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A view from Cuba

Fifty years of the transition to socialism

- IV Online magazine - 2009 - IV414 - July 2009 -

Publication date: Friday 31 July 2009

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In his January 2009 speech commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, President Raúl Castro, known popularly as RaŃl, repeated Fidel's oft-quoted 2005 speech to University of Havana students: "This nation can self-destruct... those who can't destroy it are them [the U.S. imperialists]; we, yes, we can destroy it and it would be our fault."

RaŃl reminded "tomorrow's leaders" that they must not forget that "this is the Revolution of the humble, for the humble, and by the humble" and that leaders' militancy "impedes their destroying the party." He warned of the dangers posed by U.S. imperialism, saying that future leaders must not "become soft with the siren songs of the enemy" and must "remain conscious that, in its essence, (the enemy) will never cease to be aggressive, domineering and treacherous."(1)

Nonetheless, RaŃl is open to dialogue with the Obama government so long as Cuba's national sovereignty is respected. He has offered to exchange all imprisoned Cuban (US-funded) "dissidents" for the "Cuban 5" - five Cuban patriots unjustly imprisoned in 1998 for having infiltrated Florida-based terrorist groups to protect Cuba from terrorist acts like the bombing of a Havana hotel that took the life of an Italian tourist in 1997. Self-confessed CIA-trained terrorist Luis Posada Carriles - who masterminded the hotel bombing and the 1976 bombing of a Cuban civilian airliner en route to Cuba from Venezuela that killed all 73 people aboard - walks free in Miami while the Cuba 5 remain in prison. Ten and a half years after their imprisonment, two of their wives are still denied U.S. visas to visit them.

Obama's defense of the 47-year-old U.S. trade embargo "to press for democratic reforms" is unacceptable to Cuba and the rest of Latin America. That embargo and U.S.-sponsored acts of terrorism, including biological warfare, have cost Cuba \$100 billion, killed 3,478 people, and maimed 2,099. Nor has Obama renounced the "Commission for a Free Cuba" reports of 2004 and 2006 calling for the overthrow of the Cuban government. In 2008 the U.S. government budgeted \$47 million to destroy the Revolution.

For Cubans, major goals in the early 21st century of their fifty-year-old process of transition to new forms and practices of revolutionary socialism include the following publicly proclaimed ones:

• streamline ministries consistent with constitutionally secured socialism(2) and reduce excessive, inefficient bureaucracy

• overcome economic/social problems deriving from the heightened class differences of the 1990s when former Soviet bloc trade collapsed

• eliminate the "double currency system" introduced in the 1990s of a national peso one-twenty-fourth the value of a convertible peso (roughly equal to a euro) and the consequent black market and deformation of wage and price systems(3)

• defend national sovereignty, fortify national unity, and consolidate and expand Cuban acts of international solidarity

• facilitate family visits from the United States and trips abroad for Cubans

to reform the PCC (Cuban Communist Party) at its Sixth National Congress in late 2009, there being no pre-established models of socialism (the Fourth and Fifth Party Congresses in 1991 and 1997 also introduced reforms).

State Restructuring and Streamlining

In his address to the newly elected National Assembly of People's Power on February 24, 2008, Raúl issued one of his frequent calls for meetings of trade unions, student federations, women's groups, municipal councils, and other organizations to draw up lists of popular demands to help create a more "functional structure with fewer agencies under the Central State Administration and a better distribution of their duties." Earlier, in September-October 2007, in a typical Cuban way, more than 5 million of Cuba's 11.5 million people attended such meetings and offered more than a million concrete proposals.

On March 3, 2009, after another year of mass meetings (interrupted in late 2008 by three devastating hurricanes doing unprecedented economic damage to housing and crops), the Council of State announced a state restructuring. There were "movements of cadres" and nine new ministers took office in two fewer ministries (owing to the mergers of the Foreign Trade and Foreign Investment ministries and the Food and Fishing ministries). The changes were meant to begin to tackle some of society's problems by reducing the number of bureaucrats and streamlining ministries and agencies involved with economic planning.

Almost all the new ministers were promotions from within the administration, and many came from a relatively younger generation who since the 1990s had been assuming leadership positions. Three were women, one of whom was of peasant origin. One new minister and one key cadre change were drawn from the military. Brigadier General Salvador Pardo Cruz became Minister of the Iron, Steel and Heavy Machinery Industry, one of many economic areas with strong input from the FAR (Revolutionary Armed Forces). Major General José Amado Ricardo Guerra replaced Council of Ministers secretary Carlos Lage Dávila.

Two prominent revolutionaries agreeing to step down were Lage and Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque. Both had served long terms and acknowledged they had made "errors." Lage, a doctor, had been credited for helping to pull Cuba out of the early 1990s' negative economic growth by introducing market reforms, joint ventures with foreign capital, and small-scale capitalistic businesses. Prior to his stint as foreign minister, Pérez Roque had served as an aide to Fidel. Both men had furthered Cuba's economic integration with the rest of Latin America.

Much of the foreign press interpreted their removals as some kind of "split" between Raúl and Fidel. This caused Fidel to write a strongly worded "reflection" in which he said that he was consulted even though it was not necessary "since I gave up the prerogatives of power a while ago" and that the "sweet nectar of power...awoke ambitions in them that led them to play out a disgraceful role. The external enemy built up their hopes with them."

Fidel later explained in an interview with the respected Argentine sociologist Atilio Borón that he wrote those words to "cut at its root the gossip about a conflict between the men of Fidel and those of Raúl. I could not by my silence lend credence to such foolishness." (4) As of mid-March, there were no officially released specifics about what "errors" Lage and Pérez Roque had committed and how those might affect future decision making on the economy and foreign relations. This left many questions still unanswered.

Defensive Military

Foreign analysts of Cuba sometimes suspect the FAR under Raúl Castro of being too influential. When shorn of its state funding during the economic crisis of the early 1990s, the FAR became self-financing through its generally

efficient enterprises.

Cuba's is a defensive military, not an offensive one. It has an expensive defense system of sophisticated weaponry and "thousands of kilometers of tunnels," based on the theory that "to avoid a war is the same as to win a war."(5) In addition, the FAR is well integrated with civil society.

Over the past 50 years, millions of men and women, in RaÃ³l's words, "have been workers, students, soldiers, or simultaneously all three things when circumstances so often have demanded it."(6) Recent military exercises trained 430,000 combatants of Cuba's more than one million militia and reserves, and this does not include the countless Committees for the Defense of the Revolution and resistance networks that make it "impossible to attack Cuba without annihilating its people in arms."(7)

"Our Army is the people!" proclaimed Fidel Castro in 1959. Indeed, 50 years later Cuba's remains a people's army, not a separate professional one, and consists principally of the younger generation. All fit males do military service from age 16 to 19, and women often join the military as well.

Three million Cubans are under 20. Almost all families have been involved at one point or another with the FAR, even though its numbers have become smaller over the years. Cubans are proud of their relatives who fought in Angola to help end apartheid in South Africa. Likewise, they are grateful to military personnel who have saved lives during hurricanes or other disasters. They appreciate the FAR for the educational work it conducts for its troops and local communities, as well as for its help in reforestation, the sugar harvest, developing mountain communities, and growing not only the soldiers' food but food for the population.(8)

Debating "Changes Within Socialism"

Public debates have become more widespread and nuanced ever since 2007 when the call went out for more candid criticisms and open debates. Based on interviews I have conducted with several party members and leaders, the PCC has different points of view within it. Part of the technocratic sector favors economic reforms resembling those of China or Vietnam. Some, though by no means all, old-timers and bureaucrats are resistant to change. But growing numbers of members, like civil society as a whole, look for ways to achieve a less "verticalist," more decentralized and participatory Cuban socialism without jeopardizing national unity and sovereignty.

Judging from the Cuban media and countless personal conversations, Cubans of various generations, especially among those under 45, yearn for radical changes "within socialism" (since only socialism can conserve the Revolution and its social gains). Some want to attack problems of alienation and emphasize the ideas and example of Che Guevara. Most want to conquer poverty, reduce class differences, introduce more innovativeness with more direct workers' or community control and less top-down politics, in brief, a transition to new forms of socialist democracy while oxygenating existing ones.(9)

Several economic reforms are already well underway. Two examples indicate the dynamism of the current transition. The limit on wages a worker can earn has been removed as part of the effort to increase production and reduce worker absenteeism. An agrarian reform has begun, permitting development of public lands by private farmers, usually cooperatives at the request of those participating, with price supports for farmers' crops to reduce food imports and make productive unused tillable land that is to remain state-owned. Yet new complications loom on the horizon, including a potentially sizeable influx of money from families visiting from the United States, thus widening the gulf between the "new rich" and the rest of society.

So far Cuba, arguably the world's only surviving socialist system but one with problems typical of small Caribbean island societies, has managed to escape the tragedies wracking its neighbors and accomplish revolutionary changes of considerable magnitude. Its sui generis socialism has generated a highly educated, creative populace that can boast of several internationally recognized gains in free housing, public education and health, as well as in science, sports, culture and environmentalism. This is a socialism that is always evolving and self-correcting, as in the 1980s rectification campaigns against Soviet-style Stalinist influences; the "Special Period" following the decline in trade with the Soviet bloc in the 1990s; or the successful "Energy Revolution."(10)

The Cuban Revolution has deep historical roots that permeate Cuban culture. It has always been a complex process based on realities like foreign aggression by the United States. It continues its transition toward an internationalist socialism based on Cuban practices and values developed since the earliest days of slave revolts and the struggle for national independence, social justice, freedom, and equality. Its guiding ideas are ones of "la ética" and "amor" — the struggle to create a unified ethical foundation marked by human solidarity and love for the other. That is why Cuban household names include historic figures like Hatuey, Céspedes, Maceo, Martí and Mella.(11)

Key to the Revolution's successes has been its internationalism. Martí, Fidel, Raúl and Che, like Leon Trotsky, always insisted that no revolution could survive if limited to only one country. Cuba's renowned internationalism is also historically embedded in popular culture, marked by names like Máximo Gómez and Che Guevara.(12) The poet-revolutionary soldier José Martí in the 1880s and 1890s proclaimed the struggle against imperialism and called for Latin American unity to confront it. Envisioning a utopia grounded on ethical principles, Martí insisted that "Patriotism is Humanity" and "Patriotism is nothing more than love." Martí forged a single unified political party that he realized, together with armed struggle, was necessary for achieving revolutionary goals. It is this heritage that continues to guide Cuba's transition today.

During the 1990s' economic hard times, instead of turning inward, Cuba expanded its internationalism, sending more doctors, teachers, and other professionals to needy countries, a generous move that — together with the Revolution's ethical grounding — helped save the island's socialism.

In 2004, together with Venezuela, Cuba launched ALBA — Bolivarian Alternative for Latin America and the Caribbean — a trade model of human solidarity. Today, ALBA is spreading vigorously throughout the region while the world's capitalism struggles in a state of semi-collapse.

Notes

1. Raúl Castro, Fiftieth Anniversary Address, Santiago de Cuba, Jan. 1, 2009.
2. In 2002, the National Assembly of People's Power amended the Constitution to make the socialist system — "irrevocable, and capitalism will never return again to Cuba." Eight million Cubans signed a petition for the change.
3. One leading Cuban economist told me in March 2009 that unifying the two currencies is a very complex economic/social matter that will proceed only gradually at best in light of the world economic crisis and its impact on Cuba (e.g., world prices for Cuba's main mineral export, nickel, have plummeted).
4. Atilio Borón, "Una reunión en primera persona con Fidel," Página 12, March 14, 2009, author's translation. For Fidel's reflection, see posting on Fidel Castro News site, March 4, 2009, <http://fidel-castro-news.newslib.com/>.

5. Raúl Castro, interview by Cuban journalist Talía González Pérez, Dec. 31, 2008, author's translation from <http://www.cnctv.cubasi.cu/noticia.php?idn=12659>. The tunnels store major military equipment, from tanks to planes, but no boats.

6. See footnote 1.

7. Luis Britto García, "Cuba Revolucionaria," Tribuna Popular, Dec. 28, 2008, author's translation, <http://luisbrittogarcia.blogspot.com/2008/12/cuba-revolucionaria.html>.

8. For more, see Susan Hurlich, "Three Celebrations," People's Voice, 15:1, 2007, 7 & 10.

9. One demand involves gay and transvestite rights. Raúl's daughter Mariela Castro Espín, a professional sexologist, has advocated legislation to reform the Family Code to grant homosexual couples the same rights as heterosexual ones. According to Castro Espín, even though society is more open to homosexuals than in the past, a broad educational campaign is needed. The PCC has homosexuals in its membership. Mariela plans to propose in the Sixth Congress of the PCC that this de facto acceptance be made explicit and mandatory in party statutes.

10. Cuba is a world class power in biotechnology and cancer research. Its cultural vibrancy in all the arts and critical thought is notable. The World Wildlife Fund has named Cuba as the world's most advanced country in ecologically sound and sustainable development. The organic farming advances of the "Special Period" and the renewable energy and energy conservation policies of the "Energy Revolution," launched in the 1990s but ratcheted up in 2006, contributed to this advance. Because of the devastation of the 2008 hurricanes, however, and despite economic growth rates of 8-11% in recent years, the "Special Period" still exists.

11. Revolutionaries who fought for these ideals. Hatuey was an Indian chieftain burned at the stake by the Spanish "conquerors." Carlos Manuel de Céspedes proclaimed Cuba's independence from Spain and an end to slavery, October 10, 1868, starting "the Thirty Years War." Antonio Maceo, an Afro-Cuban, was the main guerrilla commander in the war. José Martí died in 1895 fighting the same war that went on to defeat the Spaniards before the 1898 U.S. invasion tied an "independent" Cuba to U.S. capitalist interests. Julio Antonio Mella, assassinated in 1929, was a founder and leader of the University Students' Federation and the Communist Party who rejected "servile copies of revolutions made by other men" and defended "human beings who act following their own thoughts and by their own understanding, not by the reasoning of foreign thoughts." The triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 finalized the struggle for national sovereignty.

12. Gómez was an Afro-Dominican who became the main general leading the independence fighters. Guevara was born in Argentina, became a key leader and thinker of the Cuban Revolution, fought in Africa, and in 1967 was murdered on U.S. orders after his capture in Bolivia.

This article is dedicated to Celia Hart (d. 2008). It is published in [Against the Current, No. 141, July/August 2009](#).