arena is *civil society*, defined as self-organizing groups, movements, individuals, relatively autonomous from the state (trade unions, entrepreneurial groups, journalists, lawyers). In Latin America and partly in Eastern Europe (Poland), under previous military-led bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes, such civil society has shown great capacity

2. Stephan Haggard & Robert R. Kaufman (1995). *The Political Economy of Democratic Transitions* (Princeton University Press).

3. Juan L. Linz & Alfred Stepan (1996). *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation* (The Johns Hopkins University Press).

to mobilize the opposition to repressive regimes. In other cases, popular protest in the street has been the beginning of transitions. Only in the case of China (Tiananmen Square), were the regimes studied by Linz & Stepan willing to use massive force to quell protest movements. In Cuba, independent civil society is still very weak, but it is in the process of strengthening. Of particular importance may be the relationship between economic and civil society, i.e., whether the new economic groups may be able to constitute themselves to represent their interests vis-à-vis the state. We have recently seen the first examples of that, and this could have wide-reaching political consequences if it becomes a general trend.<sup>4</sup>

A third arena is a relatively autonomous and valued *political society*: mechanisms to contest the legitimate right to exercise control over public power and the state apparatus. Linz & Stepan argue that civil society may destroy a non-democratic regime, but political society is required to allow full democratic transition and particularly its consolidation, so there is an important complementarity between the two. In Cuba, the abolition of the monopoly status of the Communist Party would be decisive for the emergence of a political society. This was explicitly ruled out by the 6<sup>th</sup> Party Congress. But many intellectual party members are silently complaining that the party is gradually losing its relevance, since no real debates about the country's future take place there. This debate will then have to move to other arenas, at the very latest when the Castros are out of power. But as long as no open debate of this kind and no public contestation of existing power is permitted, liberal democracy is definitely not on the agenda.

The fourth arena is *rule of law* to ensure legal guarantees for citizens' freedoms and independent associational life: all significant actors, especially the democratic government and the state, must respect and uphold the rule of law, embodied in a spirit of

constitutionalism—a clear hierarchy of laws, interpreted by an independent judicial system and supported by a strong legal culture in civil society. We are of course far from this situation in Cuba, particularly as long as the Cuban judiciary enjoys no real independence. But Raúl Castro's strong insistence on institutional rather than Fidel's personalistic style of leadership may be a step in the right direction.

The fifth arena is a *state bureaucracy* that is "usable by the new democratic government," with an effective capacity to command (monopoly of legitimate use of force), regulate (prepare laws) and extract (compulsory taxation). The issue is particularly sensitive in post-Communist cases where the distinction between the party and the state has been virtually obliterated and the party went out of power (disintegrated or delegitimized). Again, Raúl Castro's insistence on a clearer distinction between the roles of the party and the state may be an important beginning. Cuba's problem is not that the state is weak—quite the contrary. But the lack of transparency and the bureaucracy's unwillingness to implement reforms put a question mark on whether this condition may be easily fulfilled.

Given the importance of the agrarian transformations in the present reform process in Cuba, it is of particular interest to study *the role and behavior of peasants*. Among the more conservative students of democratic transitions, Francis Fukuyama pays much attention to the decisive role of the self-owning peasants, with the right to freely engage in commerce, the opportunity to communicate among themselves, and getting organized as political agents.<sup>5</sup> Although his examples are mostly from far more traditional societies, where the peasants were a numerically more important group in today's Cuba, this may be an important factor to watch, since agriculture still is such a decisive factor in the Cuban society (due to heavy import dependence and serious shortages of food).

---

4. One recent example of this occurred in Santa Clara on 11 September (2013), when 200 licensed owners of horse carriages made a peaceful demonstration in front of the government office, protesting against high taxes. A group of dissenters, including the well-known dissenter Guillermo Fariñas (winner of the European Parliament's Sakharov prize), teamed up with the social protest to show their support.

5. Francis Fukuyama (2011). *The Origins of Political Order* (Farrar Straus and Giroux).

Fukuyama, like Linz & Stepan, link this to the *emergence of modern civil society*: “The mobilization of social groups allows weak individuals to pool their interests and enter the political system; even when social groups do not seek political objectives, voluntary associations have spillover effects in fostering the ability of individuals to work with one another in novel situations—what is termed *social capital*” (p. 472). “Successful liberal democracy,” Fukuyama goes on to say, “requires both a state that is strong, unified and able to enforce laws on its own territory, and a society that is strong and cohesive and able to impose accountability on the state. *It is the balance between a strong state and a strong society that makes democracy work...*” (p. 480, italics added).

The example of present-day China—of relevance for Cuba—stands out in contrast to this: “But China is today growing rapidly with only a strong state in place. Is this situation sustainable in the long run” (without either rule of law or accountability)? “Will the social mobilization triggered by growth be contained by a forceful authoritarian state, or will it lead to unstoppable demands for democratic accountability?” (p. 481). Fukuyama’s historical and comparative observations leave no doubt that the process of agricultural reform (including land tenure systems) in Cuba, and the role played by individual peasants and farmers including as emerging social and political actors, will offer very important indicators of future political development. The same is the case with the emergence of a more independent civil society.

### THE DEMISE OF THE SOVIET UNION — CAN THE SAME PATTERN BE REPEATED IN CUBA?

When considering Cuba’s future—although one can hardly overestimate what has been called “*Cuban exceptionalism*”<sup>6</sup>—one cannot avoid studying the *ele-*

*ments that made communism fall in the USSR and Eastern Europe*. One of the best studies of this is by the British historian Archie Brown.<sup>7</sup> Some of the factors in Brown’s analysis clearly apply Cuba; others do not.

The *economic crisis* argument is evidently crucial. By the mid-1980s everyone could agree, according to Brown, that the Soviet economy was not performing well, and this weakened the conservative opposition to reform proposals. When economic failure was accompanied by a host of social problems (declining birth rate, increase in infant mortality rate, increased death among middle-aged men largely due to a major problem of alcoholism), the legitimacy of the system obviously fell dramatically. There is clearly a parallel to this in Cuba, and it is a driving force behind the reforms. The conservative opposition coming from the bureaucracy and the traditionalists within the party may slow down the process, but not halt it.

A second factor highlighted by Brown is *improving educational levels*. The more educated the population became, the more they were inclined to seek information denied to them by the party-state authorities. He argues: “By nurturing a highly educated population, Communism contained the seeds of its own destruction” (pp. 588–89). Seven percent had completed higher education in USSR by the mid-1980s. This represented a significant increase. Brown quotes Armenian political sociologist Rafael Safarov as saying: “It’s a sociological law that the more information you give people, the more government policy becomes dependent on public opinion” (p. 599). Only 3 years into Gorbachev’s Perestroika, the free flow of information (“Glasnost”) became a political reality in the USSR, and only then did public opinion become a serious factor in the political equation.

6. Bert Hoffmann and Laurence Whitehead (editors) (2007). *Debating Cuban Exceptionalism* (Palgrave Macmillan), discusses a number of factors that make Cuba and the Cuban revolution so different from all other cases that comparisons often have failed completely.

7. Archie Brown (2009). *The Rise and Fall of Communism* (HarperCollins). Brown’s historical study is an interpretation of the factors leading to the fall of communism in the USSR and Eastern Europe, held up against the peculiarities of China, Vietnam and Cuba: “...the Communist Party itself made a powerful appeal to those who wished to see China reassert itself as a nation after a century and a half of humiliation at the hands of foreigners. In Vietnam and Cuba, anti-imperialist sentiments and national pride were also of great importance both in the foundation of the regimes and for their persistence” (p. 586).

The figures for higher education are much higher in Cuba than they ever were in the USSR. Drastically improved levels of education did not challenge the position of the Cuban revolution. This may perhaps gradually be expected to become a factor as higher education gives less and less access to meaningful professional careers and acceptable standards of living, and as access to the internet gradually increases. But the trend so far has been one of apathy rather than revolt. Young, educated and frustrated people in Cuba prefer finding a way to leave the country rather than to organize any opposition.

This factor of *access to travel* was an important element in the USSR, according to Brown. It became increasingly anomalous, he claims, that educated Soviet citizens could not travel as freely as the Westerners they saw visiting their own country, or have the same access to films or literature. This may actually have been one of the motives behind Cuba's very significant migration reform, now making it much easier for young people—even dissenters—to travel, either to leave the country or to come and go. Once again, Cuba is opening a safety valve to let off the accumulated steam of discontent among a new generation of disaffected people. But this time, by legalizing migration out of the country and back, it also has the effect of breaking down the barrier between life in Cuba and life abroad. That may in itself be contributing to a more pluralistic society. As with access to information, money seems to be the main barrier.

Brown makes an interesting assessment of the relationship between the *two defining concepts of Gorbachev's policies*, ultimately leading to the demise of the USSR. Accumulation of serious problems was the initial trigger for radical reform (*perestroika*=restructuring), initially stimulated by economic failure but gradually becoming the main factor. Perestroika allowed more independent actions from various ministries and introduced some market-like reforms. The goal of perestroika when it was launched at the 19th Party Conference in 1988, however, was not to end

the command economy but rather to make socialism work more efficiently to better meet the needs of Soviet consumers. Gorbachev's 1987 book *Perestroika* speaks about "more socialism and more democracy,"<sup>8</sup> strikingly similar to the official concept for reforms in Cuba: "updating socialism." But it was only when perestroika was paired with *glasnost* (openness, transparency), allegedly introduced by Gorbachev to help reduce the corruption at the top of the Communist Party and the Soviet government and moderate the abuse of administrative power, that the political effects of the reforms started to accelerate.

Equally challenging, *glasnost* also implied permission of more open public debate. This, of course was met with tremendous resistance, as Brown explains: "It is not surprising that conservative Communists complained at virtually every meeting of the Politburo about the press being out of control. A free flow of information and a Communist system were mutually incompatible... Freedom of speech and of publication became the most important manifestations of the new pluralism, and a bulwark against a return to the past" (p. 600).

In Cuba, there has been no explicit message about *glasnost* or political reform. There is one parallel in the sense that Cuba has also launched a serious campaign against corruption. But the main problem with this campaign, leading Cuban intellectuals argue, is precisely that it is not accompanied by policies to promote transparency and public accountability; that the system continues to be "opaque to knowledge and citizen control of (investment) contracts, the tender processes and the awarding of contracts for investment projects."<sup>9</sup> As we have noted, there are clear signs of increasing public debate in Cuba, but it is not taking place within the party—definitely not in public and apparently not even internally. One reason for this may exactly be a wish to maintain the monolithic unity of the Party, in order to avoid a repetition of what happened in the USSR.

8. Michael Gorbachev (1987). *Perestroika* (Harper & Row).

9. José Antonio Alonso and Pavel Vidal (2013). *¿Quo Vadis, Cuba? La Incierta Senda de la Reforma* (Editorial Catarata). The quote is taken from the introductory chapter of the book, reproduced by *Espacio Laical*, Havana, July 2013.

Another interesting factor highlighted by Brown is that the vast majority of leading specialists in the social sciences (academic lawyers, economists, sociologists, political analysts) in the USSR were party members, from whom the most influential ideas for change (economic and political) emanated. This is clearly also the case in Cuba—most visible in the case of economists. But once again it has to be repeated that the debate they are promoting does not occur within the party; there is simply no arena for such debate there.

The big question in the 1980s was whether the Soviet system would change from within—*evolve or collapse?* The Prague Spring was seen as precursor to *Perestroika*: movement for change came from within the Communist Party (development of critical thinking within the party intelligentsia) and reached fruition when the coming to power of a new party leader (by chance rather than by conscious choice) altered the balance of forces within the political elite. “No one who thought as Gorbachev did in 1988, not to speak of 1990–91, could have become general secretary in 1985 unless he had been an actor of Oscar-winning talents who kept all his real opinions to himself” (Brown p. 596). Still, Brown argues that Gorbachev needed reform-minded people one step down in the party hierarchy in order to win the ideological battle that followed.

This is of course also one of the big questions in Cuba, framed as follows by a leading Cuban political scientist now living in the U.S.:

Without the authority provided by Fidel’s charisma, the PCC will need rules to solve conflicts between its factions and to manage its leadership promotion from one generation to another. To rule in an institutionalized way, the PCC will have to normalize its intra-party political discussion, creating formal spaces for pluralism and disagreement within its ranks. It will have to differentiate the roles of government organizations from those of the party. It will also

need to professionalize internal party governance though a collective division of labor in the Secretariat. The experience of other one-party rule regimes shows that functional division tends to favor the creation of factional politics.”<sup>10</sup>

So far, it has been impossible to see any sign of significant new political thinking—let alone debate—among the new generation of party cadres. We may have to wait until the end of the Castro era (2018) to see this, but without a gradual opening while Raúl is still in charge, the challenge of managing internal debate and factions may be too much for the future leadership, assumingly headed by Miguel Díaz-Canel.

The Russian example, however, soon took a very different path, which also should be kept in mind when looking for Cuban parallels: the massive transfer of state property to a tiny group of super-rich capitalists (the so-called oligarchs),<sup>11</sup> and the neo-authoritarian leadership of Vladimir Putin. The transition to “capitalism” (although it can hardly be called “market economy”) in Russia has been accompanied by a certain transition to democracy, but with clear and probably increasing restrictions.

#### **AUTHORITARIAN MARKET TRANSITION: THE CASE OF VIETNAM**

Let us then move to a case of transition to what we may call authoritarian market system, with the same purpose of looking for interesting parallels to what is happening in Cuba. The Vietnam transition process is probably the closest we may come to a “role model” for how the present Cuban leadership is thinking:<sup>12</sup> there is a strong *political alliance* between Cuba and Vietnam (different from the pragmatic relations with a country like China) and Cuba has repeatedly stressed that it will study the current model of economic development in Vietnam, referring to the *Doi Moi* (renovation) initiated at the 1986 Communist Party Congress.

10. Arturo López-Levy (2011). “Change in Post-Fidel Cuba: The Challenges of Political Liberalization and Economic Reform,” in *Cuba in Transition—Volume 21* (Association for the Study of Cuban Economy), p. 385.

11. Two good studies of this process are: Chrystia Freeland (2000). *Sale of the Century: The Inside Story of the Second Russian Revolution* (Little Brown); and: Andrei Shleifer and Daniel Treisman (2000). *Without a Map: Political Tactics and Economic Reform in Russia* (MIT Press).

De Vylder & Fforde have presented one of the best political economy analyses of the Vietnamese transition,<sup>13</sup> where they claim that the Vietnamese transition was strongly influenced by some external factors which also affected Cuba at the same time: the aid cuts by COMECON and particularly the USSR in the late 1980s, culminating with the demise of the USSR. When the USSR ceased to be the main reference point for Vietnam's development, the success of the "East Asian Tigers" rapidly emerged as another beacon. The lesson from Eastern Europe was to allow for *more perestroika* (restructuring) to avoid economic collapse, but *less glasnost* (openness) to avoid the loss of Communist Party hegemony.<sup>14</sup>

This way of reading the lessons from Eastern Europe is quite similar to the Cuban case. Still, the internal factors are seen as the more important in the Vietnamese case. De Vylder & Fforde interpret the political process as an adaptation by the Communist Party to the changing political structures beneath it: (a) the rising state business interests (of a rapidly commercialized state sector), with the military playing an important role in food production; and (b) the fear of massive urban unemployment as non-viable state enterprises had to close, and the potential for social tension and disorder. Both these factors are clearly present in Cuba, where there is an increasing gulf between a majority of unproductive state enterprises and successful enterprises (many run by military companies) and joint ventures with foreign capital. This combination of factors is an important driver in favor of increasing market reforms in Cuba, just as in Vietnam.

Regarding the second factor, it is interesting to note that massive lay-offs of state workers after the *Doi Moi* was largely compensated by mushrooming employment opportunities in the non-state sector, gen-

erally offering better conditions than in the companies they left. But there are two important factors that distinguish Cuba from Vietnam here: (a) the high percentage of rural and agricultural population in Vietnam may have eased the process, by strengthening access to land and markets for the peasants; and (b) the strong and relatively unfettered stimulus in Vietnam to establish private companies, leading to a rapid surge in private savings and investments, and a strong encouragement of the entrepreneurial spirit. The Vietnamese Communist Party took a decision in 2006 to remove the clause that party members "could not exploit," i.e., that they were allowed to run private business and hire workers and practice capital accumulation. This was seen as crossing a vital ideological line, although it was probably little more than bringing the Party in line with a well-established practice. In Cuba, "capital accumulation" was explicitly ruled out by Raúl Castro in his speech to the Cuban Party Congress in 2011, thus making a clear distinction from the Vietnamese model.

The limits to *political* reform in Vietnam are quite similar to the ones seen in Cuba: limited freedom of expression (no independent media), a significant process of releasing political prisoners ending up with similar limited numbers of prisoners (a few dozen), limited access to foreign sources of information, and limited freedom of organization and association (an issue to which we will return below). The two countries also have in common the absence of organized extra-party opposition. One important difference after the migration reform in Cuba is that Cubans now enjoy much wider freedom to travel.

Just as the economic reforms have gone further in Vietnam than in Cuba, the challenge from civil society has probably also been greater. According to Thayer, the clearest expression of this was the emer-

12. When Raúl Castro visited Vietnam in July 2012, following up on Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong's visit to Havana two months earlier, there was a clear difference in the way relations with this country was portrayed in official declarations compared to the two other stop-overs on the same journey: Beijing and Moscow. This relationship is one of "brotherhood," "solidarity," rather than "partnership" and "mutual benefits," although the magnitude of trade and investments from Vietnam is lower.

13. Stefan de Vylder & Adam Fforde (1996). *From Plan to Market: The Economic Transition in Vietnam* (Westview Press).

14. An example of the latter was that a member of the Politburo who openly advocated for pluralism was summarily dismissed (after 1989).

gence of what he calls the “political civil society,” which grew out of an explosion in the 1990s of more ordinary non-governmental organizations (NGOs) at the grassroots level (140,000 community based organizations in 2005), with quite ambiguous legal status and therefore also vulnerable.<sup>15</sup> They tended to see their role more as negotiating improved services with state officials and delivering services no longer provided by the state, rather than confronting the regime. National NGOs were matched by the presence of a relatively large number of international NGOs (180 in 2002 according to Thayer), at times dominating the country’s civil society. These grassroots organizations received financial assistance from diaspora Vietnamese, most often in the U.S., where the Viet Tan Party played a role. In 2006 it coalesced into an identifiable political movement: the Bloc 8406. This group issued a Manifesto on Freedom and Democracy for Vietnam, with 118 signatories, among them teachers and lecturers, university professors, Catholic priests and other liberal professionals. The movement started making more systematic use of social media to spread its message. An important accompanying event was a farmers’ movement protesting over land grievances in 2007, which received support from the Bloc 8406. When this movement seriously started to challenge the hegemony of one-party rule, it was heavily repressed.

Parallels to Cuba and the links between the diaspora and the domestic dissenters are of course very obvious. There is good reason to believe that the Cuban security apparatus is studying this Vietnamese experience quite carefully.

Thayer’s main thesis is that “Vietnam may face the risk of domestic instability if the one-party state fails to adequately address the challenge of political civil society.” Two scenarios are foreseen: *transplacement*,

i.e., joint action by members of the ruling elite, in concert with elements of the political civil society, or *transformation*, i.e., elements of the ruling Communist Party taking the lead in initiating political change.

One of the attractive features of the Vietnamese model for Cuba is of course its remarkable agriculture-led economic growth with notable reduction in poverty, yet increasing concentration of wealth. The question is of course whether it will last, but some market analysts are very optimistic in that regard.<sup>16</sup> However, there is increasing protest over land issues, endemic corruption and an inflationary spiral, which certainly represent a worry for Cuba’s official Vietnam-watchers.

Martin Gainsborough<sup>17</sup> has offered what some other Vietnam experts characterize as a “state-of-the-art exploration of political theory applied to the case of Vietnam” (Adam Fforde), challenging “conventional accounts of the state’s retreat in a thought-provoking manner” (Carlyle A. Thayer). The focus of his study is on the politics and the state. Against the backdrop of the sweeping—almost neoliberal—*Doi Moi* policy, he is curious about how these reforms in the economic arena are matched by a remarkable persistence, but yet restructuring, of political power structures. What is the nature of the Vietnamese state, and “what is the relationship of the state to the political?” He finds three key changes during the years he studied (1996–2007): changes affecting state enterprises, growing capital markets, and signs of a widening of the political space and a more vibrant civil society. But, he goes on to say, certain things do not change very fast, and power continuously seeks to re-create itself. The abolishment of one-party rule does not at all seem to be on the agenda. An evolution towards western-style liberal democracy is the

15. Carlyle A. Thayer (2009). “Vietnam and the Challenge of Political Civil Society,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*, Volume 31, No. 1 (April 2009), pp. 1–27.

16. From 2000 until 2013, Vietnam’s GDP growth rate averaged 6.2% per annum. According to a forecast by PricewaterhouseCoopers made in 2008, Vietnam may be the fastest growing emerging economy by 2025, with a potential annual growth rate of about 10% in real dollar terms, which would increase the size of the economy to 70% of the size of the UK economy by 2050 (“China to overtake US by 2025, but Vietnam may be fastest growing of emerging economies,” PricewaterhouseCoopers. 2008–03–04. Retrieved 2010–05–07).

17. Martin Gainsborough (2010). *Vietnam: Rethinking the State* (Zed Books).

least likely outcome, he argues, also seeing this in the context of other South-East Asian political systems, what Daniel Bell<sup>18</sup> has termed “illiberal democracy.” The question, then, is how else the broadening of political space might occur, within the one-party state.

In addition to the more robust civil society described more in depth by Thayer, Gainsborough has his focus on what is taking place *within the state*. And this is probably very relevant when studying the Cuban case: the reform drive does not come from independent interests made up by social classes, but from intra-elite conflict within the state apparatus. The traditional arguments (e.g., Barrington Moore<sup>19</sup> or Rueschemeyer et al<sup>20</sup>) that the emergence of strong middle classes will produce a vital pro-democratic force seem to have little relevance in Vietnam, just as in Cuba, since these classes—to the extent they exist—are so dependent on the state. In Vietnam, the various state institutions are strengthened as political actors, the National Assembly is strengthened, and the concerns of the business sector are also channeled through state-sanctioned (and not independent) institutions.<sup>21</sup>

Another important aspect of Vietnam’s case is the constant blurring between the public and the private spheres, and the use of public office for private gain. The way “corporate actors” buy influence with “state actors,” forming patronage networks, seems to be fundamental to understand how the country’s political system works. Vietnam in this sense seems to rep-

resent the almost perfect rejection of the Weberian ideals. To a large extent, this is a blueprint for the massive corruption taking place in Vietnam. We may almost speak about a peculiar form of (neo-)patrimonial state, with the ruler in the form of the ruling party controlling political and economic life where personal relationship to the party decides who has access both to the economic and political elite and is the source of amassing personal wealth.<sup>22</sup> In that sense, Vietnam may be quite similar to another possible role model for Cuba: Angola.<sup>23</sup>

This seems to be the underlying logic to Vietnam’s political system. According to Gainsborough, we may talk about a transition from a “socialist state” to a “capitalist state,” where the concept of “reform” takes on a new meaning, and where the basic idea of “state retreat” is questioned.

Cuba has developed some of the same characteristics, but they are still at a too early stage to determine whether they will become dominant. Further, lack of openness and transparency makes it difficult to both gather and analyze data. It will be very important to watch the role of Cuban top managers of the leading state enterprises (most of them mixed enterprises with foreign capital), particularly in the nickel, petroleum, agriculture export and tourism sectors, and of course of those linked to the Mariel Special Development Zone complex: Will they obtain property shares or stay as managers only? How many of them have links to the military? Is there a capital market

18. Daniel A. Bell (1995). *Beyond Liberal Democracy: Political Thinking for an East Asian Context* (St. Martin’s Press).

19. Barrington Moore (1966). *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy. Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Beacon Press).

20. Dietrich R. Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Huber Stephens and John D. Stephens (1992). *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (University of Chicago Press).

21. Important in the latter category is the way the private economic sector is organized: through a semi-governmental organization called the Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI) (where also state-owned enterprises participate), rather than through independent employer organizations. The VCCI is not under the direct control of the Communist Party, but Party committees must be established in all private enterprises (Thayer, p. 3).

22. The neo-patrimonial literature discusses traditional and personalistic power relations built around patronage and group-specific loyalties—ethnic, tribal, geographic, religious, caste/class—with monopolistic or hegemonic party structures as a special variant of this. See e.g. David Booth (2012). *Development as a collective action problem. Addressing the real challenges of African governance* (Overseas Development Institute).

23. An excellent study of the spectacular Angolan transition is Tony Hodges (2001). *Angola from Afro-Stalinism to Petro-Diamond Capitalism* (Indiana University Press).

emerging in Cuba, and what is the basis for it (foreign investments and banking, diaspora remittances, or domestic sources, e.g., as the real estate market may lead to a capital market)? How much growth will be permitted for civil society with a clear political space? And most important of all, in order to assess whether Cuba will follow a Vietnamese-like path: To what extent can we observe the emergence of patronage networks and the beginning of a (neo-)patrimonial state, where “personal relationship to the party (or the military) decides who has access both to the economic and political elite and is the source of amassing personal wealth” (to quote Gainsborough’s definition of this in the Vietnamese case)?

### DEMOCRATIC AND ECONOMIC BACKLASH IN THE WORLD

Many of the countries that have gone through democratization transitions over the last decades may be experiencing a significant slide back toward more authoritarian political structures. In Russia, the leading country in the former USSR, there seems to be an increasing perception among the population that authoritarianism is on the offensive during Vladimir Putin’s regime.<sup>24</sup> But many observers doubt the sustainability of this new authoritarianism:

The policies of President Vladimir Putin have undermined Russia’s fledgling democratic institutions but have also failed to generate any sort of coherent authoritarianism to take their place. Thus, fifteen years after the collapse of the USSR, the country still lacks any consensus about its basic principles of state legitimacy. To explain this, we must understand the ways in which the Soviet Union’s institutional legacies have short-circuited all three historically effective types of legitimate rule—traditional, rational-legal, and charismatic—resulting in a highly corrupt state that still cannot fully control its borders, monopolize the legal means of violence, or clearly articulate its role in the contemporary world.<sup>25</sup>

An interesting element of this analysis, when looking ahead at a post-Castro Cuba, is how to uphold authoritarian legitimacy when there is no charismatic source to draw on (although Putin may have tried—and with a certain success—to build that in Russia, appealing to nationalism). How much legitimacy there is in such a situation will depend on a relative economic success: leadership transition along with economic failure and increasing socio-economic inequalities may provoke more widespread and sustained public protest, as seems to be happening in Russia in the lead-up to Putin’s intended return to the Presidency in 2012.

In the former European Soviet-bloc countries going through a recent democratization, similar trends seem to be prominent, particularly in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. A recent survey study by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) shows that positive attitude towards both democracy and market economy have fallen in 2011 relative to 2006 in all EU “transition countries” except for Bulgaria.<sup>26</sup> In 11 transition countries in Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia, 50% or fewer express a clear preference for democracy after having had a certain taste of it. What is happening in Hungary under the rightist and nationalist Orban regime is creating particular worry.

How, then, about countries where the Western powers, led by the United States, have intended to “build” (or “export”) democracy? The examples of Iraq and Afghanistan do not offer much hope in this regard.

Then we have the big new hope a couple of years ago, the Arab Spring. Most observers have already pointed out several missing factors that would suggest a repetition of the Arab Spring in Cuba: limited internet and satellite TV penetration, increasing possibility to emigrate, less brutal police repression, still

24. Putin served as President (1999–2008) and Prime Minister (2008–2012); even during Medvedev’s presidency (2008–2012), most observers agree it is he who called the shots. Since 2012, of course, he is back in the position as President, based on an electoral landslide of almost two-thirds majority—although the numbers may have been slightly inflated.

25. Stephen E. Hanson (2007): “The Uncertain Future of Russia’s Weak State Authoritarianism,” *East European Politics & Societies*, February 2007 vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 67–81

26. EBRD (2011). *Life in Transition: After the Crisis*.

not very visible wealth among political leaders, liberal sex and entertainment culture.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, whatever was attractive about the Arab Spring a couple of years ago has mostly lost attraction now, if we look at the mess in countries like Syria, Libya and Egypt. It will probably not be too difficult for the Cuban leaders to convince their people that copying the mass upheavals in Cairo is a pretty bad idea.

More relevant are street protests that have blossomed lately closer to Cuba, not least in Brazil and Chile. To the extent Cubans and particularly the youth have had access to watch these movements through tightly controlled media, they would be much more of a challenge for the Cuban regime than what has happened in the Arab world. It is very interesting to note that *Granma*, at the height of the Brazilian protests, quoted ex-President Lula's supportive remarks to the youth protesters: "Democracy is not a pact of silence, but a society in movement in search of new achievements." However, the lesson drawn from these movements in Cuba is probably rather to make sure that any open youth protests must be avoided.

Another important international lesson for Cuba is of course the deep financial crisis in Europe. For those Cuban leaders who want to put brakes on the transition to market economy, the situation of a country like Spain has become a golden argument. For some convinced communists, as Fidel repeatedly has been arguing, this may even be an indication that capitalism may actually be closer to collapse than communism.

#### HOW TO CLASSIFY PRESENT CUBA— WITH PROBABLE SCENARIOS?

Linz & Stepan make a distinction between *totalitarian*, *post-totalitarian* and *authoritarian* regimes, where

present-day Cuba, according to these authors' criteria, may be seen as fitting quite well with the post-totalitarian criteria.<sup>28</sup> Looking at the four dimensions of regime type, the following observations may be made for Cuba (Table 3.1., pp. 44–45):

##### *Pluralism:*

- Limited social, economic and institutional pluralism: Yes
- Almost no political pluralism since there is a monopoly party: Yes
- "Second economy" emerging, but overwhelming state dominance: Yes

##### *Ideology:*

- Guiding ideology still exists, but there is clearly a weakened commitment to or faith in utopia: Yes
- Shift of emphasis from ideology to more rational decision-making: Yes
- "Growing empirical disjunction between official ideological claims and reality" also seems to cover the present situation in Cuba, where the regime needs to legitimize itself are decided more on the basis of performance criteria. Other cases studied in this book show a context of growing economic crisis, leading to regime collapse when midlevel functionaries of the coercive apparatus start having growing doubts about repression of protest.

##### *Mobilization:*

- A progressive loss of interest in popular mobilization: Yes
- Boredom, withdrawal and ultimately privatization of population's values become an accepted fact: Yes<sup>29</sup>

27. See Marc Frank (2011). "Notes on the Current Situation in Cuba." *Cuba in Transition—Volume 21* (Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy). Frank's list of factors that make a similar upheaval improbable in Cuba is still very much valid.

28. Based on Stepan & Linz, Arturo López-Levy uses the concept "post-totalitarian" to describe Cuba under Raúl Castro; see Arturo López-Levy (2011), op. cit.

29. A good description of how this trend is manifested in the transition from Raúl to Fidel in Cuba is the following offered by López-Levy: "In Machiavellian terms, the authority of the party is respected but its communist ideology is not loved. Cubans, particularly those who grew up after the revolution, are skeptical and suspicious of grandiose statements from communist leaders. Communism as an ideology is nearly absent from all political debate. Mobilizing the population in a Fidel-style campaign is not possible because political enthusiasm is scarce, in the absence of a nationalism-provoking event. Instead, the demand is for technocratic, institutionalized and legalistic rule" (op. cit. p. 383).

*Leadership:*

- Checks on top leadership via party structures, procedures and “internal democracy”: This does not yet manifest itself clearly.
- Top leaders are seldom charismatic. There is clearly a loss of charismatic leadership with the change from Fidel to Raúl, and the chosen successor Díaz-Canel has so far shown even less charisma.
- Recruitment to top leadership restricted to official party but less dependent on party career—alternatively from party technocrats in state apparatus (or perhaps military enterprises): Still not clearly seen—but it would come as no big surprise.

Linz & Stepan distinguish between “early,” “frozen” and “mature” post-totalitarianism. “Frozen post-totalitarianism” may often reveal *geriatric tendencies*, “with limited capacity to negotiate. Such a leadership structure, if it is not able to repress opponents in a crisis, is particularly vulnerable to collapse” (p. 47–48). Until Raúl Castro declared that he will step down in 2018 (and very likely take the rest of the historical leaders with him), Cuba would probably be such a case. But with the complete change of leadership that now is in process, the regime may actually be moving towards “mature post-totalitarianism.” What would be required to arrive there would basically be two things, according Linz & Stepan: that the opposition is able to create a “second culture” or “parallel society,” and that recruitment of new leaders becomes less dependent on party career.

Anyway, we may probably conclude that Cuba is approaching a *mature state of post-totalitarianism*, while it remains an *authoritarian* regime. The next logical step could be to get closer to a liberal-democratic society. But as we have shown in this article, there are still many forces working against such paradigmatic change.

Another way of characterizing present-day Cuba is simply to emphasize the high degree of uncertainty about what kind of society it is and where it is heading. Julia E. Sweig in a recent article used the term *public-private hybrid*, “in which multiple forms of production, property ownership, and investment, in addition to a slimmer welfare state and greater personal freedom, will coexist with military-run state companies in strategic sectors of the economy and continued one-party rule.”<sup>30</sup>

Comparing with the three transformation scenarios we drew up in our contribution to the 2012 ASCE Conference Proceedings,<sup>31</sup> we stick to our conclusion that social-democratic or other variants of liberal-democratic market transition are still not very likely. We believe that the trend over the coming years will be a rivalry between continued authoritarian withdrawal within a one-party system (monopolistic or hegemonic, but with decreasing relevance) combined with a growing market presence in the economy, versus neo-authoritarian military dominance perhaps combined with a growing (neo-)patrimonial state where the elite combines political power with growing economic wealth. The most relevant economic reform factor that may pull development in a more liberal direction is the independent space entrepreneurs, cooperatives and individual peasants and farmers manage to occupy, and how much Cuba will be willing to draw lessons from friendly and socio-economically successful democracies in Latin Ameri-

30. Julia E. Sweig and Michael J. Bustamante (2013). “Cuba After Communism—The Economic Reforms That Are Transforming the Island,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2013.

31. Vegard Bye (2012). “The Politics of Cuban Transformation—What Space for Authoritarian Withdrawal?” *Cuba in Transition—Volume 22* (Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy).

ca (like Brazil).<sup>32</sup> Strengthened military dominance of the economy, coupled with the growth of a rent-seeking military, state and/or party nomenclature, will pull the country in the opposite direction.

---

32. Brazil seems to be emerging as Cuba's most important partner after Venezuela, with rapidly growing economic as well as political links. The impact of these relations on Cuban political development is yet to be seen: to the extent they will continue to be dominated by companies like Odebrecht—perhaps the main pillar of neo-patrimonial characteristics in Brazil itself—they may not be very instrumental for more pluralistic and transparent socio-political development. But a broader exposure to Brazilian entrepreneurs as well as political and civil society may definitely lead to more pluralism also in Cuba.