

## NOTES FOR THE CUBAN TRANSITION

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Hegel argued that “everything that was once revolutionary becomes conservative.” All revolutions are designed to transform, to subvert the base of the existing system, model, or paradigm and, in this way, bring it down. The truly revolutionary act is an abrupt gesture, a moment of rupture from the established order. Thus, the very logic of revolution intrinsically turns against it; the new context makes the revolutionary rhetoric lose its original meaning and negate the very urge that nurtured the revolutionary act. The Cuban revolution, as such, ceased to exist when it exhausted its very meaning; there is nothing more paradoxical than a revolution in power.

The explicit and manifest goal of communist revolutions—including the Russian and the Cuban—is the attainment and preservation of political power. This is what they are most about, which is why *stricto sensu* they are no longer revolutions, but brutal attempts to dominate and control. Fidel Castro, in fact, defined revolution as “changing everything that needs to be changed”—everything except, of course, his “revolution.” In today’s Cuba, it is impossible to ignore the dissatisfaction and disinterest of the people in Castro’s project. The grand illusion crashed against reality and nobody better to affirm this than Cuba’s very leaders, who prepare fundamental changes to the established system in order to stay in power.

For Cuba’s ruling elite, time is the most important variable in securing a succession. Re-launching its

position internationally has become a priority, especially reframing relations with Europe and the United States in a search for new economic and political partners that guarantee vital stability and legitimacy. The political landscape has recently re-energized with the death of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez and his succession by Nicolás Maduro. The latter, a man with few political skills, despite many odds, has managed to maintain a certain degree of stability. However, given the difficult economic situation in Cuba and the uncertain scenario facing “chavistas” in Venezuela, the Cuban regime seeks to avoid placing all its bets on Venezuela.

Within the island, the economic transformations taking place are not having a discernible impact given the years of accumulated statism, de-capitalization, and the precarious situation in many sectors. Even Raúl Castro in a recent speech acknowledged the generalized social disaster affecting the nation. A genuine process of reforms would have to involve much deeper actions, but the fear of losing control has become an obsession; it is the main obstacle to change.

The opportunity for some regime opponents to travel abroad is the boldest step the regime has taken. This measure clearly seeks improving its image abroad and ridding itself of the stigma of preventing freedom of movement. It is highly likely that underlying this action is the calculation that it will result in narrow and tolerable criticism of the regime, that international visits by regime opponents will have lim-

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1. This piece draws heavily from our article in Spanish titled “Apuntes para la transición” published in Cubanet.org, DiariodeCuba.com, and www.estadodesats.com in July 2013.

ited media reach, and that, upon their return to Cuba, State Security's absolute control and the opponents' own isolation from the population will keep everything in its place.

Given this scenario, we have to ask ourselves: is Cuban society in a position to push for greater freedom and independence? Can the opposition capitalize politically on these trips? By capitalizing, we mean enhancing our capacity to organize and project ourselves inside and outside the island as pro-democratic forces with civic or political weight. Such a projection would also allow us to end the nefarious cat and mouse game through which State Security, the political police (an arm of the system), has kept us occupied and inefficient. It is imperative for the opposition to mature as civil society in order to widen the cracks of an exhausted system holding on to control and exercising state violence as a means of social containment.

The experience of numerous transitions illustrates the importance of understanding the moment of change as a step in the process of national reconstruction, of seeing it as an inflection point rather than as a lack of continuity. In an extreme scenario such as the one we are faced with, a successful transition will require active participation by skilled human capital with a strong social commitment and a clear vision of the nation it wants to build. Absent a social fabric that can represent at least a microcosm of the nation we visualize, it will be very difficult to build a functioning democracy. Unsuccessful examples are plentiful and it would be irresponsible to omit them. The famous "Arab Spring"—that has become an "Arab Winter"—is the most recent case showing that establishing a political system requires a process of maturation and articulation of civil society. Imagining change and reconstruction of a broken country—fragmented not only in the physical sense, but also in its social and individual dynamics—is an essential exercise if we aspire to construct a democracy containing the ingredients of a modern nation.

As an opposition force we must break paradigms that imply regressing or copying other experiences in which glorious and epic symbols as well as favoritism play a significant role. We must avoid the false hope

for a sudden "spark" that will bring about change—this often means postponing effective work for the medium and long term.

It would also be healthy to leave behind the dominant idea for over half a century of the desired unity of the opposition as the only path to effective pressure to bring about change. Civil society as a whole should be the protagonist of a transition; the opposition, as a political actor, must support this process both rhetorically as well as with coherent action—this will allow civil society to have the necessary reach and penetration.

In the second decade of the 21st century we cannot think about social processes without taking into account their transnational nature. In our case, it would be impossible to analyze a transition to democracy and a process of reconstruction without involving the diaspora and the exile, including their political actors. While they are not grounded in the everyday life of the island, they are living elements of the nation that gravitate to it. The ordinary Cuban understands this clearly; in the Cuban imagination, part of the solution to our problems is in Miami (as the diaspora is generically defined). The modern vision of contemporary societies must come from and consist largely of constant reinforcement between home country and corresponding diaspora. The opposition and the community abroad should serve as the hinge making that articulation possible.

In our view the other element that would frame a future Cuban scenario is the opposition overlapping with a transnational civil society in a manner that ends the binary logic of the internal and the external, of the "Cuban from the island" and the "Cuban from the outside." For this to happen, it is not enough to recognize rhetorically, as the regime does as well, that there are no differences between us, that we are equal. There is something more—there needs to be a recognition that we are one, an indivisible Cuban people. As such, we have the right to vote and to influence the political present and future of the country, regardless of where we live. For the opposition and the exile, this is not only a political problem, but also a conceptual issue.

As political actors we must show that we represent an option for governance, showing the human capital at our disposal and the capacity to generate a political and legal framework capable of filling the probable void that would be left by the one-party *nomenklatura*. Also, we need to demonstrate that we could guarantee security not only for the country, but also for the whole region. Last but not least, we must show we can defeat Castroite candidates in eventual free elections—the path to which would have to start with a guarantee of all fundamental individual freedoms and the establishment of an even playing field for the opposition. Free elections at a later juncture of a transitional process would be the most desirable scenario for the expansion of the transnational civil society and the conclusion of the totalitarian state.

Let us be careful not to confuse succession with transition; let us learn to see ourselves as Cubans with no other descriptor and to demand our full civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights as reflected in the two United Nations Covenants.<sup>2</sup> Let us admit that for the transition, human capital dispersed throughout state institutions is needed just as badly as the skills, knowledge, and financial capital of those who have had to grow up or live far from—but not outside—their homeland.

The problem of the Cuban nation today is the problem of a process of democratic transition and reconstruction that must embody the largest number of Cubans wherever they live. We do not say that the homeland belongs to everyone, which is a *de jure* declaration; we say that all of us together make up the Cuban nation, which is a *de facto* declaration.

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2. International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.