

## FROM COLLISION TO COVENANT: CHALLENGES FACED BY CUBA'S FUTURE LEADERS

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In a relatively short period of time and by law of nature, all political actors, both in Havana and Miami, who have played a major role in the national arena during the last fifty years will be gone. The historical leaders of the Revolution and of the exile community, youngsters who made the 1959 Revolution together and then turned on each other between 1960 and 1965, very soon will yield to new generations who will be responsible for managing the challenges of the Cuban nation in the XXI century. This work will try to offer some insight into how these challenges should be processed by new political leaders on the island. When I say “new Cuban leaders,” I refer to a set of actors close to President Raúl Castro, who certainly will be responsible for driving the destiny of the Cuban nation, once the historic generation of the Revolution is gone.

The premise of this work is that the future of Cuba, without compromising the historical goals of the nation, should be born as a result of a national covenant and not of the collision between opposing forces. This should be the leading political goal of the heirs of the historic generation of the Revolution. This goal would require a redesign of the Cuban state for the twenty-first century. At the base of this national transformation lie two inescapable challenges: (1) reforming political institutions to facilitate the communication between politically diverse national forces; and (2) the implementation of a series of

mechanisms that would allow new political leaders to conduct this process with stability. We must acknowledge that actors working for this solution to Cuba's complex situation are not currently in positions of power, neither inside nor outside of Cuba.

The analysis and suggestions made in this essay are born out of the observation of the correlation of forces present in Cuban scenarios. I have attempted to put aside idealism and personal preferences, and give way to realism and pragmatism. National actors (in the Cuban government, civil society and exile) and the power quotas they exercise, are what they are regardless of preferences. I tried to offer solutions and make proposals based on the reality as I perceive it, but it is for those actors to build future options that are acceptable to all. Again, the main objective of this essay is to insist that the most important fact is that together we can rebuild the Cuban nation.

### POSSIBLE FUTURE SCENARIOS

In recent years, thanks to a combination of factors (increased access to cyberspace and alternative networking of information, the reactivation of public debate after the arrival of Raúl Castro to power, structuring of “micro public areas” open to debate<sup>2</sup>) it has become easier to trace various discourses about the destiny of the nation in Cuba's public spheres. These positions, coming both from inside and out-

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1. This essay was published by the Cuba Study Group in August 2013 as Issue No. 19 in its *Articles from the Island* series.

2. The concept of the “public micro spheres in the Cuban context” was coined by political analyst Armando Chaguaceda.

side the island, offer different views of the future. We could focus on four sets of actors:

1. the powerful Cuban-American right and opposition groups in Cuba, who aspire to a popular uprising in the style of the "Arab Spring" to overthrow the Cuban government;
2. the government headed by Raúl Castro, which promotes an "update" of the economic model without systematically addressing the Cuban crisis, but not returning to the failed policies of the past;
3. the traditional sector of the party and the government on the island, who want the unrestricted maintenance of the status quo in the country, and consider the economic reforms spearhead by Raúl Castro and a "sign of weakness" the dialogue between the President and the Catholic Church's hierarchy; and
4. the multiform and scattered Cuban political center (on the island and abroad), which aims at a gradual transformation of the current system without trauma or bloodshed.

I believe that some hope has been slowly taking shape in the last 7 or 8 years and there is a diffuse amalgam of actors and projects, inside and outside the island, which I like to call "Cuban centers." This process, characterized by the shift of political and symbolic borders, has contributed, after a very painful process at times, to erase the boundaries between "revolutionary and counterrevolutionary," in the case of the island; and between "communist and anticommunist," in the case of Miami. This is a dynamic (added to the generational change, the geopolitical and cultural shifts of the last decade, some institutional policies emanating from both the Cuban government as well as exiled political actors, etc.) that has led to a slow and sustained disintegration, of the bipolar paradigm of Cuban politics, obsessed with characterizing national actors as "good" or "bad" in order to grant them or take away legitimacy. The prestigious Cuban sociologist Mayra Espina has labeled this process as "the end of the era of angels and demons."<sup>3</sup>

There have been different actors in this process of the reconfiguration of political boundaries: civil society members (official, independent and opposition), scholars from inside and outside the island, religious communities (with special emphasis on the Catholic Church), some sectors of the Cuban government and the opposition in the island, the new Cuban left and some groups from the centrist right in exile.

A detailed mapping of these actors and their positions regarding the national problems leads us to find, sometimes masked behind convoluted languages, others more clearly, some meeting points. It would seem that they hope for a peaceful transition toward a sociopolitical system to ensure full political and economic sovereignty of the island against the policies of aggression from the United States, although they believe in the need for the urgent reconstruction of the bilateral relationship with that country; sustainable economic development under a mixed economy, with different forms of ownership (state, cooperative, private and self-management); a welfare state with a minimum baseline for national majorities and maintaining free and universal access to public services (a significant conquest of the 1959 Revolution); full integration of the country (from local standards) in the networks of the world capitalist economy and inter-American institutional architecture; a democratic state that guarantees the authority of the majority, with the respect and co-participation of the minorities; the institutionalization of social movements and of the civil society as active political participants; and an open and inclusive public scenario as an ideal mechanism for the discussion of national problems.

The goal is achieving all of this through an orderly and gradual transformation of the state of affairs on the island, without trauma or bloodshed, favoring a path of dialogue, consensus and political agreement. Unfortunately, the actors currently vying for this gradual patriotic solution do not appear to be able to predict Cuba's future, so they must work hard for it.

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3. Some of the elements of this classification belong to political expert Arturo López-Levy.

### WHO HOLDS THE POWER?

Raúl Castro's rise to the highest office in the country brought about a restructuring, without inflicting a trauma to the power elite in Cuba. At the heart of political power in the island are still those who joined the First and Second Front, when very young, in the years of guerrilla warfare, and who now occupy high positions in the Armed Forces and the Ministry of the Interior. Abelardo Colomé Ibarra, Leopoldo Cintra Frías, Ramón Espinosa Martín and Alvaro López Miera are men who, aside from their "legitimacy of origin," have the merit of having successfully led Cuban troops in African wars, which has won for them the respect of officers and soldiers in the Armed Forces, the stronger institution in the Cuban system. Around this small group, in whose center are Fidel and Raúl Castro, a significant restructuring has taken place for individuals in the exercise of government functions.

The process has dominated the progressive displacement of people linked to former President Fidel Castro, replacing them by other cadres trained in the Raúl Castro "school." Today, the center of the Cuban political power is concentrated, in no small part, in institutional values learned in the FARs by many people in the new administration, dedicated to government tasks. A significant element to consider is the high number of military members in the Council of Ministers, most of them closely related to Raúl Castro when he was Secretary of Defense. These members from the command structures and the financial elite of the FAR, replaced the younger officials and associates of former President Fidel Castro and the so-called Battle of Ideas, who were left completely out of the power structure. This restructuring of the Cuban power elite, the most drastic that has taken place during the Revolution, marks, without a doubt, the future of the nation.<sup>4</sup>

The political heirs to the historical generation that staged the Revolution of 1959 will come from these groups, whose new players have emerged after the transition of power in 2006. The visible face of the succession is Miguel Díaz Canel, upon whom the

Cuban government has focused, very strongly in recent times, its legitimating apparatus. The process has resulted in extensive media hype of his government activities and international tours, as well as media interviews, addressing issues related to sensitive ideological issues, etc. Moreover, for those of us who follow closely the government dynamics, it is evident that there is work on needing to structure a team of people to support the work of the future head of state.

### NATIONAL CHALLENGES

Since the fall of the Eastern Bloc, our country faces a set of far-reaching challenges, largely related to the postponement of a strategic redesign of the national state to adapt it to the new challenges of the XXI century. With regards to this issue, in my opinion, there are two main variables: (1) the systematic and institutional external harassment against the Cuban government by the United States (through the "immoral, illegitimate and counterproductive" embargo/blockade, in the words of Pope John Paul II); and (2) the version of Soviet socialism implemented in Cuba.

Twenty years after the collapse of such social and political order, the post-revolutionary political class methods and ways continue to be anchored in that reality, and the one-party institution (which is perceived as a "vanguard" and attaches mechanically its old Marxist-Leninist identity to the whole society and the state), the state economy (in transition, where new forms of property emerging without clear roles and market plan) and a large ideological structure (that monopolizes the ideological state apparatus and standardizes messages with a narrow view of Cuba and the world).

The Cuban economy has failed to return to the sustained growth levels of previous decades and is poorly connected to transnational networks to create value chains, typical in the global capitalist economy. The country still needs a massive injection of foreign capital, as well as greater freedom for citizens to organize under economic formulas that enable prosperity and

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4. Lenier González Mederos, "Las Fuerzas Armadas y el futuro de Cuba," *Espacio Laical*, año 9, no. 1, 2013, p. 9.

integration into the global economy. Cuba needs the consolidation of a middle class, with the sociopolitical implications that this would entail.

It would further advance the strategic adjustment of Cuban political and economic institutions to harmonize with the Latin American region, the only guarantee for the effective inclusion of Cuba in the new dynamics of the hemisphere. To this we must add the vital, yet complicated, need to rebuild the bilateral relationship with the United States, and to prevent, at any cost, that groups in the island coordinate with the organized international crime networks which have important hubs in Central America.

Cuba has a low birth rate and a growing emigration dynamic of its youth. It has an extremely diverse and active society (official, independent and opposition), who are consistently creating movements to defend religious issues, environmental, racial, immigration, sexual orientation, gender, political, and others. One must add the transnational character of this society and the strategic imperative of incorporating the emigrated community to the economic, cultural, social and political life.<sup>5</sup>

### **CHALLENGES OF THE POLITICAL HEIRS IN CUBA**

Within this context, what has Raúl Castro done to consolidate a socio-political scenario suitable for succession? First, he has used all his authority to convince the Cuban elite that the transformation of Cuba's model is a matter of life or death, since the current structural crisis prevents the exercise of power to that group of Cubans. The transformation of the Cuban economy began under the formula of "a prosperous and sustainable socialism," creating opportunities for forms of private and cooperative ownership, and opening more space to the market. He introduced the necessary changes to make the state more functional, bequeathing to his successors a cohesive government with a working Cabinet with real control and efficient processes in the country.

One of his greatest legacies will be the creation of the General Comptroller of the Republic, a major anti-

corruption structure that will be key in the future. In legal forums, and without enough clarity, reference has been made to the need for constitutional reform, and it seems like the National Parliament will return to its former home. In addition, the transfer of power into the hands of Raúl Castro has meant the start of an era of realism and pragmatism, linked to events as simple as how much money is in the state coffers and how much can be spent; the public recognition that internal inefficiency and not the U.S. blockade/embargo is the root cause of the material difficulties in the life of Cubans on the island. To this, we should also add the late implementation of serious decisions that cannot be postponed any longer such as the sale of homes, cars, ownership of cellular phones, an immigration law that, shortcomings aside, responds to the challenges involved in the international character of our society, and some opening to the internal debate on national issues.

This is the set of "conditions" that Raúl Castro bequeaths to his successors, where stability is gained in some strategic areas, but others of vital importance are postponed. The political capital of Raúl Castro and the authority represented by his political figure will be decisive in building for the future.

There remain, in my opinion, two interconnected challenges, which have to be borne by Raúl Castro's political heirs. The first one is related to the reformulation of domestic political consensus around the principles of Cuban nationalism, and the second to the adoption of a set of mechanisms that allow the legitimization of the political heirs to place them in a position to lead the process and earn a place in the future of Cuba.

Cuban sociologist Juan Valdés Paz outlines the transition from the current Soviet-style one-party system to a new institutional architecture in tune with a renewed national Cuban consensus as follows: "This national renewal (...) will have Cuban radical nationalism as its foundation, which will ensure continuity. (...) This will be a new opportunity to combine the new and traditional forces, in the building of the na-

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5. The concept of "transnational society" comes from sociologist Arnolando Dilla Alfonso.

tion ... Under this perspective, all the forces and currents of thought could agree on the goal of full independence, with the exception of annexation and neocolonial currents. All tendencies could agree on a radical democratic republic, with the exception of authoritarian currents, left or right; they could all agree on the issue of sustainable socio-economic development and eventually, they would be divided between the capitalist option (social democratic, social liberal) or non-capitalist (communists, libertarians, anarchist unionists, Christians fundamentalists, etc.). To achieve this, all would have to agree on the issue of equity and disagree on the pattern of permissive inequality. And of course, all would have to discuss policy options, tactical and strategic, more suitable for these purposes, in a public space sufficiently representative and participatory.”<sup>6</sup>

A reformulation of the political consensus in Cuba on the basis of Cuban nationalism would mean dismantling the Soviet-style institutional architecture, which ignores the political plurality of the nation. For this political imperative it would be necessary to reformulate the role of “vanguard” of the Communist Party of Cuba, which would have to stop being a mega-bureaucratic structure and become a modern political force, able to recognize the legitimacy of other socio-political forces and to dialogue with them and with groups of the society in which it is immersed, to learn how to respond according to the new times. Without an organized political force and with full knowledge of the social dynamics that take place in Cuba, it will be very difficult to drive this process. The PCC is a living and dynamic organization, but its bases do not determine the mode of operation and policies. The PCC has the challenge to reinvent itself, since the system of Marxist-Leninist ideas that rules its institutional conception is completely disconnected from the social and political

identities of the new generations of Cubans, inside and outside the island.

Cuba’s political successors will be challenged to unleash depolarizing dynamics that allow negotiations and synergies with Cuban groups with opposing ideologies inside and outside the island, but committed to the historical goals of the Cuban nation. From this angle, it would be feasible to create space for a constructive opposition, committed to the structural changes Cuba needs. Moreover, the existence of a public arena is essential where social and political actors in the nation can participate and convene all ideological state apparatus to articulate a symbolic front that facilitates this path.

Those who will shoulder the challenge of replacing Raúl Castro in ruling over the destinies of Cuba have the imperative to build a multidimensional legitimacy beyond the support it could have for Cuba’s branches of power: the Armed Forces, State Security Organizations and the PCC. The implementation of electoral mechanisms through direct elections, would be the ideal way to do so.

## EPILOGUE

In order to banish the instability and uncertainty, and to avoid compromising the historical goals of the Cuban nation, the future of Cuba must be born as a result of a national covenant and not the collision between opposing forces. This should be the leading political goal of the successors of the historic generation of the Revolution. This is why it is urgent to redesign the national State for the twenty-first century. Without reform of state institutions to channel the aspirations of a politically plural nation and without legitimating mechanisms for the post-revolutionary political generation that could lead to stability for this process, such historic venture would not be feasible. The Cuban patriots have the challenge of building this road, focused on depolarizing the political field. This will open the doors to the future.

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6. Juan Valdés Paz, “Pasado, presente y futuro de la Revolución cubana,” *Espacio Laical*, año 8, no. 3, 2012, p. 55.