

REFLECTIONS ON A NON-TRANSITION IN CUBA: COMMENTS ON ELITES

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The survival of Cuba's highly authoritarian regime ten years after the collapse of the Berlin Wall remains one of the more confounding facts of contemporary politics, strikingly so in light of numerous predictions by scholars, analysts and political observers about the regime's inevitable demise. It would only be a matter of time, went the conventional wisdom, before the loyal elites that control the Cuban regime see that their own fortunes are better served through their own initiation of a process of political change. Failing to lead a process that would dismantle a political model no longer sustained by either legitimacy or "revolutionary charisma" would be suicidal for the elites, for whom such a compelling reality would trump other attempts at regime preservation.

That line of thinking is directly influenced by the collapse of socialist regimes in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, where strategic elites in control of (then) ruling communist parties led the respective implosions that paved the way for successful transitions to democracy following decades of communist rule. In other words, neither popular rebellions, nor recurring economic failures, nor communist militarism brought down those regimes; rather, it was the purposeful recognition by ruling elites themselves that their own survival demanded action, lest they be swept away by uncontrollable forces wreaking total destruction of the old order.

The belief that a popular rebellion would bring down communist rule in Cuba was also widely articulated in the early 1990s, largely based on the assumption that economic crisis would inevitably produce a pop-

ular explosion that the regime could not contain. The breaking point is close, one often read or heard, and the regime's "imminent collapse" was all but assured.

Still others expected that growing discontent at various levels of the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR) would coalesce into either a successful military conspiracy to overthrow the regime from within, or force the political leadership to change course radically in order to stave off the inevitable collapse. A more extreme version of this scenario had a renegade faction in FAR assassinating Fidel Castro and other top political leaders and subsequently entering into a temporary alliance with "reformers" that would pave the way for a transition to a non-communist regime.

In short, fanciful scenarios and more feasible options were articulated as time went on, even as the regime itself "hunkered down" and refused to cooperate with its enemies and critics. One is not going to simply hold those that expressed such wrong-headed judgements necessarily accountable by pointing out their failure to understand the internal political correlations of messianic-authoritarian regimes, in particular how elite dynamics is a central feature of their survivability.

A major aim of these "reflections on a non-transition" is to explore (mostly) the political reasons for the regime's survival, and to provide an elite-based alternative explanation as to why the status quo prevails. Rather than laying out systematically the reasons for the lack of fundamental change—what the

non-transition boils down to—the discussion of immobilism draws from empirical observations, historical experience and the scholarly literature from elite dynamics in (former) communist political systems. Sources are included in a selective bibliography.

CONTEXT AND DISCUSSION OF ELITE DYNAMICS

Lessons drawn from the collapse of formal socialism fed expectations that something similar to what had occurred in many parts of the communist world take place in Cuba, in part because its political system had incorporated the central features of communist rule elsewhere. Because one party politics, Marxism-Leninism as the only acceptable ideological guide, state control of all important political, social and cultural institutions, and a command economy were deemed dysfunctional for governance and economic survival in a post-communist world, fundamental change would become imperative in Cuba as well.

The Cuban model evinced all of the institutions that had proven so brittle elsewhere except the dominant role that the founding caudillo played and the dwindling legitimacy that his presence preserved. Continuous leadership by Castro, rather than changes in top leader, is a major distinction between Cuba and other communist countries (the People's Republic of China, the former Soviet Union itself, many of the Eastern European communist states) where second and third generation leaders routinely ascended to the top.

Second, it is often argued that as an authentically nationalistic or “home grown revolution,” the revolution was not imposed by either an imperial, foreign power, nor was it the result of a military occupation. Comparatively speaking, this historical fact separates the Cuban case from other communist takeovers in Eastern Europe, where foreign agents and local communist parties played key roles. The power of revolutionary nationalism, particularly evident at elite levels, presumably contributes to the system's survival.

Third, it is a fact that no transition to democracy has occurred in any country where the “founding revolutionary leader” exercised considerable, if not absolute political power, and where his loyal minions chose to

go along and obey rather than challenge his authority. These incontrovertible facts shape a view that has gained some currency, namely that as long as the caudillo remains in power, the political system will remain largely as he configured it, with little prospect for fundamental political change.

From an institutional perspective, prospects for the long-expected transition to something other than messianic-caudillo rule and one-party politics remain distant and difficult to discern, relying on little more than conjecture about Fidel Castro's health. The view that no fundamental political change will take place as long as Castro is alive and remains the central political actor is gaining credibility in academic circles.

Other perspectives emphasize that the incipient expansion of independent groups and associations suggests that a democratic culture is surfacing and rapidly gaining space. Membership in dissident and opposition groups that have emerged in the past 20 years or so includes scores of individuals that were once loyal to the revolution, and in many cases participated in it in various capacities. Son of the life-long Communist and Stalinist-cum-Castroite Blas Roca, Vladimiro Roca is probably the most prominent among those individuals that have repudiated the ideology of their fathers and mentors and moved into opposition. (In the same vein, if someone wants to make the case for former First Daughter Alina Fernández after she fled Cuba, I will listen to you.)

Political factors that drive once-loyal revolutionaries and assorted sympathizers into either a neutral camp or into the ranks of dissenters include: disillusionment with the revolution, alienation from “the system,” outright hatred of Castro and other leaders, ideological conversion (or repudiation of Marxism), and the realization that messianic communism has failed and cannot be revived.

Democratic ideals inspire a growing number of dissenters who speak the conventional liberal language of “rights and responsibilities” mixed in with references to civil disobedience, peaceful dissent and non-violent opposition to what they view as an illegiti-

mate dictatorial regime leading the nation over the abyss.

Disaffection, apathy, anger or “dropping out” among “the children of the revolution” may be a prelude to anti-system activism, but so far neither disaffection nor discontent have led to the formation of a credible, national opposition movement. The number of anti-system activists and dissenters in general is unquestionably growing and more and more political confrontations take place in the streets and in public, suggesting that political support for the regime at the grass roots is fading.

On the other hand, what is relevant for this analysis is that dissident and opposition groups of various persuasions are far from constituting an effective, anti-system force as of now, in part because their capacity for anti-system and anti-government mobilization is very limited. A few years ago, Concilio Cubano came close to demonstrating some of the organizational strengths, including strong leadership, that could have transformed it into a credible opposition movement, but that option is now foreclosed.

Theoretical explanations advanced after the fact for the collapse of European and Soviet communism are inadequate when framing the Cuban situation, as are current journalistic or popular interpretations. It would not be surprising if no one accurately predicts what will happen in Cuba in the medium term, as happened when many experts and top-flight intelligence agencies failed to anticipate the implosion in the former Soviet Union.

The present situation is even more intractable in light of the fact that Cuba’s depressed economy no longer generates the resources that once enabled the state to meet some of its social goals. Growth rates of 2.5 percent in 1997 and 1.2 percent in 1998 came in well-below targets and clearly demonstrate that the economic crisis is far from over. And the near-insolvency of the state’s finances means that obtaining fresh credits in hard currency is extremely difficult. If the 1980s were “the lost decade” for Latin America from an economic growth standpoint, so the 1990s have been for Cuba nothing short of a protracted economic debacle.

The marked decline in resources further weakens regime legitimacy, especially among those sectors of the population that still depend on state allocations for much of their livelihood. It remains to be seen whether declining legitimacy turns into destabilizing demonstrations of political disloyalty, but suffice it to say that the growing political discontent at the grass roots is fueled by unresolved (and growing) consumption pressures.

On the other hand, the argument that “misery would breed revolt,” where simmering popular pressures boil over and produce social explosions that the regime could not control, except at an exorbitant cost, has not been validated. Neither deepening scarcities, declining living standards, or the realization that prosperity is never going to be around the corner produce systemic political explosions.

During 40 years of revolutionary development (?) one would be hard pressed to show a correlation between substantial, even protracted economic crises and anti-system political mobilization at either the elite or mass levels. The social and political controls typical of a command system account for the lack of such anti-system explosions, but there are other reasons as well. Finally, there is a whole scholarly literature that tends to validate the view that slowly improving economic conditions often precipitate the collapse of authoritarian regimes, rather than protracted economic misery.

In addition, the economic situation was appreciably worse in the 1989-1993 period than it is today, and no social explosion of any political significance took place. The state’s coercive capabilities are considerable and are systematically deployed against any significant manifestation of political opposition, affecting individual perceptions between staying put or becoming politically active. In short, the balance between the risk of anti-system behavior and the possible payoff from such has not tilted against the state.

Before popular pressures can coalesce into a sustained anti-system movement, a whole series of political, organizational, psychological and even moral thresholds have to be crossed. Among other forms of anti-system behavior, risk-taking has to become function-

al among individuals willing to challenge the power of the state. Psychological barriers erected and maintained through fear have to break down to the point where individual apprehension about the consequences of dissent give way to a sense of satisfaction when one steps beyond the permissible line.

Particularly important is the fact that the crumbling of authoritarian and communist regimes often stemmed from the public and private disaffection with the status quo among supporting elites, galvanized into anti-system action when their own interests were threatened if things continued as they were.

Concerted anti-system behavior by disaffected elites is what would ultimately threaten the Cuban regime, rather than either apathy or discontent among the masses. A major difference between the Cuban and other cases is that, for instance, in Chile, or Spain and even in some former communist countries, spaces existed for the counter-elites to pose their respective challenges. In Cuba, creating those spaces, much less defending established gains, is a task that remains to be done.

OBSERVATIONS ON THE CUBAN CASE

The principal reasons behind the regime's refusal to embark on a process of political change stem directly from the self-interest of the top rulers and of those loyal elites that profess a commitment to preserving a model of political domination that excludes contestation and accountability. Cuba's political system is designed to perpetuate rulership by strategic elites bound together by common interests, and increasingly so by the fear of what would happen to them and to their privileges should the model be substantially modified.

In other words, political immobilism is a function of the elites fear and uncertainty regarding their personal political and material fortunes, that is, their standing is inextricably tied to the continuation of the present state of affairs. Second, manifestation of political loyalty remains the currency of choice for elites that have reached the top in the Communist party, the armed forces and other important bureaucratic and functional groups. Having navigated the system and reached the top by professing loyalty to the His-

toric Leader (Fidel Castro), historical processes (the revolution), and powerful symbols (the nation, national sovereignty), elites are unlikely to repudiate their commitment to the system without a compelling reason to do so.

From this perspective, one does not find credible evidence of elite disunity, that is, of politically meaningful cleavages or unmanageable factionalism in either state or government institutions. This is not to suggest that all members of the National Assembly are satisfied with the status quo, or that ranking military officers are not fully aware of the colossal miscalculations by top leaders that have brought the nation to its present insolvency. Or that members of the Communist party may not wonder about the true reasons behind the collapse of formal socialism. Finally, neither is it to overlook past crisis, like the proceedings against General Ochoa and others that strongly suggested that a political challenge to the Castro brothers was beginning to gather steam.

Rather, the argument is that until now the incentives for elite cohesion outweigh the possible benefits of challenging the system from within. The rules of the revolutionary game reward conformity and obedience, going along with what "the top" decides and refraining from questioning where "it" wants to go. Non-compliance or deviation from the leadership's goals is punishable, even costlier for the elites by virtue of the fact that they have more to lose.

For instance, the object lessons drawn from the brutal resolution of the Ochoa affair, recurring purges at various governmental and institutional levels, and summary destitutions (that of Roberto Robaina is the most recent example) are meant to show who is in charge and to reinforce loyalty over dissent. Incompetence and personal corruption are frowned upon and if discovered are punishable by demotion or removal from influential position(s), but political loyalty is paramount. As demonstrated in many instances, complete explanations for destitutions are never offered, with the usual official statement pointing to "weaknesses and deficiencies" in the disgraced comrade's work.

Discontent is tolerated as are private disagreements over a particular issue or policy, but stepping out of line and challenging the top's authority or questioning the wisdom of its decisions are unacceptable. Simply stated, the rules of the game and the unwritten codes of behavior among elites prohibit public disagreements with The Leader and at all times demand craven expressions of loyalty. To deviate from these norms is politically lethal.

That lesson is hammered at all levels again and again, namely that "we either stay together or we will hang separately." Constant calls for "unity" among revolutionaries is a core theme of elite and mass politics, though unity simply means routinely complying with the preferences and goals of Fidel Castro. Multi-party politics, for example, are ruled out on the grounds that pluralism equals division and anarchy, opening up spaces for the enemies of the revolution to do their dirty work.

The official view is that the Communist party "will never retreat before the dangers and is fully confident in a final victory. The enemy combats our party, not because it is the only one, but because its existence and work guarantee the unity of our people." In addition, the party "endures and grows even in difficult times because the Cuban people want it. It is the vigilant conscience and backbone of the resistance of the nation" against its enemies. The relevance of this message is not that elites believe it to be true, but rather that their political behavior be consistent with the message's functional imperative, namely that elites conduct themselves as if it were so.

Careful selection of cadres and rotation of new members into the Communist party (for instance, the reorganization of the party's Central Committee following the Fifth Congress in 1997) and other national institutions serve two purposes: to weed out potential troublemakers (those "infected" with notions of perestroika and glasnost) and to reward up and coming, probably younger loyal cadres with higher status and recognition. This provides a degree of fluidity and to some extent minimizes the prospect of cadres venting their frustration, or perhaps fantasizing about what it will take for them to reach the top.

More to the point, for the political leadership a process of change that would liberalize the political system would not only be an ideological abdication, it would of necessity be destructive and chaotic. In Fidel Castro's messianic mindset, there is no such thing as "an orderly transition" to anything, much less democracy. Classical or modern definitions of democracy that emphasize political competition, a division of power among levels of government, free elections and alternation of leaders are categorically rejected in Cuba. With a straight face and in its inimitable Orwellian way, the party contends that "our political system is genuinely democratic, offering wide popular participation based on dignity, equality and the real exercise of human rights." In short, there is no need to bring about a transition to democracy, because we already have it.

Revolutionaries must remain united if necessary to the bitter end, so to articulate a different political vision constitutes an act of betrayal, punishable by ostracism or expulsion from, for instance, the Communist party. There is no reason to believe that the messianic leader's unflinching beliefs in "socialist democracy" will change, or his insistence in the need to maintain political coherence among elites if the regime is to survive. Unity among elites is the core value of revolutionary governance, and this fact goes a long way in explaining why the status quo prevails.

As articulated, the relationship between "unity," "socialism" and "the nation" is perfectly clear: these elements are integrally and organically related and constitute the basis of a new (though highly dubious) legitimacy. The themes of nation, socialism, revolution, independence and national sovereignty form the basis of a discourse that aims to re-energize nationalism and leave behind formal ideological formulations.

For example, a document released prior to the Fifth Congress of the Communist party asserted that:

Hoy está más claro que nunca, que Revolución, Patria y Socialismo son una misma cosa. En Cuba no habrá restauración del capitalismo porque la Revolución no será derrotada jamás. La Patria seguirá viviendo y seguirá siendo socialista.

In short, any thought of a transition either towards a market system, or to a more open and pluralistic political order is categorically ruled out; those thinking about “alternatives” need not apply. Adapting to new economic realities is necessary, but there is no possibility of either political or economic structural change. Only the revolution can save the nation.

At times, Castro points to the “political confusion” and disarray among elites that brought down communist regimes elsewhere, something that he must at all costs prevent lest Cuba suffer the same fate. In other words, the fate of post-communist elites in former communist countries is framed as an object lesson for Cuba’s elites, reminding them that their own destiny is tied to the system’s preservation. Interpretations in the media about the performance of post-communist systems emphasize the economic difficulties evident in some cases, and otherwise highlight instances of religious, cultural and ethnic strife. The message conveyed is one of chaos, social confrontation, corruption and growing misery and alienation, a message that reinforces the Cuban leadership/s commitment to the status quo.

But contrary to Castro’s contention, elites in post communist societies have in many cases functionally adapted to the new order(s), and have not been entirely displaced from positions of power and influence. In some instances, the administrative or technical expertise of elites is needed to provide some continuity between the old and new systems; in other cases, the assumed loyalty of elites to communism itself was found to have been greatly exaggerated, making adaptation to new situations smoother and politically acceptable for non-communist rulers.

In sum, the Cuban leadership’s interpretation of what has befallen post-communist elites exaggerates the real damage to elite interests that would come from systemic change in Cuba itself, though it is not clear to what extent Cuban elites know the full picture. It is in the leadership’s clear interest to frighten elites with tales of horror and woe in order to minimize the prospect that elites should think of coalescing into effective anti-system factions. And in a society where information is manipulated to serve the interests of top leaders, it is highly probable that the

practice of deceiving its own elites in order to retain their loyalty is part of the regime’s strategy.

Second, the less-than-successful experience of several post-communist societies in moving to market economics, or their failure to orderly consolidate democratic institutions is used in order to reinforce the notion that Cuba would become ungovernable if the system were to be dismantled. Neoliberal reforms in Latin America are attacked from the same standpoint and with the same aim in mind: to delegitimize the very idea of structural political and economic reform, and to putatively show that that is not the path for Cuba. For example, the document cited above characterizes the situation in these terms:

Con el modelo neoliberal, aumenta la polarización social hasta extremos intolerables: crecen el desempleo, el hambre, la miseria; las funciones del estado se reducen a la aplicación de las terapias de choque, a ser guardián del gran capital mediante la represión anti-popular. Se exacerbaban al propio tiempo la xenofobia y el racismo, expresiones de tendencias fascistoideas.

Not surprisingly, given what neoliberal and pluralistic reforms presumably lead to, Castro insists that “only the revolution can govern here” (in Cuba), making it plain that other political options are neither to be discussed nor tolerated. Interpreting complex economic and political transitions in former communist countries in its own self-serving way, the leadership repeatedly tells its loyal minions that no matter how bad things are in Cuba, look at what has happened among “our” former friends and allies.

Inducing fear of the unknown through distorted and altogether false portrayals of the reality in post-communist societies is an additional key in the leadership’s overall internal strategy. In other words, the regime has a clear interest in not publicizing successful transitions to democracy and market economics, in order to reduce the probability that loyal elites or the masses seriously begin to question the official commitment to “socialism or death.”

Simply stated, by making the imagined future look worse than the present, the regime seeks to suppress rational thinking among its supporting elites about the real costs of embarking on a different path, more

so in a context where credible information is either undisclosed or released when it serves clear political purposes. To some extent this approach has been effective and is probably a major factor accounting for the regime's internal stability and cohesion.

ELITE SUPPORT:

PLAUSIBLE EXPLANATIONS

If the above analysis is correct, then one has to explain why elites remain largely united behind what is clearly a dysfunctional system of government and an obsolete model of political domination. One would grant that what appears to be dysfunctional or obsolete to outside observers may in fact be perceived in an entirely different matter by elites or insiders; that is, one has to ponder the prospect that Cuba's elites do not believe that the revolution and its institutions are completely decayed and devoid of any legitimacy. Even if one holds this to be delusional, an extreme form of denial, it has some plausibility for individuals whose frame of reference is not democratic capitalism and have been socialized under revolutionary communism.

Second, one must also come to grips with the fact that two generations of Cubans have not experienced anything other than messianic and authoritarian leadership under Castro. In other words, their individual political identities revolve around his definitions of who is a good revolutionary and how he/she must behave to maintain that image. The controlled mass media and other institutions and agencies of socialization reinforce a Manichean message defining proper and improper political conduct. In sum, for 40 years, Fidel Castro has defined the political world for the elites and set its acceptable and unacceptable norms of conduct. He has been the center of their political universe and it is not implausible to imagine that without him, their world would crumble.

Third, for many that have risen in the system and gained material advantages from it, Castro may well be considered indispensable, the lynchpin of a political system where personal ties and cunning count far more than expertise, laws, morality or institutions. These individuals have internalized a code of conduct that is probably more deeply rooted in deciphering what "top orientations mean" than is commonly

believed. Such a code includes techniques such as "simulation," the *máscara* or other necessities of political survival, but that is the way to move up the political ladder in the Cuban system.

Fourth, older revolutionaries who still profess loyalty to Castro and his vision(s) probably do so out of conviction and ideological zeal. This is clearly the case with the few prominent *moncadistas* and others from "the founding generation" (Machado, Almeida, Hart, Cienfuegos) either in powerful positions or living off the symbolism of having participated in "the revolutionary epic." There is no record of any of them crossing Castro, publicly articulating a point of view that substantively differs from what he has proposed, or questioning his fitness to rule as "the Eternal Leader." In fact, there is remarkable continuity among the members of this group insofar as none of them has broken with the revolution nor given plausible reason to doubt their fealty to it and its Leader.

A combination of paternalism and self-interest may shape perceptions among elites as to what Castro's role means for them concretely. For example, high ranking military officers were told at the time of Ochoa's trial that "all of us are Fidel's children," brutally reminding them that their status was directly related to the revolution itself and Castro's own leadership. In other words, Father Knows Best, and without him all of us would grope around in the dark. It is also true that many high ranking officers come from humble social origins and moved up the ranks through performance and loyalty; they literally owe their careers and livelihood to the revolution.

There is no way to determine whether professional military officers, top level bureaucrats, Cabinet Ministers, technocrats, officials of the Cuban Communist party, prominent cultural leaders and other members of the elites that run state institutions on a daily basis think of themselves as nothing more than "Fidel's children." But such statements reiterate the point that the higher one goes, loyalty to the supreme leader and the revolution are the *sine qua non* of arriving and being rewarded with elite status.

All told, until credible evidence to the contrary surfaces, the assumption here is that Cuba's governing

elites still believe that lining up behind the Leader and defending the system serves their collective interests better than either defying Castro, or acting in open opposition to the system itself. If any of them harbor political ambitions in private about being “the successor” (rumors about Mr. Alarcón surface periodically in the press, which I believe send him into a panic), disclosing them would surely lead to their political death. The image of a regime fully united behind its Leader must be preserved for purposes of domestic order and international notoriety, lest potentially catastrophic fissures be detected “by the enemy.”

CONCLUSION

The evidence reviewed here strongly indicates that the strategic elites responsible for the administration of the state, carrying out domestic and foreign policies, and those that are in charge of the Communist party and other top political institutions, show no inclination to break away from the political status quo. At a minimum, breaking the ice would mean moving away from one-party politics and calling for authentic pluralism; advocating ideological debate rather than ritualistic compliance with Marxism-Leninism; considering replacing charismatic authority and communist dogma with the rule of law; and articulating the need for a genuine expansion of civil and political freedoms and the dismantling of repressive social controls.

By those measures, true reformers are nowhere to be found among the ruling elites. And that is why one cannot speak seriously of a transition to a different system of government and rulership. The regime maintains unity in the ranks, even if private disagreements over particular issues or policies exists. From a systemic standpoint, what is important is that differ-

ences that may exist remain hidden and not spill over into public view, and that disagreements not be articulated institutionally.

At the level of top political elites, one is hard pressed to find politically meaningful cracks that would signal the existence of anti-system factions powerful enough to carry the day in a confrontation with the most orthodox actors led by Fidel Castro. As long as potentially explosive and divisive issues remain off limits, the regime can make its unity stick and sustain the impression that it is not divided against itself. Rotation among the elites keeps open those channels through which ambitious cadres biding their time reach the top, reducing the probability that they would challenge the system out of generational or other kinds of frustration.

Speculation to the contrary aside about putative “reformers” or their alleged influence, one is hard pressed to identify a Gorbachev, Walesa or Havel among those close to Fidel Castro. The Leader purposely surrounds himself with intellectually mediocre subordinates who profess absolute loyalty to his views, sublimate their ambitions to his preferences, and stay in his good graces. None of the second-level leaders in the Political Bureau or the Central Committee has hinted publicly that messianic communism has failed, or that Castro’s historic leadership served its purpose, but now is time for him to go.

There is no record of advocacy for either a partial political liberalization, or for the kind of fundamental political reforms that would change the nature of governance. For better or for worse, rupture among the elites that comprise the ruling coalition remains an entirely hypothetical prospect, rather than an imminent reality.

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