

THE INTERNAL OPPOSITION AND CIVIL SOCIETY: AN ASSESSMENT

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As we approach the millennium, one question in the minds of most observers of Cuban politics is when and how will the transition to pluralism unravel in the island? At a practical level, this preoccupation is based on the fact that only a handful of Communist regimes survived the end of the Cold War. From a more philosophical perspective, the question begs our attention because the Castro regime has managed to survive four decades of numerous political threats, social deprivation, economic chaos, and geographical proximity to its most formidable adversary.

This paper examines the contention between the internal political opposition and the regime. The amount of political space molded by the internal opposition is a barometer to measure the strength of civil society in Cuba today. The two central questions addressed in this paper are: (1) Is the internal opposition capable of contributing to the breakdown of authoritarian rule? (2) Can the political civil society exacerbate Cuba's *legitimation crisis* and jump-start the process of transition? These preoccupations demand an assessment of the strength of civil society.

There is consensus among political sociologists that the strength of civil society correlates positively with a peaceful transition to polyarchy. Also, the tolerance of the regime towards its opposition is the best indicator of whether or not there have been meaningful political reforms in Cuba today. For academics, to grasp the workings of the opposition presents the grueling challenge of analyzing an ongoing process of change as it unfolds.

The evidence examined in this paper supports my assertion about the relative strength of Castro's domestic opposition. Cuban dissidents are neither as weak and powerless as sympathetic pundits of the regime assert nor are they as robust as well meaning supporters claim. Dissidents have shown a tremendous resilience, dedication, ingenuity, and courage. The evidence also suggests that various dissident groups are overcoming obstacles imposed by the government, scarce resources, and their own idiosyncrasies to collaborate and support each other. These all are positive signs that in other settings have chartered a transition course to pluralism. At the same time, Cuban dissidents still have a long way to go before they overcome serious obstacles, in at least, the following areas: (1) the regime stigmatization; (2) debilitating the ruling coalition; (3) solidifying their organizational capacity; and (4) sustaining diverse relations with foreign allies. As I discuss later, any attempt to overcome these challenges may present serious dilemmas for opposition groups. Nonetheless, without making some inroads in these four courses of action, it is very likely the internal opposition will play a secondary role in the eventual breakdown of authoritarian rule in Cuba. In short, the evidence I have examined thus far suggests that while the opposition is exacerbating the legitimacy crisis of the regime, it is still too feeble to bring about its demise.

To illustrate my relativist thesis, the argument in this paper will be organized as follows. First, the literature on opposition politics in civil society will be briefly examined to illustrate how activities in the social

realm facilitate democratization. Second, the paper will discuss the rising tide of internal opposition to the revolution. Third, the strength of the internal opposition will be assessed. I conclude with some considerations about the future of opposition politics in the island.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRACY: A BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

Civil society is the arena where citizens voluntarily assemble independently from the state to articulate political preferences, capitalize on their human capital, or demand policy initiatives from the state or state-sponsored institutions. Since the Scottish Enlightenment originally articulated the idea, scholars have maintained the primacy of autonomous civil networking regardless of philosophical traditions.¹ Moreover, historically the proliferation of civic associations is analogous with good governance.

To test the extent of the autonomy between the state and civil society in Cuba, and other similar authoritarian polities, it is useful to distinguish between the political, economic, and cultural realms of civil life. The political is where the most contentious issues of governance are wrestled. The economic is where human capital resonates and the cultural realm often exposes the artifacts of legitimation.

In Communist societies the first realm is usually more autonomous. This is so because the opposition is usually disgruntled and not easily co-opted by the regime. Political groups are fiercely independent from the state and there is some degree of concertation among opposition groups.² Despite the unregimented sociability among the political opposition, these groups rarely bring down authoritarianism without some external support and backing from the loyal opposition. In the economic and cultural arena, the regime exercises more control over individuals and there is little room for association. For instance, last year there were approximately 150,000 licensed

providers in Cuba, mainly in the services, retail, and food sectors.³ Yet, individuals in these sectors have no organized representation either by independent labor unions or associations of service providers. Despite the apparent lack of autonomy, these sectors were successful in steering the parameters established by the regime to obtain piecemeal reforms. As the recent relaxation of religious practices shows us, there seems to be a tacit agreement between the regime and economic and cultural actors not to politicize passions and interests in exchange for official recognition.

The Cuban state also manipulates the issuing of licenses and granting official recognition to coagulate dissenting political views in the public space. Artists and performers must juggle between artistic freedom and the limits of state tolerance. Contentious issues are addressed vaguely in films and popular songs and the regime is never directly blamed for the island's enigma. Rather, Cuba's problems are blamed on the current situation, an abstraction that implies that these ills are temporal and apolitical. These trends are evident in the highly successful film "Fresa y Chocolate," and to a lesser extent in its sequel, "Guantanamo," by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea. While these pictures present a critical and devastating accounts of the Cuban reality and the parricide state bureaucracy in the island, they also bring us a representation of a caring, compassionate, and magnanimous new revolutionary cadre. In neither picture is there any mention of the regime or its leaders when the island's situation is alluded to.

Intellectuals have enjoyed some degree of autonomy in other authoritarian regimes throughout Latin America but not in Cuba. In his account of the role of intellectuals and the re-assertion of democracy in Chile, Jeffrey M. Puryear credits the autonomous networks among intellectuals opposing the Chilean dictatorship with impacting the democratic transi-

1. See among others, Adam Seligman, *The Idea of Civil Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

2. Witness the sizeable support for Concilio Cubano among the opposition.

3. The data originate from Philip Peters, *Cuba in Transition. The People of Cuba's New Economy* (Arlington: Alexis de Tocqueville Institution, March 1999) p. 2. By some accounts, these numbers have recently declined due to heavy taxation and state regulation.

tion by transforming the political culture, promoting ideas, and solidifying relations with foreign supporters.⁴ One of the most recent cases, which demonstrates the arbitrary control of the Cuban state over intellectuals in the island, is the case of the economist Omar Everleny Pérez. Recently, Mr. Pérez was censured and stripped of his job as university professor and Deputy Director of the official Center for the Study of the Cuban Economy after delivering a seminar to army officers that was judged too pessimistic by Raúl Castro and his associates.⁵

By partitioning civic life into the political, economic, and cultural realms, we can identify a valuable axiom about the role of civic associations in authoritarian situations. Paradoxically, the degree of social autonomy does not easily translate into political currency in non-democratic environments. Authoritarian regimes disperse its repression selectively and benefit greatly from a facade of pluralism or from portraying the opposition as intransigent and outrooted from other domestic actors. Witness the *Granma* editorial discrediting political dissidents after the trial of “The Group of Four” last Spring. Among some of the charges in the laborious editorial, *Granma* claimed the United States manufactured and professionalized the internal opposition. In their words:

A tal extremo les aportan fondos, que han convertido las actividades contrarevolucionarias internas en un oficio y un modo de vida fácil y han diseñado una nueva categoría de vagos, sin valores patrióticos, sin ideales sociales y humanos de ningún tipo, sin ideas de la justicia ni las realidades actuales del mundo, que no trabajan ni sudan la camisa ni producen otra cosa que no sea intrigas, ilusiones vanas, palabrería barata y hueca, repetir consignas y mentiras que les suministran desde el exterior a través de sus medios masivos.⁶

Another lesson we can draw from the Cuban case is that many of the attributes identified by political sociologists in support of the correlation between the depth of political associations and pluralism simply do not hold true with respect to authoritarianism. Robert Putman’s popular proposition about how socialization in civic life overcomes the free-rider problem in collective action rarely has the intended effects in non-democratic settings.⁷ Collaboration increases trust, sharpens expectations, and facilitates social ties. However, these attributes do not seem to be enough to jump-start a democratic process. For the political opposition to make a major role in the process of democratization, it must diversify its ties with foreign allies, break the anti-patriotic stigma imposed by the regime, solidify its own organizational capacity, and attempt to debilitate the ruling coalition.

After examining some of the general considerations regarding civic life in authoritarian regimes, I turn my attention to an analysis of the internal opposition by (1) discussing the rise of the internal opposition; (2) assessing its strength; and (3) analyzing some eventful implications of civic opposition for contemporary Cuban politics.

THE RISE OF INTERNAL OPPOSITION: FIRST VS. SECOND OPPONENTS

In Communist societies, the political arena is normally disguised until opponents of the regime find an opening to articulate their demands in the public space. In Cuba, this opportunity evolved gradually during the late 1980s and finally materialized in the early 1990s when the opposition was emboldened by the fiscal crisis of the state and an unfolding *legitimation crisis*. Data collected by Juan Carlos Espinosa supports this assertion. In 1987, 6 dissident and opposition groups were active in the public space. This

4. Jeffrey M. Puryear, *Thinking Politics: Intellectuals and Democracy in Chile, 1973-1988* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

5. Paul Knox, “Cuba muzzles reformer with ties to Canada,” *The Globe and Mail* (July 10, 1999), electronic version.

6. “¿Quiénes son los disidentes y los presos de conciencia en Cuba?,” *Granma*, at <http://www.nodo50.ix.apc.org/cesc/disidentes.htm>.

7. Robert Putnam, et. al. *Making Democracy Work. Civic Tradition in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

number grew to 103 in 1992, 330 in 1996, and 380 by 1998.⁸

The apparent Communist homogeneity does not mean that these regimes are monoliths. Adam Michnik has called these conditions “the fragility of totalitarian stability.”⁹ Benigno Aguirre’s discussion of the culture of opposition illustrates how shadow institutions offer opportunities for cover and surreptitious anti-government activities.¹⁰

The Cuban case demonstrates that the opposition in Communist countries generally evolves in two phases. The first occurs as the regime is consolidating its hold on society. The social foundation of this opposition is marked by a coalition of *politicos* defeated by the regime, former allies of the previous regime, and dissatisfied members of the revolutionary armed forces. These three groups are the most affected by the coming to power of a revolutionary movement. In many cases, the victorious rebels are embowered by their victory. They also have serious grievances against those who were not fully committed to their cause. Revolutionary movements also have their own agenda. The popular expectation is that the new regime will address their lament with swift policy reforms. There is also the fact that many revolutionary movements, like the 26th of July Movement, are not democratic and end up having a hard time differentiating between the political organization to fight and the preferable structure to rule. Finally, as in the case of Castro, revolutionary leaders see in the political process an opportunity to fulfill personal ambitions or a historic national mission.

In Cuba, the first opposition wave lasted from 1960 to the mid-1960s. During the decade of the 1960s the principal strategy of the opposition was a subversive confrontation with the regime. In retrospect, it is easy to recognize that this played right into the hands of the Castro regime. Castro exploited the degree of foreign sponsorship of opposition groups and labeled

them as anti-nationalist in a decade when decolonization and nationalism were the words of the day. Moreover, the use of violence by the opposition permitted the regime to consolidate its diverse factions into a common front. This was most important in the case of Cuba because the Castro government was not institutionalized until the middle of the next decade. The weak institutional foundation of the revolutionary government often resulted in policy mistakes and significant contradictions that were not exploited fully by its opponents. More importantly, there was little attempt to capitalize on internal feuds and gain the sympathy of defectors and those in the popular sector that supported the government who identified with the revolution but not necessarily with its self-proclaimed Communist ideology. Under these circumstances, any chances for other than a non-violent victory were greatly diminished. The terrain in which the early opposition functioned was outside civil society.

As the regime eradicated the first opposition wave and made more ruthless use of force, another period emerged in the mid-1970s. This opposition endorses peaceful means of resistance and a negotiated transition. Their main goal is not necessarily to defeat the regime entirely, but to move forward with democratization. They subscribe to a market economy and sustained social safety net. Many of their public declarations have a populist flavor reminiscent of Social Democrats and Christian Democrats in Latin America. The social fabric of the new opponents is also radically different from the first phase of the opposition. Most opposition leaders today supported the regime at one point. Elizardo Sánchez, Vladimiro Roca and Gustavo Arcos are good illustrations. Sánchez is an intellectual who taught Marxist philosophy at the University of Havana. Roca is the son of Blas Roca, one of the founders of the Cuban Communist Party and an intellectual in his own right. And Arcos, from a middle class family, joined the 26th of July Move-

8. Juan Carlos Espinosa, “Civil Society in Cuba: The Logic of Emergence in Comparative Perspective” in this volume.

9. Adam Michnik, *Letters from Prison* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987): 139.

10. Benigno Aguirre, “Culture of Opposition in Cuba,” in *Cuba in Transition—Volume 8* (Washington: Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy, 1998).

ment as a university student and rose to become a diplomat.

Contrary to their predecessors, opponents of the regime today advocate a peaceful, negotiated transition to democracy. Most significantly, dissidents have tried to legitimize their work by alluding to civic and organizational rights guaranteed, but rarely enforced, under the constitution drafted by the Castro regime. This is important to consider because, unlike early opponents, these arguments could potentially provide a legal umbrella that did not exist previously. In addition, their actions embarrassed the government by outlining the contradictions that exists in the implementation of rights among supporters and opponents of the regime despite the public rhetoric to the contrary.

But perhaps what differentiates the more recent dissident movement from the early opposition is that these opponents continue to multiply in numbers and have also strengthened their organizational and articulation capacities. During the first decade after Ricardo Bofill and a handful of associates organized the Comité Cubano Pro Derechos Humanos (CCPDH) in 1976, many of the dissident groups worked semi-independently from each other and their plight was the respects for human rights and the release of political prisoners. Starting around 1990, the character of the opposition changes. Not only does it proliferate substantially as previous stated, but it also becomes bolder in articulating numerous social, environmental, religious, and economic issues. For many observers this period marks the explosion of pluralism because of the wide scope and depth of opposition politics. Finally, since the mid 1990s to the present, the internal opposition has widened its scope to include independent labor unions, journalists, religious groups, and professional associations. More importantly, these organizations are collaborating and supporting each other to a degree never witnessed before. Umbrella associations such as the Asociación Nacional de Economistas Independientes de Cuba, Centro de Formación Cívica y Religiosa, Concilio

Cubano, and the Grupo Cubano de Trabajo de la Disidencia Interna are a few examples of the proliferation of groups witnessed during the late 1990s. During this period autonomous publications such as the magazines *Palabra Nueva* and *Vitral* and path breaking manifestos such as *La Patria es de Todos* were also published.

A good illustration of the new strategy by the opposition is the request made by Concilio Cubano to hold a public forum. Concilio is a coalition of about 20 dissident organizations. Back in December of 1995, the group drafted an open letter to Fidel Castro asking for permission to meet. The initial official reaction was a transient silence followed by one of the most severe periods of repression in recent years throughout the country. According to *El Nuevo Herald*, Leonel Morejón Almagro, one of the founders of Concilio, drafted another a similar request to the government on June 10, 1997, two weeks after he was freed from the Ariza prison in the province of Cienfuegos. In his letter, Almagro states: “Tenemos el deber cívico de solicitar de nuevo a usted y a los organismos gubernamentales el permiso para celebrar el encuentro antes mencionado, el cual incluirá a todos los cubanos, tanto los que viven dentro del país como los que residen en el extranjero.”¹¹

Another component of the strategy of the new opposition is to forge links with diverse foreign allies. This too was an aspect somewhat neglected early on by dissidents. Whereas early opponents relied almost exclusively on the United States for backing, contemporary opposition groups are more interested in diversifying their foreign support base. Today, many opposition figures have constant communication with governments, non-governmental organizations, and exiled compatriots throughout Europe, North America, and Latin America. Foreign dignitaries often meet with opposition figures when they visit the island. Dissidents have also managed to obtain support from a very diverse group of intellectuals abroad. A few days before the VII Meeting of Latin American heads of states in Venezuela, a group of

11. “Vuelven a pedir permiso para reunión de Concilio,” *El Nuevo Herald* (June 26, 1997).

Mexican intellectuals signed a document pressing for the release of Vladimiro Roca, Marta Beatriz Roque,

René Gómez Manzano, and Félix Bonné, the authors of *La Patria es de Todos*.¹²

Table 1. Comparison of the First and Second Phases of the Internal Opposition in Cuba

	Phase I (1960s)	Phase II (mid-1970 and beyond)
Strategy	subversive	delegitimize the regime by exposing its weakness in civil society
Social Base	former adversaries and early supporters	former allies of the regime, primarily from the intelligentsia and professional middle-class
Ideology	democratic populism	social democracy
Mission	to topple the regime and reinstitute republican politics	to reform the revolution and introduce more market initiatives and pluralism
Political Arena	fight the government, primarily in the countryside	a national strategy of urban violence in civil society

Other actions devised as part of the non-violent scheme by contemporary dissident groups include:

- The organization of close to one hundred independent journalists who report alternative news from all throughout the island to foreign newspapers and CubaNet and other internet outlets;
- the operation of around two dozen independent libraries through the island;
- an initiative to return blank voting ballots during elections. In the election organized by the Communist Party last December to select candidates that would run in a national election for the general assembly (Poder Popular), 14% of the votes were blank;¹³
- organizing colloquiums to coordinate activities and exchange information such as the one organized on January 13, 1999, by the Movimiento de Acción Nacional Demócrata Independiente, Fundación Lawton de Derechos Humanos, Grupo Acción Cívica, Movimiento Agenda Nacional and the Confederación de Trabajadores Democráticos de Cuba (CTDC);
- peaceful public demonstrations in support of fellow dissidents and/or to celebrate anniversaries of human rights leaders such as Martin Luther King, organized by the Fundación Lawton on January 13, 1999; and
- among others, seat-ins and hunger strikes in support of civic rights in the island as demonstrated recently at Tamarindo 34.

Table 1 compares the early and more recent opposition efforts in Cuba. The main point we should consider from recounting of the evolution of opposition politics is that as opponents of authoritarian politics become more mature, their tactics become more sophisticated. Early opponents played right into the hands of the regime by attempting to topple it by force. Recent dissidents, in contrast, have managed to capitalize on the major flaw of the regime: its inability to tolerate proponents of peaceful reforms despite the public rhetoric of being inclusive. The current actions by Cuban dissidents beg the question, how can the Cuban state legitimize its claim of popular representation when it continues to exclude those who disagree with its policies?

THE RISE OF OPPOSITION IN CIVIL SOCIETY

Many Cuban scholars, like Ariel Hidalgo, attribute the rise of internal dissidents to a group of individuals who played a prominent role in the opposition movement. Undoubtedly, it is a mistake to take a deterministic historiographical position and deny the role of leaders in the formation of a political process. It is also an error to neglect the structural conditions which impulse these figures to break with the regime and embarked on the arduous path of contending an authoritarian regime. The approach I follow attempts to reconcile both of these positions by analyzing conditions that lead to dissent in conjunction with the critical role of opposition leaders.

12. CubaNet (November 5, 1977).

13. http://cubasos.com/documents/press_release/anulan_boletas_durante_elecciones.htm

A useful approach to interpret the conditions that lead to the rise of political dissent since the early 1970s in Cuba is Habermas' concept of *legitimation crises*.¹⁴ The legitimation crisis depicts contradictions in the process of governance. These dilemmas are easily resolved through the ongoing bargaining, accountability, and rotation in office in democratic regimes. However, in non-democratic situations, dilemmas and contradictions could easily escalate and cause dissatisfaction and discontent among members of the ruling elite and their supporters causing the *desgaste* of the regime. The gap between the political rhetoric and specific actions are issues not easily resolve without popular political accountability. The rise of a new class in a regime that claimed to be class-less, the insertion of some market reforms and concomitant social inequities, and the failure to implement legislation evenly have undermined the regime and caused popular disillusionment.

In the case of Cuba, three particular events exacerbated the problems of legitimation of the regime and gave rise to dissident activities in civil society. The first was the attempt to institutionalize Communist rule, a process formally completed in 1975. Despite the institutionalization of the regime, government institutions have little autonomy for decision-making. The core power elite still exercises a lot of discretion on policy issues. And the polity remains very autocratic. Many leaders of the human rights movement, who eventually became leading dissidents, expected the institutionalization of the revolution to broaden the reigns of government and permit more accommodation and tolerance.

The second pivotal event relates to the tactics crafted by the government to deal with the "special period." The severe social deprivation and economic stagnation that marked the early 1990s altered the minds of many former allies of the regime about socialist economic planning carried out in the island. Moreover, as *La Patria es de Todos* states so well, disenfranchised intellectuals believed that government officials had

exhausted their options and the central planning economic model was exhausted in Cuba. The crises of the special period also trashed any hopes about the future that Communism could provide. This is important because the Communist doctrine encourages immediate sacrifice and the prospects for future state-less panacea. In Cuba in particular, Fidel exploited this expectation and often assured Cubans of a more prosperous future. The effects of this disillusionment among former Communist cadres could not have been better framed than by Milovan Djilas when he posited:

True, communism has adopted itself to changing realities, but it has always done so in order to survive, strengthen and preserve its totalitarian essence. The current changes and "reforms" are different because the crisis is different—it is systematic and without communist solution. The essence of communism is not changing; it is disintegrating. There is no exit from the current crisis except into a new essence: a new system.¹⁵

The third consequential set of events occurred outside Cuba but had a profound effect inside the island. At a structural level, some of these events are the reform and eventual breakdown of the Communist world, the end of the Cold War, and the assertive international role of middle-powers like Spain and Canada in world affairs. The end of the cold War signified the failure of Communist to reform itself. At a more inter-subjective level, a crucial development was the diffusion of the idea of non-violent resistance from civil society leaders in Eastern Europe during the closing years of Communist rule. Close relations between Cuba and its former Eastern European allies and the academic exchanges between these two regions acquainted Cuban intellectuals with the ideas of Vaclav Havel, among other thinkers, and with the organizational tactics of Lech Walesa. In an interview with Oswaldo de Céspedes, a journalist from the *Cooperativa de Periodistas Independientes*, Oscar Elías Bisset, director of the *Fundación Lawton*, praises the non-violent struggle of Gandhi, King Jr.,

14. J. Habermas, *Legitimation Crises* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).

15. Milovan Djilas, "The Crisis of Communism," *Telos* 80 (Summer 1989), p.120.

Walesa, Havel, and Torreau and states “La Fundación Lawton tiene un programa de lucha cívica no violenta para poder rescatar para nuestro país las libertades y el respeto a los derechos humanos que se merece el pueblo cubano.”¹⁶

In short, the bankruptcy of ideology in conjunction with the ineffectiveness of state institutions and organizations helped weaken the ideologically-based patronage instituted by the Castro regime. Ideological and organizational factors have also eroded some of the state-sponsored mechanisms of control and indoctrination. The indiscriminate coercion of the regime against its opponents is now more transparent with the insertion of the island’s independent press. In addition, the regime currently devices economic incentives to discipline its people. All of these factors present continuous opportunities for the opposition to unveil the ongoing legitimization crisis and promote their quest for change in Cuban society.¹⁷

THE RELATIVE STRENGTH OF CONTEMPORARY CIVIL SOCIETY IN CUBA

There are many indicators that support the assertion of the weighty presence of dissidents in civil society today. On the international arena, Cuban dissidents have captured a good deal of attention, especially in the new medium of the internet. Two Web searches for Cuban dissidents resulted in 1,691 hits with the *El Nuevo Herald* Service quepasa.com and 12,148 with Alta Vista. News from independent journalists and dissident groups are featured regularly on CubaNet and other internet sites.

Among Cuban exiles, the support for dissident groups is undeniable. In a poll of 1,200 randomly selected Cuban-American in South Florida conducted

by Florida International University’s Institute for Public Opinion Research (IPOR) in 1997, 92% strongly favored supporting human rights groups working inside Cuba. This level of support did not diminish when gender, income, race, and educational attainment segregated the sample of respondents.¹⁸

Domestically, the periodic waves of indiscriminate repression against the dissidents are an indication that the government is not taking any chances. Amnesty International has consistently reported Cuba as one of the worst violators of human rights in the planet. In its *1999 Annual Report*, Amnesty reports that there are still around 300 political prisoners, 100 of which are prisoners of conscience.¹⁹ But the repression does not stop there. The report concludes: “... las fuerzas de seguridad hostigaron y detuvieron arbitrariamente a numerosos activistas pacíficos. La represión gubernamental afectó a amplios sectores de la sociedad, como los académicos, los activistas de derechos humanos, los sindicalistas, los líderes religiosos, las organizaciones juveniles y los partidos no oficiales.”²⁰

As Table 2 shows, there is substantive evidence that dissident groups are increasingly coordinating civil disobedient activities.²¹ Most of the civil actions reported from Cuba today involved more than one dissident group. In addition, there seems to be coordination between these groups and independent journalist to report these stories.

Opposition leaders have also made good use of the airtime provided by Radio Martí to transmit their messages and promote their ideas back home in the island. The *Granma* editorial against the Grupo de Trabajo de la Disidencia Interna mentioned earlier

16. CubaNet (January 21, 1999).

17. According to Alexander Smolar, these trends were also evident in Central and Eastern Europe before the fall of communism. See Alexander Smolar, “Civil Society After Communism: From Opposition to Atomization,” *Journal of Democracy* 7 (January 1996).

18. FIU 1997 Cuba Poll, <http://www.fiu.edu/orgs/ipor/cubapoll/report.html>.

19. <http://www.amnestyusa.org/ailib/aireport/ar99s/amr25.htm>.

20. <http://www.amnestyusa.org/ailib/aireport/ar99s/amr25.htm>.

21. The event analysis in Table 2 was conducted by previewing the first one hundred hits in an internet search of dissidence in Cuba through Alta Vista. Repeated or related hits were excluded as were numerous hits related to the arrest and case of the Grupo de Trabajo de la Disidencia Interna. Reports of incarcerations were also excluded.

Table 2. Networking Among Dissident Organizations in Civil Society

Date	No. of Dissident Groups	Activity	Affiliation
9/9/98	6	anti-government protest	Proyecto Solidaridad
12/2/96	6	anti-government protest	Proyecto Solidaridad
4/5/97	3	meeting with Manuel Chávez (Spanish Official)	Comisión Cubana de Derechos Humanos y Partido Socialdemócrata
4/12/98	3	police harassment	Movimiento de Reconciliación Nacional
11/7/97	4	public demand for a political plebiscite	Comité Cubano de Derechos Humanos/Movimiento de Liberación
	2	coincide with Cumbre Ibero-Americana	Proyecto Demócrata Cubano/Comisión de Derechos Humanos
11/7/97	3	public demand for a political plebiscite	Plataforma Democrática Cubana
9/30/97	2	civil disobedience	Acción Democrática
9/11/97	6	civil disobedience	Partido de Solidaridad Democrática
12/14/97	5	celebrate human rights day	Frente Patriótico Oriental and others
12/12/97	7	hunger strike	Partido Pro Derechos Humanos

refers to 120 appearances in the station by Roca, Roque, Gómez Manzano and Bonné between January and June of 1997.²²

Opposition groups have also grown in scope to encompass a variety of issues beyond human rights. According to Néstor E. Baguer of Agencia de Prensa Independiente de Cuba, today there are more than 200 dissidents groups active inside Cuba. These groups cover a wide array of issues besides politics, ranging from the environment to burgeoning religious concerns. However, the same author points to five political associations as the most prominent based on the level of national support and organization.²³ One of the challenges for the future growth of civil society is to strengthen the activities of non-political groups to the levels of prominence enjoyed by political dissidents.

Despite all of these assertions, the dissident groups face four major challenges in the near future as they navigate through the dwindling years of the Castro regime and the prospects for a forthcoming political transition.

Regime stigmatization. By regime stigmatization, I mean the attempts by the regime to stigmatize the opposition as either anti-nationalist, parasitic or, in most cases, annexionist. This effort by the regime is

constant and burdensome. The Cuban state has a monopoly over the means of communication and additionally, has the ability and willingness to infiltrate its opponents to weaken their organization or reshuffle their missions. There is a large body of evidence of this official strategy. The Venezuelan newspaper *El Universal* reports that an official bulletin summarized the verdict in the trial of Roca and his associates as "... el caracter antipatriótico de los hechos muy severo."²⁴ To counter these efforts, the dissident opposition must manipulate more effectively patriotic symbols and allude to patriotic figures when justifying their struggle against the Castro regime. The goal of the opposition must be to deny the regime the ability to claim monopoly over nationalistic symbols. One way to accomplish this goal is to reframe its struggle in light of a continuous quest for independence and justice that dates from the middle of the 19th century.

Debilitating the ruling coalition. One of the more burdensome tasks by the opposition is to make some inroads into weakening the governing clique. Especially, it should attempt to foster more contacts, and even an eventual network, with reformist elements within the ranks of the island's semi-autonomous NGOs. The idea behind this recommendation is to exacerbate political cleavages and pushed the regime

22. *Granma*, <http://www.nodo50.ix.apc.org/cesc/dissidentes.htm>

23. Néstor E. Baguer, "¿Quién es quién en la disidencia cubana?" CubaNet (September 12, 1997).

24. *El Universal Digital* (March 16, 1999), <http://archivo.eud.com/1999/03/16/16106DD.shtml>

to censor its own associates. However, this task presents a lot of challenges not the least of which is the perception of co-optation from outside supporters. Another difficulty may be identifying who truly belong to the group of reformers and how many of them will concede open dissent in such autocratic-authoritarian situation. Nonetheless, a historical fact remains: one of the precipitating factors during the downfall of authoritarianism is the erosion of support among regime insiders.

Solidifying organizational capacity. Dissident groups also strengthen their capacity for inter and intra-organizational networks. Coordinating strategy and policy is no longer enough. Opponents need to blend behind a transition plan. During the anti-Batista insurgency, the 26th of July entered into different strategic alliances (*pactos*) to survive, rally support, and gain visibility. The publication of *La Patria es de Todos* presents a unique opportunity to jumpstart this blending process.

Sustaining diverse relations with foreign allies. One of the most effective forms of leverage that the opposition has in its arsenal is to embarrass the regime by drawing international actors into their struggle. Recently, the nonviolent plight has successfully affected relations between Cuba and its closest allies to the point that these relations have either been scaled down or recalculated. One of the consequences of the Omar Everleny Pérez incident I mentioned earlier was the temporary suspension by Canada of two bilateral cultural and academic programs with Cuba. Spain and France have also expressed concern publicly about the fate of internal dissidents. The internal opposition and its supporters should attempt to out-weigh recent diplomatic efforts launched by Havana to isolate its international adversaries and eventually realign its relations with the United States. One way to accomplish this task is to make the Arcos

Principles, which link progress in human right practices to foreign investment, a precondition for any changes in U.S. foreign policy.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to assess the state of the internal opposition to measure the strength of civil society in Cuba. Political sociologists believe that the strength of civil associations is the backbone of pluralism. The more leverage the opposition brings to the negotiating table during the transition process, the more concessions it can bargain away from the regime. Events in the Southern Cone illustrate this axiom well. As Alfred Stepan, among others, suggests, the opposition's capacity to survive under an authoritarian regime is a measure of relative strength. In Cuba, internal dissident groups have not only endured but multiplied as well. Whether the regime admits it or not, dissident groups are formidable opponents. I am not saying the opposition should be complaisant. Dissents still have much to do to solidify their presence and prepare for the transition.

To conclude, I outline some lessons learned from an assessment of Cuban internal dissidents:

- As the opposition matures and the correlation of forces turns against violent confrontation, the opposition in authoritarian regimes turns to the more peaceful arena of civil society;
- Non-violence exploits the internal contradictions of authoritarianism and heightens the legitimization crisis;
- As the opposition matures, it ventures into other issue areas besides politics; and
- The more serious challenges faced by the opposition are to undermine the stigma imposed by the regime, to debilitate the ruling coalition; to solidify its organizational capacity, and to sustain relations with diverse foreign allies.