

THE STABILITY OF THE INSTITUTIONS OF THE CUBAN STATE DURING THE TRANSITION

B. E. Aguirre

The author makes the assumption that there *will not be* a rapid political transition in Cuba immediately after the death of Mr. Fidel Castro. It is also assumed that democracy, constitutional guarantees and liberties, and the rule of law will not be established over a short period of time. Instead, it is argued here that at the death of Mr. Castro, the one-party political regime in place today will continue to govern the island for the foreseeable future. The author's cited articles on the reasons for the stability of Cuba's political system (Aguirre, 1999), the nature of the culture of opposition in the island (Aguirre, 1998; 2001), the effectiveness of social control systems (Aguirre, 2002), and the nature of the Cuban elite provide the rationale for this perspective on political change in Cuba.

OUTLOOK

It is the author's view is that there *will not be* a rapid political transition in Cuba immediately after the death of Mr. Castro. Instead, the present-day one-party political regime and the absence of constitutional guarantees will continue during the first five years following his death. This forecast is based on the following reasons:

First Reason: The legitimacy of the Castro-led government, if legitimacy is understood not as a population's agreement with the government about its programs and policies but as hegemonic control by the government of the interpretative schemes people use to make sense of their worlds (Aguirre, 1999). Such legitimacy is based in large part on the presence of a cultural system producing social control rather than

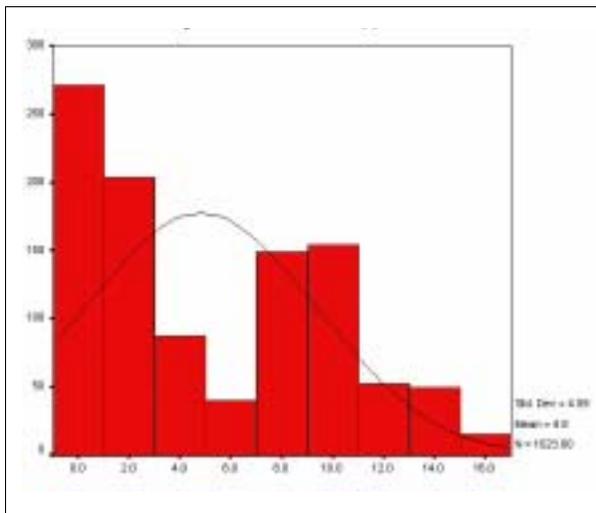
primarily on sheer force and terror. As I have written elsewhere (Aguirre, 2002), the basic quality of the system of social control in Cuba is its combination of both formal and informal processes that simultaneously emphasize openness and rigidity. Both formal and informal systems are guided by an ideology, a reigning political culture, and the operations of a centrally planned society. Elements of the informal system are propaganda, education, residential patterns, humor, myths and rituals, and charismatic authority. The formal system is one geared to block all anti-hegemonic acts of individuals and organizations, particularly those acts that if left unchecked could become symbolic acts encouraging similar patterns of behaviors perceived as undesirable by the authorities. Comparatively greater importance is given nowadays to reactive rather than proactive formal social control mechanisms—as exemplified by the Cuban government's rapid action brigades.

There are too many empirically verifiable examples of the effectiveness of this system of domination to give an inclusive account here. A critical dimension is the near absence of knowledge among the Cuban people of actors and actions and events that reflect a culture of opposition to the present-day regime. In an earlier paper (Aguirre, unpublished), the author created a culture of opposition (CO) scale based on information collected during December 1998 to April 1999 from 1,023 recently arrived Cuban immigrants who had been in the United States for 90 days or less (for the methodology used in the original survey, see Roberts et al., 1999, 11ff.; Roberts, 1999;

Betancourt and Grenier, 1999). The Knowledge of culture of opposition scale is a seven-item scale that includes information on explicit acts of dissent and on leaders and organizations of the dissidence:

- Whether respondents had knowledge of independent union leaders;
- Personally knew Cuban dissidents;
- Knew about the “Support for a Democratic Transition in Cuba” document released by the Clinton administration in 1994;
- Knew the substance of “The Fatherland Belongs to All” declaration by four prominent Cuban dissidents;
- Knew about the 1998 street demonstration in support of dissident Reinaldo Alfaro;
- Could identify eight major leaders of the dissident movement in the island; and
- Knew of the existence of the “Cuban Council,” an organized, peaceful, important effort to bring about political and social change.

Figure 1. Knowledge of the Culture of Opposition



As shown in Figure 1, the distribution of the Cuban respondents in the scale is negatively skewed. The vast majority of respondents had a rather incomplete knowledge of the CO; 26.5 percent had no knowledge whatsoever of the CO, while 50 percent scored

3. Only 87 respondents scored 12 or more in this scale. This state of generalized ignorance of the culture of opposition can be hypothesized to be partly the result of the great effectiveness of the systems of social control in Cuba as well as of a generalized sense of disinterestedness in public affairs and distrust of public institutions in the population.

This generalized state of ignorance and cynicism is produced by government policies and programs and would continue to be an important contributor to the political stability and continuity of the regime at the death of Mr. Castro. This is the case since the prevailing contemporary view in the social sciences regarding the preconditions for the occurrence of political change in national political systems agree that such change depends not only on structural opportunities and the presence of social movement organizations clamoring for change, but on the availability to populations of competing frames of interpretation which are at present insufficiently developed in Cuba.

The stability of the political system in Cuba is in part the result of the political alienation of the Cuban people, their indifference towards the public good. It is a generalized sense of alienation produced by the system of social control of the Cuban state that during decades has channeled, controlled and frustrated the aspirations of the Cuban people. They cannot change it so they try to ignore it, showing in their indifference their lack of hope and their skepticism. Their quietude is a key foundational element of the present day domination of the Cuban state by the Castro brothers and their followers.

State-sponsored collective behavior in Cuba illustrates the legitimacy-building mechanisms used by the regime. It is in this context that the vote of 100 percent of the population in favor of the government's initiative in the last plebiscite cannot be assumed to reflect the wishes and the opinions of the people of Cuba, but rather is a wonderful example of the effectiveness of the hegemonic control by the government of the rhetorical interpretations available to Cubans which shape their behavior in public. It is not proof of their unanimity of opinion in favor of the government.

Swidler (1986) calls our attention to the value of thinking about culture as external to the person. She identifies culture in terms of semiotic codes, rhetorical contexts, and the institutional networks impacting people's lives. Using her framework to understand the Cuban case, we can say that governmental social control materializes in Cuba in institutional terms in the absence of civil society. All of the institutions present in people's lives reflect the interpretative scheme and follow the guidelines of the state, so people, to get along in their institutionally-based relations must also act within government's stipulations.

Rhetorical control comes from the restriction of the interpretative schemes available to people, so that the only rhetoric that takes place in Cuba in public occasions is the rhetoric of the state. The alternative rhetoric of the enemy, of the other, of the dissidence, of the Yankee, are always second hand, as it were, always fictional messages mediated by the government's interpretations. They are in fact made part of the officially sanctioned reigning rhetoric. These alternative rhetorical schemes constructed by the government and made part of its own rhetoric are thus examples of hyper reality, for they suppose the existence of a reality that never existed, of presumed "enemies" that are never allowed to act in Cuba.

Controls based on semiotic codes come from the person's perception of what others will interpret and say about the person's actions. They come from "del que dirán," from doing what needs to be done to not attract attention to oneself. People do what they do not because they want to do it or think it is appropriate or the right thing to do, but because they worry about how others are going to interpret their actions. I would suggest that these three types of cultural dynamics identified by Swidler help us understand the system of social control that makes possible a vote of 100 percent in favor of a government initiative.

Second Reason: A second matter is the absence of an important type of political opportunity, namely splits and severe conflicts among members of the Cuban political elite and lack of control over the key institutions through which power is exercised, namely the armed forces and the Cuban Communist Party

(CCP) (del Aguila, 1999). It is an elite that has been in power more than forty years, which gives it a great deal of cultural and political coherence. This longevity makes possible and implies similarities among elite members of experiences of socialization, styles of living, expectations, and sense of responsibility in the exercise of public office. It is an elite united by:

- Endogamy;
- Racial homogeneity;
- The economic interdependence of its members and their recognition that their privileges are tied to the economic and political system established during the Castro regime;
- The widespread complicity of the elite in the multiple and variegated crimes of the regime. Much can be understood about this process if we study the sentencing to death of General Arnaldo Ochoa in 1989 and the participation in this crime of the most important members of the Cuban elite.

In sum, the Cuban elite is a political elite unified by traditions, similarities in life experiences, family relations, economic interests, and odious political acts. These various elements strengthen each other and form a strong community of interests: the elite will not disappear at the death of its leader. Nor can we find evidence of chronic and unresolved conflict among different segments of the key institutions of the state.

Third Reason: The third matter to consider is that the Cuban government limits very effectively the growth of civil society. Moreover, the dissident movements and the isolated opposition to Castro's government are ineffective and weak and suffer extensive persecution by government social control systems. The opposition lacks political opportunities at present and does not have the resources, such as access to the mass media, the right to assemble and to organize and petition the authorities, and other tactical matters necessary to advance programmatic alternatives that would have a chance of gaining a degree of acceptance by the Cuban people at the death of Mr. Castro. It will take time, probably a few years,

and an opening of the political system for the opposition to begin to transform the political landscape in the island.

The author's intent is not to dismiss the great courage and unremitting effort of the many patriots in Cuba that at great personal costs carry peaceful opposition to the regime. Instead, we can expedite change in Cuba not only by supporting the opposition, but also by helping diminish the cultural domination of the regime, the unity of the reigning elite, and by propitiating conflict in the armed forces and the CCP. To paraphrase Doug McAdam's argument (1996), we need to foster the cognitive liberation of the Cuban people and divisions within the political elite. In my view, neither of these preconditions exists in Cuba today to the extent that they would bring about a rapid change of the political system at the death of Mr. Castro.

A number of analysts of Cuba argue for a quick political transition in Cuba in the aftermath of Mr. Castro's death. I concede that this is probably the majority opinion. Partly supporting their reasoning is the experience of former Soviet republics and countries like East Germany and Czechoslovakia. There is also the perception among many Cuba watchers that the political regime is much less in control of events in Cuba than I have portrayed it and that its domination is undermined by corruption and cynicism. I do not agree with either of these lines of reasoning. Cuba is not Eastern Europe. The links of the Cuban revolution to nationalist feelings and resentment towards the USA is very different from the domination of the communist parties in Eastern Europe in the aftermath of World War II and their dependence on the threat of invasion by the Russian Army. Mr. Castro's regime has much greater legitimacy. I also do not agree with the perception that his regime is a paper tiger, waiting to collapse on its own weight. Obviously unexpected events could change the outcome I outline. These can be either internal or external events. Internally, there could be a military putsch. Externally, there could be an invasion by United States military. Both scenarios would mean a great deal of bloodshed with very uncertain outcomes. I do

not believe that either present viable, much less desirable, political alternatives at this time.

FIVE TO TEN YEARS AFTER THE DEATH OF MR. CASTRO

The long-term prognosis of what would happen in Cuba at the death of Mr. Castro depends on national and international dynamics too complex to discuss at length here but which, at any rate, would take five to ten years to develop after the death of Mr. Castro. It will probably take that much time for new patterns to come into being. The elite will change after his death, most probably to a Chinese-type system in which there is the commingling of the continued totalitarian political control of the state by the ruling political elite and the CCP, with the emergence and public acceptability of a capitalist elite which would act as intermediary between the state and the agents of international capitalism in Cuba.

The entrepreneurial activity of segments of the political elite will become more marked in the years to come, particularly after the death of Mr. Castro, at which time it can be expected that the Cuban state will relax access to the economy by international capital, particularly from the United States of America. The opportunity for corruption at all levels will increase exponentially during this time (for an extended analysis of corruption in Cuba see Puerta, 2002). It is conceivable that the Cuban state will allow the emergence of Cuban oligarchs, duplicating, to some extent, the experience of Boris Berezovsky, Vladimir Gusinsky, and Alexander Smolensky, among others, in Russia in the aftermath of the disappearance of the U.S.S.R.

The most important task for the Cuban government during this time of transition will be to negotiate this opening to capitalism and the transformation of segments of the ruling elite into a capitalist class in such a way that it will not endanger its continued political control. The success of this project will mean the establishment of severe and ruthless capitalist exploitation of the Cuban people under the intermediary auspices and patronage of a new Cuban capitalist class allied to the state. The present day incorporation of officers from the security services, the armed forces, and other adepts to the government into ad-

vanced training in economics and managerial activities can be understood as an exploratory attempt by the regime to set the limits that will be enforced during the economic transformation to come. It is also in this context that the recent, historic visit of President J. Carter to Cuba can be understood. With it, Mr. Castro anticipates his own death and tries to influence the terms of the rapprochement between the Cuban state and American capitalist firms in a future without him.

Thus, my sense is that, absent some other opposing set of forces, in the immediate future we will see a Cuban state that favors the transformation of a political elite into an economic elite that in turn acts as the conduit between international capital and the government and enriches itself in the process. This is, I am afraid, the real nature of the transition that everyone awaits so impatiently thinking, erroneously I believe, that it will be a political transition.

AN ALTERNATIVE

One final question: What can stop this process? What can create the opportunity for democracy and equality of opportunities and the rule of law and constitutional guarantees in Cuba? If it comes, it will not come primarily or initially from the United States of America, the exile community in Miami, or from capitalist firms. Capitalists require political stability to guarantee their investments. They do not require either freedom or democracy. It is true that most capitalist developed countries have democratic political systems, but this happy coincidence is not the case in the periphery of the world, in the developing world, and in Communist China.

We must look inward for an answer. Poverty is widespread on the island, and, if the literature on the social science of protest is any guide, the poor, to the extent that they are not organized and mobilized, are not political actors. Thus, it is not poverty per se but the social organization of aggrieved populations that allows us to guess about the nature of post-transitional political dynamics. What will be the political mobilization of aggrieved communities? What sectors of the public will likely be important political actors or, expressed differently, what groups likely will become

mobilized and place demands on the political system and limits on capitalist exploitation?

For many decades, interest group politics have been suppressed very effectively by the Castro-led government even as it created a sense of entitlement in the population. This seemingly contradictory process typifies the regime: it cannot provide for the most elemental needs of the people and yet it portrays itself as their champion and benefactor, always blaming the United States government for every problem it cannot solve. But that system of justifications will not be as successful when the very state becomes the main underwriter of capital and when the contradictions allowing for the new capitalist class begins to play an ever increasing role in the daily lives of the people. An inescapable contradiction in the process of capitalist class emergence and the presence of international capitalist firms operating in Cuba is also the growth of civil society and the loss of control by the state of the institutional life ways. The economic change will bring with it increasing contacts between Cubans in and out of Cuba as well as increasing opportunities for social movement organizations to coordinate activities in and out of Cuba. It is obvious to me that it will also mean the reactivation of aggrieved populations in the island.

Old and new political claimants will become active and will organize under an emergent capitalist economic system. Many of these constituencies were active in the pre-1959 Republican period. Others are products of the post 1959 period. Probable candidates for active public participation are: university students, the labor movement [Grenier (1996) writes that in the future we can expect many independent labor unions rather than one major labor union such as the Cuban Workers' Central (Central de Trabajadores de Cuba—CTC)], agricultural cooperatives, environmentalists, ethnic and racial minorities, women, homosexual and bisexual minorities, and professional associations.

Before Castro took power in 1959, active social movements of university students and a powerful labor union movement existed in Cuba (Magnusen and Rodríguez, 1998). Also active in the defense of

the interest of their members were a number of very effective voluntary organizations in the black community (Aguirre, 1976; Aguirre and Bonilla Silva, 2002), as well as professional organizations of lawyers, doctors, architects, newspaper writers, and other occupational groups. Since 1959, other groups, particularly small agriculturists, private agricultural cooperatives (Alvarez, 1999), independent women's organizations, and environmentalists, have emerged in Cuba and suffered varying degrees of repression.

Nevertheless, they are part of civil society and can be expected to participate vigorously in the future life of the country. It is these forces of the Cuban nation assisted by the exile community, the European community, the international labor movement, and other organizations throughout the world that are the only hope for equality and democracy in the island and for bringing to justice those who have robbed the nation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aguirre, B. E. "A Test of Culture of Opposition Power Grid." Unpublished manuscript, work in progress.
- Aguirre, B. E., and E. Bonilla Silva. "Does Race Matter Among Cuban Immigrants? An Analysis of the Racial Characteristics of Recent Cuban Immigrants," *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 34, no. 2 (2002): 311–24.
- Aguirre, B. E. "A Test of Culture of Opposition Theory." Pages 404–17 in *Cuba in Transition—Volume 11*. Washington: Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy, 2001.
- Aguirre, B. E. "The Internationalization of Collective Behavior: Lessons from Elian." Pages 254–64 in *Cuba in Transition—Volume 10*. Washington: Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy, 2000.
- Aguirre, B. E. "The Stability of Cuba's Political System." Pages 273–78 in E. Linger and J. Cotman, eds., *Cuban Transitions at the Millennium*. Maryland: International Development Options, 1999 (reprint).
- Aguirre, B. E. "Culture of Opposition in Cuba." Pages 326–43 in *Cuba in Transition—Volume 8*. Washington: Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy, 1998.
- Aguirre, B. E. "Differential Migration of Cuban Social Races," *Latin American Research Review*, 12 (1976): 103–24.
- Betancourt, E. F. and G. Grenier. "Measuring Cuban Public Opinion: Economic, Social and Political Issues." Pages 251–69 in *Cuba in Transition—Volume 9*. Washington: Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy, 1999.
- del Aguila, Juan M. "Reflections on a Non-Transition in Cuba: Comments on Elites." Pages 192–200 in *Cuba in Transition—Volume 9*. Washington: Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy, 1999.
- Grenier, Guillermo J. "The Changing Nature of Labor Organizations in Post Communist Europe and the Implications for Labor in Cuba." Pages 346–57 in *Cuba in Transition—Volume 6*. Washington: Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy, 1996.
- Magnusen, Karl O., and Leonardo Rodríguez. "Cuba, Labor and Change," *Labor Studies Journal*, 23, no. 2 (1998): 21–41
- McAdams, Doug. "Conceptual Origins, Current Problems, Future Directions." Pp. 23–40 in D. McAdams, J. D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, editors. *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Puerta, Ricardo. "Corrupción Actual en Cuba: Herencia y Vicio," in this volume.

Roberts, Churchill, Ernesto Betancourt, Guillermo Grenier, Richard Scheaffer. *Measuring Cuban Public Opinion: Project Report*. Gainesville: The University of Florida, United States Agency for International Development, Agency Contract LAG-G-00-98-00021-01, September 1999.

Roberts, Churchill. "Measuring Public Opinion: Methodology." Pages 245–48 in *Cuba in Transition—Volume 9*. Washington: Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy, 1999.

Swidler, Ann. "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies," *American Sociological Review* 15 (April 1986): 273-286.