

# U.S.-CUBA POLICY: STRENGTHENING CIVIL SOCIETY, ESTABLISHING DEMOCRACY

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Not since the early 1900s has democratic promotion been a more prominent feature of American foreign policy. As President Bush has proclaimed, “the world has an interest in the spread of democratic values.” One key strategy for promoting democracy is the strengthening of civil society. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, virtually every international development organization concerned with promoting global democratization—including the U.S. Agency for International Development, the National Endowment for Democracy, the World Bank—and private foundations such as the Open Society Institute have made civil society assistance programs a priority. Since the Reagan administration, the United States has expanded its efforts to include the support of civil society as important components of its foreign policy. It is not surprising, then, that the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba (CAFC) has a main task empowering Cuban civil society.

## CIVIL SOCIETY DEFINED

The idea of civil society has existed since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Civil society is the realm of voluntary human association and can be loosely defined as an intermediate area of political activity and social relations not occupied by the state. It is an area where individuals

and associations negotiate each other, the state and the market. “Civil societies arise from the increasing complexity of social and economic life and the proliferation of interest, identities, and causes.”<sup>2</sup>

Many scholars have stressed the relative failure of the economic systems of communist states as a major contributory factor in their collapse.<sup>3</sup> Part of the struggle for autonomy from the state takes place in the economic sphere, insofar as any private entrepreneurial activity is usually in direct opposition to the tenets of the centrally-planned, state-run economy. Black markets are usually prevalent as people take independent initiatives to cope with the scarcities produced by centrally-planned economies.

In communist regimes, where the means of production are controlled by the state, any non-state-run economic activity must be considered as part of the larger struggle of civil society attempting to reclaim autonomous space from the state.

Political parties, political dissidents, and underground opposition groups should not be excluded entirely from the civil sphere. In Cuba, the communist party is the only legitimate party allowed within the state. This gives the Castro regime and the party

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1. The ideas and opinions presented in this paper are solely that of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Center for a Free Cuba.

2. Espinosa, Juan Carlos. “Civil Society in Cuba: The Logic of Emergence in Comparative Perspective.” *Cuba in Transition—Volume 9*. Washington: Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy, 1999.

3. Holmes, Leslie. “The Democratic State or State Democracy? Problems of Post-Communist Transition.” European University Institute, Jean Monnet Chair Paper RSC No 97/48, 1997.

an effective monopoly on power. To contest the monopoly requires the actions of other political actors autonomous from the state. For example, in Poland,

The role of the dissidents in the emergence of significant political activity was clearly significant...the fact that some leading dissidents became popular, and that citizens wanted them to play a major role in the politics of late communism and early post-communism, testifies to the widespread perception that several of them had played an important role in the delegitimation and then collapse of communism.<sup>4</sup>

In states where autonomous public associations are impossible or highly dangerous, only the intimate sphere remains as a skeletal sphere of autonomy from the state. One example would be on the issue of religion. Most Communist states tried to encourage atheism, Cuba is no different.

To summarize, civil society is comprised of voluntary associations and movements, artists, intellectuals, and a free press—all optimally protected by a set of civil rights that guarantee their freedom to exist, to express themselves, and to interact with and influence the ruling government when required. These groups can be social, cultural, economic, subsistence-based, anti-repression, or political in nature. Thus churches, independent journalist, independent libraries, merchants' association, and even a baseball league, are all threads in the fabric of civil society.

### ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS

In the former Soviet Union and in Cuba, the state “neutralized the culture-conserving institutions” and confiscated civil society not just by usurping its role as framework, but dictating what the framework should be. Mass organizations deemed acceptable were those of workers, women, agricultural and youth/students, even sports were heavily politicized.<sup>5</sup> Mass organizations functioned as outlets for government propaganda and also forced an artificial uniformity upon members.<sup>6</sup>

Civil society has a significant role in effecting democratic transitions. Not all types of civil society organizations will have equal significance in the transition process. In terms of effecting political transition in repressive states, it seems likely that pro-democracy and human rights groups will be some of the most significant, though it may differ in specific circumstances. Human rights groups are particularly key components in democratic transitions, because the liberties for which they advocate are the premise on which all independent associations flourish.

Other important sectors within civil society are the artists, intellectuals, publishers, and the media. They are disseminators of information and ideas: without the freedom to exchange ideas and to dispute dominant ideologies, a democracy cannot truly function. All of these groups have been suppressed under communist regimes. Artists' works are usually required to stay within boundaries defined by the state. Intellectuals are persecuted and heavily monitored, sometimes jailed if they are outspoken in their criticism of the regime.

In Cuba, the government operates the radio and television networks and is the sole domestic producer of films and books. It exercises rigorous censorship over foreign information media and controls the importation of books and periodicals. Thus, the government controls not only the channels of information (and dissent), but also the flow of information necessary to formulate alternative viewpoints to those expounded by the state, creating an information blockade. Further to this, Castro has outlined specific boundaries for the tolerance of artistic freedom: “*Dentro de la Revolución, todo: contra la Revolución, nada.*” (Within the revolution, everything, against the revolution, nothing.)

Educational curricula, even at the university level, are also under communist party control, so that free debate of ideologies is prevented. As the Cuban government has stated: “*La universidad es sólo para los revo-*

4. Arato, Andrew. “Civil Society Against the State: Poland 1980–81,” *Telos*, 47 (Spring 1981): 32.

5. Nelson, Lowry. *Cuba: The Measure of a Revolution*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1972.

6. Bengelsdorf, Carolle. *The Problem of Democracy in Cuba: Between Vision and Reality*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

*lucionarios*” (The University is only for the revolutionaries).

Intellectuals played a significant role in the downfall of communist regimes in countries such as Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary. Hungary had the most developed underground publishing program of all the Eastern Bloc states, out of which its opposition movement grew. Intellectuals began to:

write and disseminate analyses of the system, details of harsh treatment by the authorities, examples of the state breaking its own agreements, etc. Most of these articles and pamphlets were handwritten or typed on thin paper, and recipients were often requested to make an additional copy before passing on the documents. This was necessary because the state controlled virtually all photocopying facilities and it would have been dangerous. ... This process was known as *samizdat*—literally self-publishing—and the very inclusion of the word ‘self’... indicates its independence of the state.<sup>7</sup>

A free press is an essential component of any democracy. Cuba’s civil society movements have produced their own *samizdat*, including the magazine *De Cuba* and at least 17 other newsletters and magazines, 8 of which have been published in prison.

Even within totalitarian states, civil society never disappears entirely. It usually exists in tiny, atomized pockets, waiting for opportunities to resurface and grow. In the former Soviet Union, economic and political crises, coupled with Gorbachev’s policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, destabilized the regime sufficiently by the end of the 1980s for civil society to surface throughout the communist world, including Cuba.

### CIVIL SOCIETY IN CUBA

Civil society, as defined by the Cuban government, consist of all mass organizations and legal non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and association registered under the Law Number 54 of 1985 on “Associations and their Regulation.” The significant “NGO” boom was apparent in Cuba particularly in 1995 with over 2000 organizations recognized as

“non-governmental.” It is important to note however, that NGOs in Cuba must be in agreement with the Cuban state and are often created by the state, therefore lack autonomy from it.

Despite decades of repression and condemnation by the government, an increasing number of human rights, prodemocracy, and other organized dissident groups have arisen in Cuba. Human rights groups have often been the first to surface in civil societies of communist states, and Cuba is no exception. Such groups began to emerge as early as the mid-1970s and continued to multiply into the 1980s and 1990s.

Since the mid-1990s Cuba has seen an increase of other sectors of civil society including, independent journalism and independent libraries. However, the Castro government has been willing to face international condemnation rather than allow an alternative view to be presented on the island. In March 2003, a widespread crackdown on Cuba’s civil society occurred. After kangaroo trials, 75 opposition activist were sentenced to long prison terms, ranging from six to twenty-eight years, for “subversive” activities such as association with international human rights and humanitarian NGOs. For example, Raúl Rivero, poet and UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Award winner, was sentenced for “subversive activities” including owning a chair that a U.S. diplomat once sat in. All 75 were adopted as prisoners of conscience by Amnesty International. Today over 60 of them remain in prison. But despite the danger, Cubans are clearly losing their fear of the dying regime and are demanding a role in building their own democratic future. An authentically independent civil society is developing throughout Cuba.

The Varela Project is a peaceful call for a national referendum on political and economic reforms in Cuba that seeks to take advantage of a clause in Castro’s constitution that requires the national assembly to consider a referendum upon the petition of 10,000 signatures. The five points of the Varela Project in-

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7. Arato, Andrew, *op. cit.* 43.

clude: the right to free expression and association, amnesty for political prisoners, the right to form businesses, new electoral laws, and the legal foundation of democracy.<sup>8</sup> Over 11,000 signatures were collected from ordinary Cubans in 2002 and presented to the National Assembly. The response from the regime was to arrest over 20 of the organizers and to sentence them to long prison terms. Instead of capitulating to this pressure, Oswaldo Payá was able to gather an additional 14,000 signatures. These thousands of Cuban citizens cannot be dismissed by the government.

Martha Beatriz Roque, Felix Bonn , and Ren  G mez Manzano, who have all served prison terms, continue their efforts to promote peaceful and positive change in Cuba. Roque organized an Assembly to Promote Civil Society, which convened in Havana on May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2005. In an unprecedented gathering, more than 150 opposition leaders gathered to discuss and plan the transition to democracy and civil society in Cuba.

Furthermore, a different form of activity has been the quiet protest carried out by the “Damas de Blanco,” the wives of political prisoners. For months, they have met outside Saint Rita’s Church in Havana on Sundays and walked quietly for a few blocks. Although their pleas for amnesty have gone unheeded, their act of defiance has been effective. The result has been much press coverage, international sympathy, and more importantly the further dissipation of what Oswaldo Pay  calls “the culture of fear.”

### EMPOWERING CUBAN CIVIL SOCIETY

In his second inaugural address, President Bush established the principal objective of the U.S. foreign policy agenda to be to promote democracy and support for pro-democracy leaders:

It is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture. ... All who live in tyranny and hopelessness can know: the United States

will not ignore your oppression, or excuse your oppressors. When you stand for your liberty we will stand with you. ... Democratic reformers facing repression, prison, or exile can know: America sees you for who you are: the future leaders of your free country.

As was stated above, it is no surprise that an important component of the strategy laid out by the CAFC report designed to support a rapid, peaceful transition to democracy is the empowering of Cuban civil society. Because knowledge is power, current U.S. policy seeks to develop civil society through information dissemination. Authorized assistance includes: published and informational matter (i.e., books, videos, other media) on democracy, human rights, and market economics; humanitarian assistance to victims of political repression; support for democratic and human rights groups; material assistance; equipment; and professional training. The CAFC report proposes \$29 million in assistance over two years for civil society groups.

Another key component of the CAFC strategy is to break the regime’s information blockade on the Cuban people by improving delivery methods for TV Mart  and Radio Mart . U.S. government-sponsored radio and television broadcasting to Cuba began in 1985 and 1990, respectively.<sup>9</sup> The objectives of Radio and TV Mart  are: (1) to support the right of the Cuban people to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers; (2) to be effective in furthering the open communication of information and ideas through use of radio and television broadcasting to Cuba; (3) to serve as a consistently reliable and authoritative source of accurate, objective, and comprehensive news; and (4) to provide news commentary and other information about events in Cuba and elsewhere to promote the cause of freedom in Cuba.

In summary, the fundamental goal of U.S. assistance to a free Cuba is to empower the Cuban people. Empowering them will mean improving their economic

8. Varela Project website. <http://www.proyectovarela.com/historia>

9. [www.martinoticias.com](http://www.martinoticias.com)

and social well-being, helping them reconstruct a democratic civic culture through education and institution building.

### CONCLUSION

Throughout the years, Cuban dissidents have shown tremendous resilience, dedication, and courage. Many analysts maintain that Castro's willingness to jeopardize the possibility of eased U.S. trade and travel restrictions is an indication that it currently views the dissident movement as a serious security threat. Contrary to the intentions of the Castro regime, the crackdown on pro-democracy advocates in 2003 did not dismantle the opposition movement or stop the initiatives of the incipient independent civil society inside Cuba. Cuba's pro-democracy movement is strengthening and public discontent is at its highest level in more than a decade. Many Cubans are increasingly unhappy about chronic shortages of electricity, water, food, housing, and health care. Castro is moving forcefully to prevent major protest

from erupting. In mid-2005, he doubled the presence of police patrols in Havana and other major cities. The MININT implemented aggressive surveillance and intimidation tactics against dissident leaders in an effort to dissuade them from initiating public protest against the government. More than 50 dissidents were detained; as of July 28, 2005, at least 16 remained behind bars.

The pro-democracy movement and civil society in Cuba is not an artificial construction generated abroad, disconnected from Cuba's reality. Its emergence and growth represent the awakening of alternative sectors within society in search of solutions to a national crisis. The U.S. should continue its current strategy of empowering civil society by providing material assistance, training, disseminating information, and most importantly, providing solidarity. However, the U.S. should not seek to dictate the terms of a transition. Cuba's future must be decided by the Cuban people.