THE ROAD AHEAD:
CUBA AFTER THE JULY 11 PROTESTS

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Frustration Boils Over: The Politics of July 11

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Abstract: Although the proximate causes of the July 11 demonstrations were the desperate economic situation and the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic raging out of control, the protests also revealed a deep current of dissatisfaction with how Cuba's political leaders responded to these challenges. The legitimacy of the new "post-Castro" leadership depends upon its performance and in the summer of 2021, many Cubans found it lacking. As Cuban society becomes more stratified, more-market-oriented, and more inter-connected via the Internet, its politics have inevitably become more complex. Social media played a key role enabling Cubans to mobilize in towns and cities across the island on July 11. Cubans officials, who have long enjoyed a monopoly on politics through the leading role of the Communist Party and on information through their control of print and broadcast media, are facing a more activist public demanding a more responsive state. How Cuba's institutions adapt to this new reality will be the principal determinant shaping the future of Cuban politics.

The catalyst for the protests that erupted across Cuba on July 11, 2021, was economic desperation caused by the combined shocks of a collapse in tourism because of COVID-19, fuel shortages due to Venezuela's declining production, U.S. sanctions that blocked most remittances, and inflation stemming from the January 2021 dual currency reform. But the protests also expressed political grievances. Chants of "Libertad!" (Liberty), "Abajo la dictadura" (Down with the dictatorship), "Abajo Comunismo" (Down with Communism), and "Abajo Díaz-Canel" (Down with Díaz-Canel), erupted periodically from the marchers, along with a variety of more profane references to the President Miguel Díaz-Canel.[1]

External economic shocks hit Cuba especially hard because the economy suffers from structural vulnerabilities to begin with. So, too, have the political shocks of the economic crisis hit especially hard because of weaknesses in Cuba's political institutions. The current economic crisis is the worst since the depression of the "Special Period" in the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union—a crisis that touched off the last major street demonstration, the 1994 "Maleconazo" (a riot on the Havana waterfront). The economy in 2021 is not as bad as it was in the 1990s when GDP fell by 35 percent and real incomes fell by more than three-quarters. But the political challenges confronting Cuban authorities are greater.

The Cuban leadership has changed since the 1990s and so has the population. Several key pillars of regime legitimacy have eroded over the ensuing years. Civil society has become more heterogeneous and vocal, and Internet connectivity has enabled Cubans to form virtual social networks of likeminded people outside the government's control. Finally, the political institutions built in the 1970s to mobilize support have atrophied, leaving many Cubans feeling politically disconnected.

Succession and Legitimacy

Cuba's economic problems coincide with the generational transition from the founders of the revolutionary regime to the first generation born after 1959, culminating with Miguel Díaz-Canel's assumption of the presidency in 2018 and leadership of the Communist Party in 2021. Fidel Castro was the quintessential charismatic authority whose political acumen was a cornerstone of the revolutionary regime's early legitimacy. But the broad popular support enjoyed by the government was never just a matter of personality. Castro delivered on the promises of greater social justice and Cuban independence from the United States—long-standing themes of Cuban political culture. The public outpouring of grief at his death in 2016 showed that many Cubans still venerated him. No one could match Fidel's charisma, but the other historical leaders also enjoyed a measure of prestige and legitimacy as founders. In April 2021, led by Raúl Castro, they all stepped down from the leadership of the Communist Party, replaced by people born after 1959.

The legitimacy of Cuba's new leaders depends on their performance, especially their economic performance, which is now at a twenty-five year low. Díaz-Canel has been a firm supporter of Raúl Castro's policies—first and foremost the economic reform program launched in 2011. His favorite hashtag is "We Are Continuity," and the 2021 Party Congress was billed as the "Congress of Continuity." Intended to convey a message of stability, this theme is tone-deaf to the public's desire for change after too many years of austerity and sacrifice.

During the economic crisis of the 1990s, Cubans who lived through the insurrection against Batista or came of age in the early euphoric years of the revolution were a majority of the adult population and a core base of regime support. Today that generation, in their 70s and 80s, constitutes less than 15 percent of the population.[2] For Cubans who came of age after the fall of the Soviet Union, "The Revolution" has meant persistent economic privation and failed reforms. By large majorities, they are discontented with the economic and political status quo.[3]

Díaz-Canel has stressed the theme of unity, within the party and within the broader public, while promising a more collective and participatory leadership style—a necessary virtue for a president who lacks the inherent authority of being a Castro. Harkening back to Cuba's struggle for independence, Díaz-Canel has called unity the nation's "most valuable and sacred force" for the defense of its sovereignty.[4] Yet the national political elite has been divided about the pace and depth of social and economic change for a decade, with the result that the reforms begun in 2011—reforms that raised people's expectations for greater prosperity— have been slow and halting. The urgent need to respond to the contemporary economic crisis and the political discontent manifested on July 11, puts significant pressure on elite decision-making between those who see the crisis as reason for retrenchment and those who see it as reason for accelerating reforms.

Civil Society and the Internet

The economic changes underway since the 1990s have transformed Cuban society, creating a more complex social structure of groups with diverse and sometimes conflicting interests. Issues of economic inequality, race, and gender have become more prominent. Cuban intellectual

thought has also become more diverse and wide-ranging. At the first National Conference of the Cuban Communist Party held in 2012 to review the party's political work, Raúl Castro warned his comrades that Cuban society was becoming more heterogenous. Emerging social groups—private entrepreneurs, prosperous farmers, and other special interest groups—and growing social stratification demanded a more sophisticated approach to politics than the administratively-oriented party had traditionally practiced.

Cuba's increasing reliance on market mechanisms, beginning with the Special Period in the 1990s and accelerating with the "updating" reforms begun in 2011, inevitably produced winners and losers, despite Raúl's promise that no one would be left behind. Private producers, especially those with family connections abroad to provide capital and a reliable supply chain, did well, as did artists and writers whose work found a market outside Cuba. Cubans working in the state sector for inadequate wages saw no improvement in their standard of living, even as income inequality grew and became more visible. Retirees, single women with children, and those with no family abroad to send them remittances—including most Afro-Cubans—lived precariously at the margin of poverty and food insecurity.

The expansion of Internet access, especially 3G access via cell phone, and the blossoming of social media presents a significant challenge to the government's desire to control both information flows and civil society organizations (which by law are supposed to have a state sponsor). As of 2021, 68 percent of Cubans had Internet access and 56 percent were active on social media.[5] The absence, until recently, of legal prohibitions on expression in cyberspace gave rise to a free-wheeling digital public sphere in which Cuban bloggers and independent journalists offer reporting, commentary, criticism, and debate.[6] At first, the government tolerated online criticism, but as Internet access had become more widespread, harassment of site managers has escalated. After the November 27, 2020, demonstration by several hundred artists outside the Ministry of Culture protesting harassment and censorship, state media launched an aggressive campaign to brand independent online media as part of Washington's attempts to promote a "soft coup" by exploiting popular discontent. The United States has, in fact, funded a variety of projects in recent years—including online media operations-- intended to foment opposition.[7]

After the July 11 demonstrations, during which automated accounts based outside of Cuba flooded social media with photos and video of the protests, including some that were fake, the government issued a new decree law on cybersecurity in August. It imposed criminal penalties for hacking, the dissemination of disinformation, and accessing the Internet by satellite without a permit. It also potentially gives authorities enormous latitude to criminalize online commentary "inciting mobilizations or other acts that alter public order," "subverting the constitutional order," or "defamation with an impact on the country's prestige."[8]

Social media have also enabled Cubans with common interests to find each other, spurring the growth of social networks that constitute an independent civil society beyond state control. In the past few years, a wide variety of independent groups have sprung up, organized initially on social media, but then meeting in person to pursue common projects, whether social, artistic, or political. Evangelical Christians expressed vocal opposition to same-sex marriage during the consultation process on the constitution and won withdrawal of the measure. When the government cancelled the annual officially-sanctioned March Against Homophobia, LGBTQ+

activists organized their own march. Taxi drivers angry at new, costly government regulations organized a work stoppage that they referred to as *El Trancón* (The Big Traffic Jam). Feminists launched a campaign demanding a law against domestic violence, and animal rights advocates demonstrated for a law against animal cruelty. Symbolic protests by artists over the censorship provisions of Decree 349 in 2018 led to the spontaneous protest by several hundred artists at the Ministry of Culture on November 27, 2020. Thus, although the July 11 demonstrations were unprecedented in terms of their size and geographical scope, they were not the first independent political mobilizations organized via social media and likely will not be the last.

Grievance and Accountability

There is no shortage of grievances in Cuba over the poor state of the economy. In every independent opinion poll taken in Cuba since 2005, the economy has been reported to be the most important issue facing the nation.[9] The high hopes people had for economic growth as a result of Raúl Castro's economic reform program and the normalization of relations with the United States have been dashed. The combined shocks of U.S. sanctions, COVID-19, and exchange rate reform have plunged the economy into deep recession. Discontent is especially high among Cubans below the age of 60 who are too young to remember pre-revolutionary Cuba or the euphoria of the revolution's early years.

Cubans of African descent—once among the most solid supporters of the revolution -- have been disproportionately among the losers in the new economy. Because some 90 percent of the Cubans who went into exile after 1959 were white, few Afro-Cubans have relatives abroad to send them remittances to bolster their standard of living or provide the seed capital to start a business. Because Afro-Cubans are more likely to live in decaying neighborhoods, they have fewer opportunities to rent rooms to visiting foreigners. Afro-Cubans have been less likely to find jobs in the tourist sector where workers supplement their state salaries with hard currency tips.[10] It was not coincidental that many of the demonstrations on July 11 began in the poorer neighborhoods of Cuban cities.

Cuban political institutions have done a poor job of responding to popular grievances in recent years, leaving many Cubans with a sense of disconnection from the regime. Cuba's one-party system has its roots not so much in Leninism as in Cuba's own political culture. Division among Cubans doomed the first War of Independence in 1868 and a quarter century later, José Martí was intent upon uniting Cubans in a single revolutionary party to battle Spain. Since at least 1997, the Cuban Communist Party has claimed legitimacy for its political monopoly by citing this history and the need for Cuban patriots to remain united in the face of U.S. efforts to restore its political and economic dominance over the island.[11]

But political monopolies, like economic ones, have no competitors to compel them to stay in touch with the preferences of their constituents. The Cuban political system has mass organizations that serve as mechanisms for mobilizing supporters, but their role, for the most part, has been to promote government policy to their respective constituencies, rather than represent their constituents' interests to the government. Since the 1970s, Cuba has held

elections that offer some opportunity for people to hold local legislators accountable, but at the national level, only one candidate is nominated for each National Assembly seat and in almost thirty years, no nominee has ever been defeated.

At the First National Party Congress in 2012, Raúl Castro called for the revitalization of the Communist Party by repairing weaknesses that had developed over the preceding decade. The Party had been drawn into the administration of state agencies, interfering with the role of the government bureaucracy, and neglecting its political work. Its endless meetings had degenerated into "formalism," in which no real criticism was ever voiced, and little was accomplished, thereby "spreading dissatisfaction and apathy" among the membership. The result of these failings was a loss of the Party's ties to broader public, for whom the Party seemed remote and inaccessible.[12] Another indicator of the Party's tenuous standing was an 18 percent decline in membership from 2011 to 2016—the first decline since the Party was founded in 1965.

In his report to the 2021 Party Congress, Raúl Castro reiterated many of the themes from the 2012 Conference. The Party was still interfering with government administration rather than focusing on political work. "We have been repeating this for more than 60 years and, really, it must be said that very little has been accomplished," Castro complained. The "moral authority" for the Party's privileged position had to come from "the broadest democracy and the permanent, sincere and profound exchange of opinions, not always agreeing; strengthening ties with the working masses and the population, and ensuring the growing participation of citizens in making fundamental decisions." But on the ideological front, "I am not satisfied with the progress achieved."

In Cuba's poor neighborhoods, people do not see "las organizaciones" (the state, party, and mass organizations) as responsive to their needs. As one woman says in the 2014 film, *Canción de Barrio*, "We are excluded people." The consequences of that exclusion were starkly visible on July 11, as young people, who clearly saw the police as their enemy, tried to drive them out of their neighborhoods with barrages of rocks and bottles. Even after they smashed and overturned police cars, they continued to pelt these broken symbols of authority with stones.

The challenge for the Cuban government is how to regain the trust of a population long frustrated by anemic economic performance and the slow pace of reform, and now pushed beyond the limits of endurance by the current economic crisis and pandemic. This political dilemma is exacerbated by the fact that the government does not have the resources to end the current shortages and relieve people's misery. People want help, but the government has little to give.

The State's Response to July 11 and Road Ahead

As protests proliferated across the island on July 11, President Miguel Díaz-Canel's initial response was combative. That afternoon, he went on television to denounce the protests as provoked by the United States. "The streets belong to the revolutionaries," he declared, and called on loyalists to mobilize to confront the protestors.[13] Regular police and the "Black Beret" riot police deployed in force, backed by "rapid reaction" battalions of plainclothesmen armed with clubs. Videos showed numerous incidents of police beating people and, in a few instances,

firing their weapons at them. At least one person was killed and more than 500 arrested. The police violence shocked the conscience of many Cubans.

By Monday morning, July 12, order had been restored. A few more protests flared up over the next few days, but the worst of the storm had passed, though not the political reckoning it provoked. On July 17, the government organized a "reaffirmation of the Revolution" rally in Havana, mobilizing thousands of supporters to demonstrate its ability to control the streets.

In a roundtable discussion on Cuban television three days after July 11, Díaz-Canel took a decidedly more conciliatory tone. He acknowledged for the first time that the protestors were not all mercenaries and criminals, but also included honest Cubans who were "legitimately dissatisfied" because their needs "have not always received adequate attention." The demonstrators "are also part of the people," he said, and their grievances were a consequence of "fractures…in our attention to certain social problems." Political institutions had not been sufficiently sensitive to people's problems, especially in "disadvantaged or vulnerable neighborhoods." He closed with a call for national unity, urging, "citizen peace and tranquility, respect, solidarity among compatriots and towards others… That is our message to our people."[14]

Opposition voices have called for a national dialogue between the government and its opponents, although who, precisely, represents the opposition is open to question. Organized groups like the Ladies in White and the Patriotic Union were taken by surprise by July 11 and have never had broad followings of their own. The ad hoc group of artists who formed the 27N movement (named for the November 27, 2020 demonstration at the Ministry of Culture) comprised a cross-section of artists and intellectuals, but could hardly claim to speak for the population at large. In late September, playwright Yunior García announced a call for "a civic march for change" on November 20 in a number of cities. Citing their constitutional right to peaceful demonstration, organizers submitted permits from local authorities.[15] At this writing, the authorities had not responded. But November 20 may prove to be a test of whether the loosely organized artists movement can mobilize a broader movement for change.

The protests of July 11 crystalized the need for the government to find new ways to enable the vox populi to get through to policymakers and give people a greater sense of inclusion. But Cuban authorities are unlikely to respond by relaxing political controls. Their attitude toward political liberalization has been shaped by the traumatic experience of watching the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost* opened the floodgates of public criticism at a time when the economy was suffering the dislocations of Gorbachev's *perestroika* economic reforms. The result was the de-legitimation, destabilization, and eventual collapse of the system—what Fidel Castro called one of the great tragedies of world history. In his oral autobiography, Castro reproached Gorbachev for his "errors," perestroika among them: "If we'd had that perestroika, the Americans would have been delighted." China, Castro continued, had not made these mistakes, and had emerged as a world power. The difference was that China launched its economic reforms while maintaining tight party control. When economic change sparked demands for political reform—the Democracy Wall in 1978, the university protests in 1987, and finally the 1989 demonstration at Tiananmen Square, the Chinese response in each instance was to suppress demands for political reform while continuing to reorganize the economy.

The lesson that Cuban authorities took from these experiences was that economic reform is socially destabilizing and politically dangerous. To simultaneously allow political reforms that give discontent an opportunity for free expression can put regime stability at risk. "What happened in the USSR or the countries of Eastern Europe will never happen here," Raúl Castro promised in 1997.[16] Maintaining political stability through the social turmoil caused by the current economic crisis is an enormous challenge and Cuba's leaders are not likely to make it even more challenging by relaxing political controls, especially while Washington maintains its policy of regime change and support for regime opponents. If anything, Cuban authorities are likely to become even less tolerant of those they regard as implacable enemies.

Notes

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[3] NORC, "A Rare Look Inside Cuban Society: A New Survey of Cuban Public Opinion," (Chicago, University of Chicago, 2017). https://www.norc.org/Research/Projects/Pages/survey-of-cuban-public-opinion.aspx

[4] Miguel Díaz-Canel, "I assume this responsibility with the conviction that all revolutionaries will be loyal to the exemplary legacy of Fidel and Raúl," *Granma*, April 19, 2018, http://en.granma.cu/cuba/2018-04-24/i-assume-this-responsibility-with-the-conviction-that-all-revolutionaries-will-be-loyal-to-the-exemplary-legacy-of-fidel-and-raul.

[5] "Casi 8 millones de cubanos se conectaron a Internet mediante Etecsa en el mes de enero," Periódico Cubano, February 27, 2021. https://www.periodicocubano.com/casi-8-millones-de-cubanos-se-conectaron-a-internet-mediante-etecsa-en-el-mes-de-enero/

[6] Ted A. Henken, and Sjammevan der Voort, "From Cyberspace to Public Space? The Emergent Blogosphere and Cuban Civil Society," in Philip Brenner, John Kirk, Marguerite Rose Jimenez, and William M. LeoGrande (eds), *A Contemporary Cuba Reader: The Revolution Under Raúl Castro* (Lanham, MD: Rowman-Littlefield, 2015): 99-110; Ted A Henken, "Cuba's Digital Millennials: Independent Digital Media and Civil Society on the Island of the Disconnected," *Social Research* 84, No. 2 (Summer 2017): 429-456.

[7] A USAID project to create a covert digital network in Cuba that could access the internet via satellite, independent of Cuban servers, landed USAID contractor Alan Gross in a Cuban prison for three years. A subsequent U.S. project distributed a social media app called ZunZuneo intended to provide a channel for distributing anti-government messages to Cuban youth. It was later replaced by a similar app called Piramideo. In 2017, the Trump administration formed a Cuba Internet Task Force to explore ways to expand internet access on the island to "encourage freedom of expression through independent media." Reese Erlich, "U.S. Funding (Another) Social Network to Try to Overthrow Castro," HuffPost, July 18, 2014.

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/us-funding-another-social_b_5599147; U.S. Department of State, "Charter of the Cuba Internet Task Force," December 4, 2017." https://www.state.gov/charter-of-the-cuba-internet-task-force/.

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