

FAR—NEW GENERATIONS IN POWER: UNDERSTANDING A SCENARIO OF CONTINUITY

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When we approach the Cuban debate, the scope of political actors is generally limited to one or two, Fidel Castro and/or Raúl Castro. Partially true in the past, nowadays it becomes an increasingly misleading approach not only because of very obvious reasons of age and health, but because it tends to bypass and ignore completely the fact that most of the old Cuban leadership or *históricos* have either passed away or retired and new generations are already in control of much of the existing power structure and its institutions, becoming key players in the policy and decision making processes. Cuba's armed forces—the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias, FAR—represent not only Cuba's most important and influential institution but also the power institution where more clearly this dominant trend of the new generations coming into power can be observed.

In a relatively short period of time (5 to 10 years), the aging factor will decide the ultimate fate of the remaining *históricos*. By that time, the question of who is really in command will be an even more critical issue than it is today; an issue that is met by an enormous vacuum of information as to who the new generation are, their background, their feelings, inclinations, and patterns of behavior, their connections, interests, and expectations.

Any approach, any negotiation, any initiative or action—even extreme scenarios such as a coup d'état, civil war, or a U.S invasion—will have a hard time dealing with players they do not know, and this is what makes this issue so crucial. To better under-

stand how important this issue is, we need to place it, and correlate it, with a number of basic assumptions. From the author's perspective, these are the basic assumptions:

1. The existing power structure will not fall, collapse, or implode under the effective leadership of Fidel or Raúl.
2. The existing power structure will not fall, collapse, or implode immediately after the death of Fidel and Raúl.
3. Scenarios frequently discussed, such as mass opposition, demonstrations, riots, and violent uprisings or a military coup d'état are not likely to take place.
4. The scenario of an internal split or violent scramble for power among different factions is even less likely to emerge at an early stage after the death of both Cuban leaders.
5. A wait-and-see period by the bulk of the population will occur after the death of both Cuban leaders. During this period, the new power generations will have the opportunity to move ahead with an expanded version of reforms that, eventually, will meet many of the economic and social expectations of vast sections of Cuban society together with a considerable amount of political tolerance. Political pluralism and more democratic arrangements will be more likely to take place at a later stage.

The fundamental reasons for these assumptions are the following:

1. Violent civil conflict is absolutely unacceptable to the vast majority of the Cuban population because there is a deeply-entrenched reasoning and belief that such a conflict would involve the most destructive consequences for families and the nation, even entailing strong racial and regional overtones.
2. The notion that such a conflict might bring about various forms of U.S. intervention, including military, that would aggravate the levels of confrontation and destruction, something that three years of war in Iraq tend to confirm and illustrate.
3. High expectations among the majority of the population concerning their material welfare, and how improvements will come about in a post-Castro Cuba, will determine the ultimate choice between an initial wait-and-see and the devastating scenario of violent civil conflict mixed with U.S. intervention.

Fully understanding the lessons of Tiennanmen Square and its aftermath, the new generations in power will do their utmost to strengthen political cohesiveness and outreach to the population in their quest for acceptance and legitimacy. This is why cohesiveness and consensus building will be key attributes of the new generations in power.

THE UNFOLDING OF THE CURRENT TREND AND THE FAR

Since the early 1990s, the trend that we are discussing today began to unfold itself quite rapidly. At the time, very few were concerned with this trend. Most researchers were concerned about comparative studies of Cuba and Eastern European nations and the imminent downfall of the Cuban regime. Among the few who took another approach were the Cuban Research Institute at Florida International University, which began highlighting some interesting manifestations of the rejuvenation of several civilian institutions, especially the National Assembly.

At the level of Cuba's FAR, the mid-1990s saw significant evidence that something entirely different was in the making: (a) scores of generals with strong credentials as *históricos* were retired and a few transferred to civilian positions; (b) between 1992 and

1998 two new promotions of generals in their early and mid-40s came in to replace the old veterans; (c) the replacement of Politburo member and Division General Ulises Rosales del Toro by Brigadier General Alvaro López Miera as Chief of Staff. The latter change was a real landmark. López Miera was just a child of 14 in 1959 and only a colonel and a member of the Central Committee in the early 1990s. To appoint him as Chief of Staff meant bypassing a host of generals in terms of rank, seniority, and historical credentials. A similar pattern, was followed when Brigadier General Rubén Martínez Puente, Chief of the Air Force and Air Defense (DAAFAR), was replaced by recently-promoted Brigadier General Pedro Mendiondo Gómez, a teenage militia member in 1960.

Other examples were the case of Brigadier General Rafael Hernández Delgado, a young general that was chosen to command the December 2, 1996, military parade celebrating the FAR's 40th Anniversary, followed by the appointment of two recently-promoted Brigadier Generals (Carrillo Gómez and Méndez de la Fe), not members of the Central Committee, to preside over the Central Political Directorate. Both of them in the early 1970s were simply *camilitos* (students at pre-cadet schools known as *Escuelas Militares Camilo Cienfuegos*).

Almost ten years later, on April 10, 2005, at the military celebrations held at the *II Frente Oriental "Frank País"* (the front established and led by Raúl Castro during the guerrilla days), a similar pattern was observed when young Brigadier General Rafael Borjas Ortega commanded the military parade.

At the Ministry of Interior (MININT), the case is similar. Already, several directorates are in the hands of either generals who were not even 10 years old in the mid 1960s—for example the Intelligence Directorate and Border Guards—while much younger colonels are in charge of Traffic, Police Patrols, and several others are second-in-command to various directorates such as the National Revolutionary Police (Policía Nacional Revolucionaria, PNR), and the recently-created Department of Public Security (Departamento de Seguridad Pública).

A similar trend is observable within Government and Party leaders. At the level of the Politburo, members like Carlos Lage, Abel Prieto, Yadira García, Pedro Sáez, Jorge Luis Sierra, and Miguel Díaz-Canel, whose ages are between 46 and 56. At the provincial level, the age of the first secretaries is between 46 and 53. And at the government level, the age is currently between 45 and 55. Out of the 14,946 delegates elected in the 2002–2003 elections at precinct level (*circunscripción*), 6,652 were below 40 years of age and 4,847 between 41 and 50; that is, more than two thirds were young or relatively young.

Another extremely important perspective is race. Public discussion of this issue began in 1985, during the III Party Congress. Fidel Castro was then, and continues to be, extremely reluctant to discuss the matter in public; he has done it just two or three times. Paraphrasing José Martí, he keeps emphasizing that the notion of human being goes beyond that of black or white; that intrinsic qualities are the ones to be judged, not color of the skin. With an entirely different approach, Raúl Castro has repeatedly raised the issue at Party Congresses as well as in public and closed-door meetings, very much supported by Carlos Lage. According to both of them, social mobility, material progress, and promotion opportunities, are not still equally distributed among racial groups. Racial inequities do exist and permanent improvement and supervision is needed.

Today, the one institution in Cuba in which blacks and mestizos are best represented is the FAR. The promotion of blacks and mestizos to the higher military ranks (majors, colonels, and generals) has been higher over the last 15 years, including to Fidel Castro's personal security staff. A detailed observation of military games and maneuvers, recruitment, graduations, and military celebrations over the last six years should leave no doubt to this effect.

WHO THEY ARE, HOW MUCH POWER DO THEY HOLD, AND MIND SET

The overwhelming majority of these new generations come from family environments with strong revolutionary commitment and loyalties, including systematic exposure to official ideology, family revolutionary experiences of which to be proud, and early

political involvement. In general, their educational standards, scores, and performance as students are well above average.

They are very much aware of the many risks involved and of the highly competitive structure of the existing standards, but also of the many rewards in terms of promotion, professional, economic, and social benefits, and of public recognition, plus the terms for retirement. Professional and vocational opportunities are equally high and attractive.

Although affiliation with the Party and Union of Communist Youth (Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas, UJC) are important references, they are not an obstacle to normal promotion from lieutenant to major. We must bear in mind that only 50 percent of the military are members of the Party or UJC.

From the military standpoint, most of them, as already stated, are lieutenants and captains (and even cadets) with experience in Angola and Ethiopia (with several tours in many cases), as well as in some other countries like Syria, Congo Brazzaville, Nicaragua, Yemen, Vietnam, Iraq, and the Balkans. Up to the mid 1980s, many of them took different courses in the former Soviet Union (pilots, tanks, political officers, Intelligence and Counter-Intelligence, and various other branches) and in Vietnam (especially after the implementation of military strategies and tactics in the late 1970s known as All People's War or *Guerrea de Todo el Pueblo*). Until 2015, Cuba's military leadership will consist of a body of officers with ample combat experience. Since the early 1990s, training in Vietnam and China has been intensified together with numerous visits to exchange experiences. Visits to China have played an important role in improving Cuba's military industries and the experiences connected to *Perfeccionamiento Empresarial*.

The amount of power they hold has been multiplied over the last 15 years through the activities of the FAR's Vice Ministry of Economic Activities, under the command of Army Corps General Julio Casas Regueiro and a team of highly trained officers in management, finances, and technologies in G-7 nations and other countries. FAR has expanded its activities, making inroads in fields such as tourism,

mining and industries, foreign and domestic trade in hard currency and in pesos, banking, agriculture, and others. In a number of cases, officers on active duty or retired officers have been appointed to a certain number of civilian economic institutions, but not—as commonly stated—to militarize them but to provide guidance and leadership connected with implementing the policies of *Perfeccionamiento Empresarial*, and all too frequently not on a permanent basis, but on a temporary one.

Hundreds if not thousands of these officers have been exposed to the best notions and experiences of capitalist management for more than 20 years; the industries, services, and agriculture they control operate along such lines, and they know perfectly well that every single sector, industry or service that works in the Cuban economy is managed according to such notions and experiences and in close association to foreign capital, technologies, and markets. This is perfectly clear for them today, and they have no reason to back off from such policies and actions.

The role of these new generations is already critical, and will be even more so in the future. Four years ago, Raúl Castro stated something that is absolutely true: “The men and women that in the future will hold the main responsibilities in matters of defense, as in every other sphere of this country, including the top leadership of the nation, are not about to arrive, they are already among us. ... In the case of the FAR, there are already *camilitos* that are generals or colonels leading important combat units and in the majority of the key positions of every staff.”

The political influence of young officers has grown considerably as they reach higher ranks and command positions, which allow them through the army councils deliberations and the policy reports coming from CODEN (Colegio de Defensa Nacional) to voice their views, concerns, and recommendations more directly to the top political leadership.

Concerning their mind set, several critical questions should be highlighted:

1. In the case of Cuba and the FAR, including its younger leadership, lessons and warnings did not start with the fall of the Berlin Wall and of the

Soviet Union. They started with a thorough and detailed, on site, fact-finding, analyses, and generalization of events in Poland before and after 1980. The crisis was too big and too complex for the Polish armed forces to play the role of savior. A more encompassing and essentially political approach was needed.

2. The atmosphere of entrenchment and siege—Cuba’s last stand, a type of Spaniard Numancia resistance—of the late 1980s and early 1990s, which eventually entailed the notion of defeat, is not anymore. There is now a strong sense of having overcome the worst scenarios.
3. The Chinese experience is two-fold and extremely critical to the new generations, who are interacting very closely with the former. There are the lessons of Tiennanmen, which are essentially three: (a) a political crisis is not to be dealt by military means that could, eventually, lead to a bigger and uncontrolled conflict; (b) resorting to violent means may split the political and military leadership, something that could prove fatal for the Cuban context; and (c) a wide range of significant economic and social reforms is the best possible solution to ensure progress, stability, and continuity. Thus, *Perfeccionamiento Empresarial* and beyond are key tools to any sound strategy in terms of national security.
4. Twenty years of exposing these new generations to *Perfeccionamiento Empresarial* and its principles of capitalist organization and management, and its association to foreign capital, have had a deep impact in shaping an open mind, a sense of readiness and of successful effectiveness vis-à-vis a full-scale reformation or restructuring of the Cuban system in the near future.
5. But for these new generations, a national security strategy has a first, and unavoidable, dimension: the conflict with the United States, and this dimension has been instilled in their hearts and minds since day one. It does not have perhaps the overtones and emotional strings that it did for the older generations, but the basic elements are very deep-rooted. And Iraq, the Preemptive Strategy, and the May 2004 new U.S. policy toward the Cuban government, have reinforced—

as never before since the crumbling of the Soviet Union—the existing feelings and perceptions about the conflict with the U.S.

CONCLUSIONS

The long-term perception until the early 1990s of Cuba's officer corps among some political scientists as simply a bunch of *guajiros machos* proved to be not only inaccurate and outdated, but deeply misleading. For many years now the officer corps has proven to meet very high standards.

Two sustained obsessions among analysts tending to explain Cuba's power structure around two dominant, but fading, figures—Fidel and Raúl Castro—limits the ability, and the need, to understand clearly the far-reaching consequences of the enormous implications of these new generations in power. These new elites have very different backgrounds and char-

acteristics with which U.S. policies will have to deal over the next decade.

These new elites are, indeed, a unique experience. Such a phenomenon cannot be found either in other experiences in Eastern Europe or in the former Soviet Union or among the Miami-based exiled organizations and the dissident movement in Cuba.

These new generations, the new power elites in the Cuban experience—military and civilian as well—will be the ones in charge of the nation's destinies after the death of both leaders. They will be the ones fostering and implementing the reforms and changes that will finally reshape the Cuban system, first in its economic and social domains; later on, in its political life, guided by the key notions of cohesiveness, stability, and continuity.