

11/19/2009



Cuban Political System: More Than Just Castro

Comparative National Systems



Cuban Political System: More Than just Castro

Comparative National Systems

Introduction

Much of the literature about Cuban politics over the last years has focused on the speculative scenario of a post-Castro Cuba. The inevitable question not whether Castro will fall, but when Castro will fall has caught most of the attention. Deviating from the contemporary approach, this report analyzes the Cuban political system with a firm belief that the Cuban regime consists of more than just Castro.

Besides the brilliant leadership of Fidel Castro, the endurance of the Cuban regime over the last five decades has been possible by virtue of a strong state, solid military and political institutions, and most importantly, a leadership that proved impermeable to domestic and international influences. Therefore, this report explores the role and characteristics of the Cuban state, discussing its scope and effectiveness. In addition, this report examines particularities of the Cuban political regime and its military and political institutions. Moreover, this report analyses the possible effect of economic development on the stability of the Cuban political system. There is also a special section dedicated to the Communist Party of Cuba and its crucial role in the dynamics of political, economic, and social life in Cuba. This report also discusses the proven capacity of the Cuban government to cope with international influences.

On the whole, this report attempts to help the reader understand the main features of the Cuban political system.

Stateness

In 1918, just a few years before Fidel Castro was born in Havana, the German economist and sociologist Max Weber defined a state as an entity that claims “a monopoly of the legitimate use of violence within a defined territory”. Without doubts, this claim could be regarded as the perfect definition of the Cuban state, a state that has enjoyed a quasi-monopolistic control of every sphere of economic, political, social, and cultural life since the Revolution in 1959.

In Cuba, the establishment of an effective state has not been unintentional. On the contrary, it has involved significant levels of repressive measures as means of cohesion.¹ The use of the military and government bureaucracy, and especially the creation of a nationwide network of local-level neighbor-watch groups called Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, has been essential to nail a powerful level of state effectiveness. The scholar Mujal-Leon has defined the Cuban state as “an intrusive state whose elites have atomized society, controlled and reorganized it, and channeled participation vertically through a host of mass organizations”.²

Over the years, Fidel Castro, the charismatic and influential leader who envisaged the emergence of a Cuban socialist state, has based the legitimacy of his regime on the moral obligation to liberate and protect Cubans not only from oppressive imperialist forces, but also from domestic enemies of the revolution.

In 1999, a report by The Freedom House characterized the Cuban state as “one of the most repressive” states in the world. Efforts by brave Cubans to offer peaceful political alternatives [to the Castro dictatorship] have been met by violent repression”.³ Political indoctrination and repression is executed by the Association of Combatants of the Cuban Revolution, a body of about 340,000 members consisted mostly of communist youth and military veterans.⁴ In other words, the pretext of protecting state security is used as a means to intimidate opposition through repressive measures.

In addition, the state is a central actor in the economic life of the country. The Article 9 of the Cuban Constitution entrusts the state “to direct in a planned way the national economy” and encourages “the creation of an economy based on the people’s socialist ownership of the fundamental means of production”.⁵ Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s and the end of Soviet subsidies, Fidel Castro opened certain sectors of the economy to foreign investment, leading to the creation of ‘mixed enterprises’, firms created with a mix of domestic and foreign capital. The Cuban state could not consent to suffer even the minimal loss of control on the economy.

On the political and social arena, the Castro regime is highly repressive of political dissent. Cubans are not allowed to freedom of expression, movement, assembly, and association. Privately owned media is forbidden and independent journalists are constantly harassed through laws that restrict “enemy

1 H. Dilla Alfonso, “Cuba: The changing scenarios of governability”, Duke University Press, *Boundary 2*, Fall 2002

2 Eusebio Mujal-Leon, “Tensions in the regime”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 20, Nr. 1, January 2009

3 The Freedom House, at: www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=70&release=70

4 C. Gershman and O. Gutierrez, “Ferment in Civil Society”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 20, No. 1, January 2009

5 Constitution of the Republic of Cuba

propaganda” and “unauthorized news”.⁶ Even though the Cuban Constitution allows for limited rights of assembly and association, gatherings or unions are penalized if they are perceived to act against the existence and objectives of the socialist state. For instance, the Cuban law punishes unauthorized meetings of three or more people with sentences of up to three months or more in jail. Likewise, workers are not entitled to bargain collectively or to strike and the government usually harasses individuals of independent unions.⁷

In Cuba, the state is seen as the prime instrument in charge of educational and cultural development and therefore strives to insure that all teaching material contains socialist content. That being said, students must carry personal cards with information regarding their parents’ activity with the communist party.⁸

Political Regime

According to Article 1 of the Cuban Constitution, Cuba is “an independent and sovereign socialist state of workers, organized with all and for the good of all as a united and democratic republic, for the enjoyment of political freedom, social justice, individual and collective well-being and human solidarity”⁹ controlled by a single-party, the Communist Party of Cuba.

Clearly, the sole inclusion of the word *democratic* is misleading. Therefore, it is paramount to arrive at a more accurate definition of the Cuban political system. A more pragmatic definition would regard Cuba as a single-party authoritarian regime ruled by Raul Castro and his close group of communist party loyalists. In other words, Cuba is not an electoral democracy, but rather a one-party authoritarian state with the Communist Party having total control on every aspect of the political spectrum. For the magazine *The Economist*, Cuba has a “centralized political system, with close identification between the Communist Party and the state.”¹⁰

The Cuban Constitution mandates the Communist Party to be at the forefront of the “construction of socialism and the progress toward a communist society.”¹¹ Therefore, all political organizing outside the

6 J. Roberg & A. Kuttruff, “Cuba: Ideological Success or Ideological Failure?”, *Human Rights Quarterly* 29, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007

7 The Freedom House, at www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&year=2008&country=7378

8 The Freedom House, at www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&year=2008&country=7378

9 Constitution of the Republic of Cuba

10 The Economist Intelligence Unit, “Country Report: Cuba”, October, 2009

11 Constitution of the Republic of Cuba

Communist Party is illegal and access to power is channeled through the party. The Castro regime strives to command every facet of Cuban life through the Communist Party, including its affiliated mass organizations (e.g. groups of women, students, small farmers, and retired soldiers). Interestingly, a vast majority of the adult Cuban population is enlisted in organizations linked with the Communist Party, which derives in a communist agenda that is effectively transferred to the masses.

The brothers Fidel and Raul Castro have ruled Cuba since 1959. They have fiercely retained power through the regime's instruments of repression and control. Both leaders have prevented dissidents to express their political views, to participate in politics, or even to hear what others had to say. The lack of frequent, fair and free elections, political pluralism, and freedom of expression, among other shortages, leads to discard the possibility of a truly democratic political system. Instead, the discussion usually moved into the opposite direction: debates attempt to decide whether Cuba has an authoritarian or totalitarian regime. Although there are some features in the Cuban affair that resemble a totalitarian regime (e.g. official ideology), the mere existence of the most distinctive feature rules out this assertion: elections. In reality, it is not the incumbent ruler who appoints his successor. The Cuban legislative body, namely the National Assembly of People's Power, controls the presidential succession. Every five years, dubious elections are held on a municipal level to designate the members of the National Assembly. Subsequently, the National Assembly gathers, votes, and selects the Head of the Cuban Council of State, who is essentially the president of the country. Yet, one could argue that the design of the electoral system may have permitted the permanence of the Castro brothers on the highest governmental positions for various decades. As described by Oswaldo Paya on his letter to Vaclav Havel, former President of the Czech Republic, the "term of such a post [president] appears to be lifelong, and socialist democracy always guarantees reelection."¹²

The Cuban governmental structure reveals a high level of political institutionalization mostly represented by three political entities: the National Assembly of People's Power (NAPP), the Council of State, and the Council of Ministers. Currently, Raul Castro serves as the Head of the Cuban Council of State, Head of the Council of Ministers, and Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces. Although Fidel is nominally the President of the Communist Party of Cuba, his brother Raul is in reality controlling the party. In Cuba, there is no clear division of power between the executive, legislative, and judiciary branches of government. The Cuban constitution assigns supreme power to the Council of State when the National Assembly is not in session. Since the assembly only meets twice a year for a few days each time, it is Raul Castro, as Head of the Cuban Council of State, who exerts supreme power most of the time. Likewise, the Cuban Constitution regards the Supreme Court of People's Power, which is the highest judiciary court in

12 Oswaldo Paya and Vaclav Havel, "The Czech Past and the Cuban Future", 2003. Oswaldo Paya is the beneficiary of the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought in 2002 and founder of the Varela Project, a Cuban prodemocracy movement. Vaclav Havel is former president of Czechoslovakia and later the Czech Republic, prior to which he was a prominent dissident in communist Czechoslovakia.

Cuba, as an independent entity. In reality, however, the court is subordinated to the National Assembly, which is in effect the Council of State. As a consequence, the Council of State also serves as a de facto judiciary.¹³ As the Head of the Council of State, Raul Castro has absolute autonomy to execute the state's security apparatus. In other words, the state's security mechanism is supported by a judiciary system that is subordinated to the Head of the Cuban Council of State, Raul Castro. For instance, people could be sent to jail for terms of 3 years or more only for criticizing the Castro regime.¹⁴

Economic Development

The Cuban government follows a socialist approach to economic development, where the state owns most of the means of production and holds tight control of many facets of the economy. Currently, the state possesses the large majority of the firms in the island and employs more than 90% of the labor force.¹⁵ The main sources of revenue for the government include taxes, remittances, tourism, and the export of sugar and nickel. Furthermore, the presence of foreign capital is restricted to few sectors like mining, technology, and oil extraction.

Around the world, the failure of authoritarian regimes to meet pledges on economic development, among other promises, has led to their collapse in the eyes of a population demanding more democratic governments. The Castro regime has “promised to improve economic equality, redistribute land, reduce rent and place a cap on utilities.”¹⁶ It would be then understandable to believe that the failure to respond to citizens' expectations could hinder the stability of the Castro government. In reality, however, the Castro regime has already “survived” more than five decades of economic needs, so the possibility that economic factors would provide the opposition with sufficient strength to pose a threat to the regime's political stability seems unlikely. First, the status quo in the Cuban political system, especially over the last twenty years or so after the collapse of the Soviet Union, has proven wrong those people who claimed that a gradual opening of the economy would be accompanied by a similar degree of political liberalization.¹⁷ In the early 1990s, the Cuban government was forced to alleviate shortages of food, consumer goods, and services by gradually opening the economy to foreign investors. In fact, the Castro

13 The Freedom House, at www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&year=2008&country=7378

14 U.S. Department of State, at: www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2886.htm

15 U.S. Department of State, at: www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2886.htm

16 J. Roberg & A. Kuttruff, “Cuba: Ideological Success or Ideological Failure?”, *Human Rights Quarterly* 29, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007

17 J. Corrales, “The Gatekeeper State: Limited Economic Reforms and Regime Survival in Cuba, 1989-2002”, *Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 39, No. 2, June 2004

regime has used the slight liberalization of the market to exert even larger levels of state leverage.¹⁸ Second, although Cuba has lacked the basis on which to develop an economy able to provide jobs and wealth for its people, it has developed a state capable of controlling the emergence of dissident movements.¹⁹ A transition away from the current political system seems most likely to respond to differing views from within the Communist Party rather than from claims of failed expectations from the Cuban society.

Though, it is undeniable that the current world financial crisis has posed a new threat to the stability of the Castro regime, especially considering that Cuba imports near 80% of the food it provides to its citizens.²⁰ A few months ago, Raul Castro launched a nationwide consultation to evaluate possible solutions to the crisis. While the core of the discussions is to identify mechanisms to alleviate the economic effects of the crisis, the underlying fear of growing political and social instability cannot be neglected. An “ever-failing economy with an unproductive labor force, rampant unemployment, systemic corruption, a repressed and deformed private sector, and obsolete industrial plants and equipment” pose an existential threat to the system.²¹

On a different note, Raul Castro’s announcement about the elimination, on experimental grounds, of subsidized ministries’ canteens does not only represent an attempt to improve economic fiscal balances and promote self-employed enterprises, but also marks the first step away from the efforts to forge a “new man” in Cuba.²² In return, employees will receive 15 Cuban Pesos (USD0.60) in compensation. The government justifies the end of free staples arguing the need to create incentives to raise wages, and thus productivity. Interestingly, the newspaper *Granma*, the official magazine of the Communist Party of Cuba, recently published an article titled “giving, more than taking away”. For *Granma*, it is “time to open doors to rationality and savings, to free the nation from a function that it cannot sustain any longer.”²³ This signal of change might be reinforced by the recent distribution of permits that allows private cars to be used as taxis and the assignment of idle agricultural land to farmers. These initiatives do not only benefit household incomes and fiscal accounts, but also suggest a possibility of economic changes.²⁴

18 J. Corrales, “The Gatekeeper State: Limited Economic Reforms and Regime Survival in Cuba, 1989-2002”, *Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 39, No. 2, June 2004

19 J. Roberts and R. Walsler, PhD, “Cuba’s Phony Transition: Fidel Resigns, Raul Reigns”, The Heritage Foundation, 2008, at: www.heritage.org/Research/LatinAmerica/wm1820.cfm

20 CNN, “Cuban leader looks to boost food production”, 2008, at: www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/americas/04/16/cuba.farming/index.html

21 C. Gershman and O. Gutierrez, “Ferment in Civil Society”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 20, No. 1, January 2009

22 *The Economist*, “The demise of the free lunch”, October 8th, 2009

23 *Newspaper Granma* (Official newspaper of the Communist Party of Cuba), at: www.granma.cubaweb.cu/2009/09/25/nacional/artic03.html

24 *The Economist Intelligence Unit*, “Country Report: Cuba”, October, 2009

In a substantial way, the survival of Cuban state-controlled economy depends on the alliance between Cuba and Venezuela. In exchange for receiving oil at subsidized prices, Cuba has sent a few dozen of thousands of doctors to Venezuela.²⁵ Some estimates reveal that favorable terms of payment result in Venezuela providing around 20,000 bpd of free oil to Cuba.²⁶ Furthermore, it is believed that Raul Castro is re-exporting this free oil at international market prices, generating effortless revenues that are essential in the functioning of the economy. Although the country is undoubtedly benefiting from the agreement, a reliance on Venezuela for oil imports will continue to pose a threat not only to public finances, but also to the stability of the Castro regime.

According to the “2009 Index of Economic Freedom”, published by The Heritage Foundation and the Wall Street Journal, Cuba ranks 177 out of 179 countries, making its economy one of the world’s least free ahead of only Zimbabwe and North Korea.²⁷ There are several features that contribute to this standing. First, the state largely dominates the industrial and service sectors, sets prices for goods and services, and subsidizes most of the economy. This may change in the near future, as Raul Castro is slowly decentralizing the economy by giving state-owned enterprises more autonomy. Second, the state maintains strict capital and market controls, and impedes regular operation of foreign banks. Third, the state imposes severe working regulations that hamper employment and productivity growth. Lastly, the state applies complex rules that obstruct the inflow of foreign investment and the establishment of joint ventures.

Institutions

Undoubtedly, the Cuban Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR) is regarded as the most powerful institution in the regime.²⁸ The FAR is Raul Castro’s military base and controls an estimated 60% of the economy through the management of state’s enterprises in key economic sectors.²⁹ The FAR also has authority over

25 V. Bulmer-Thomas, “Cuba After Fidel”, Harvard International Review, 2008

26 J. Corrales, “The Logic of Extremism: How Chavez Gains by Giving Cuba so Much”, Inter-American Dialogue, 2005

27 The Heritage Foundation, at: www.heritage.org/Index/Country/Cuba

28 J. Suchlicki, “Challenges to a Post-Castro Cuba”, Harvard International Review, 2007

29 J. Roberts & R. Walser, PhD., “Cuba’s Phony Transition: Fidel Resigns, Raul Reigns”, The Heritage Foundation, 2008, at: www.heritage.org/Research/LatinAmerica/wm1820.cfm

pivotal instruments of the regime such as the Communist Party and the National Assembly of People's Power. According to Prof. Jaime Suchlicki, the "stability of the regime is based primarily on the strength of its institutions. The armed forces are undoubtedly the most vital".³⁰

In addition, the power of the Cuban single-party authoritarian regime also hinges on a cluster of institutions, namely the Constitution, the National Assembly of People's Power (NAPP), the Council of State, the Council of Ministers, the People's Supreme Court, the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, and other mass organizations like the Federation of Cuban Women and the Young Communist League.

The Cuban Constitution, sanctioned in 1976 and amended in 1992, embraces the fundamental principles of the Castro regime. The original constitution of 1976 entrusts the state to organize, direct, and control the economic life of the nation, promises citizens with access to free health-care and education, demands parents to inculcate socialist values to their children, and recognizes the existence of only one political party in the country, the Communist Party of Cuba. In addition, the Constitution was modified to defend the Revolution, recognizing the right of citizens "to struggle through all means, including armed struggle, against anyone who tries to overthrow the political, social and economic order established in this Constitution."³¹ In the year 1992, the constitution was revised to respond to the economic crisis triggered by the collapse of the Soviet Union. The amendment permitted the inflow of foreign investment in the form of mixed-enterprises (joint ventures with the Cuban government).

The National Assembly of People's Power (614 members) embodies the legislative and constituent authority in the Cuban political system. The National Assembly is a unicameral parliament, meets twice a year (though extraordinary sessions could be called), and its members are elected in single-district electoral processes every five years. The National Assembly elects both the Council of State and the Head of the Cuban Council of State. Additionally, it has the power to revise the Constitution, approve or revoke economic development plans, modify the state budget, and sanction domestic and foreign policies.

The National Assembly elects the Council of State (31 members). During times when the National Assembly is not in session, which is most of the time, the Council of State has the authority to exert legislative power, yet pending to approval from the National Assembly. The Council of State appoints and removes ministers, ambassadors, and other officials. In addition, the Council of State proposes the members of the Council of Ministers, who are then approved by the National Assembly. The President, the First Vice-President, and five Vice-Presidents of the Council of State are also members of the Council of Ministers.

30 J. Suchlicki, "Challenges to a Post-Castro Cuba", *Harvard International Review*, 2007

31 Constitution of the Republic of Cuba

The Council of Ministers (38 members) is the highest executive body and is responsible for the implementation of policies dictated by the National Assembly. For this reason, the Council of Ministers is regarded as the government of Cuba. It is composed of the President, the First Vice-President, and five Vice-Presidents from the Council of State, the Secretary of the Executive Committee, and National Ministers (e.g. agriculture, culture, economy and planning, education, justice, etc.). The Council of Ministers responds to the National Assembly and to the Council of State and its members serve on 5-year terms.

The People's Power Supreme Court represents the highest judiciary system in Cuba. Constitutionally regarded as an independent entity, in reality the court is subordinated to the National Assembly, in effect to the Council of State. In short, Raul Castro possesses total control of the judiciary system.

Used by the state to strengthen vigilance for anti-social behavior, the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR) are organized in every city, factory, and workplace. In other words, these committees are neighbor watchdogs used by the state to exert social cohesion to the regime at the local level.³² The mission of the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution is to defend the state against ideological "enemies" through intimidation and disruption of dissenters.³³ Every militant of the communist party has to be affiliated to a local-based committee.

Finally, there is a network of mass organizations like the Federation of Cuban Women and the Young Communist League. Even though they do not particularly channel popular participation in the political life of the country, they represent instruments through which specific national interests can be incorporated to the edification, consolidation, and defense of the socialist society. In fact, the Cuban government, essentially the Communist Party, uses these organizations to exert control over the society. The Young Communist League has close ties with the political regime and attempts to instill socialist values in new generations of youths. Moreover, the role of the league is reinforced in Article 6 (Chapter I) of the Cuban Constitution "the Young Communist League, the organization of Cuba's vanguard youth, has the recognition and encouragement of the state in its main duty of promoting the active participation of young people in the tasks of building socialism."³⁴

Party Families

32 The Freedom House, "Change in Cuba: How citizens view their country's future", 2008. at: www.freedomhouse.org

33 Eusebio Mujal-Leon, "Tensions in the regime", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 20, No. 1, January 2009

34 Constitution of the Republic of Cuba

There is no political pluralism in Cuba, as the Communist Party (800,000 members in 1997)³⁵ is constitutionally recognized as the only legal political party in the island. According to Article 5 (Chapter I) of the Cuban Constitution, the “Communist Party of Cuba, a follower of Marti’s ideas and of Marxism-Leninism, is the highest leading force of society and of the state, which organizes and guides the common effort toward the goals of the construction of socialism and the progress toward a communist society.”³⁶

The party is entrenched in every level of government and is therefore endowed with complete control to shape every aspect of Cuban life. The party is directly involved in the formation of policies ranging from health and education, to political assembly and association.

The first Secretary of the Communist Party is Fidel Castro, but due to his illness the real leadership of the party is currently in hands of Raul Castro, the second Secretary. Consequently, he commands the most important institution in the Communist Party of Cuba: the Politburo. The Politburo, an influential committee composed by 22 members drawn from a Central Committee selected by the party congress (only five congresses have been held in the history of the party, being the last one in 1997), is in charge of setting policy for the party and for the state. The Politburo “is the party’s leading decision making institution, and Cuba’s most important decision-making entity. Membership on the Politburo best identifies Cuba’s most powerful leaders.”³⁷

Another key institution in the Communist Party is the Central Committee, which is the executive body of the party, has the power to elect the members of the Politburo, and also defines policies for the state. The various policies that are implemented on a national level always result from the outcome of discussions within the Communist Party. For instance, Raul Castro has recently announced that he would meet with the Central Committee of the Communist Party to discuss solutions to the current world financial crisis.³⁸

The Communist Party also plays a central role in manipulating the role of the media. In an attempt to avoid the publication of anti-government propaganda, the state applies total control over the press.³⁹ Specifically, the state only allows the existence of official communist publications. A report published recently by The Freedom House regards Cuba as a country without free media and ranks it in the low 190 position out of 195 possible candidates.⁴⁰ Clearly, the information disseminated to the public is totally biased towards governmental ideology and interests. Essentially, the leaders of the Communist Party determine what information is to be distributed to the public. In Cuba, the government does not officially

35 J. Dominguez, “Cuba, a country study”, U.S. Government Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 4th edition, 2002

36 Constitution of the Republic of Cuba

37 J. Dominguez, “Cuba, a country study”, U.S. Government Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 4th edition, 2002

38 CNN, at: www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/americas/07/26/cubal.tough.times/index.html

39 Jaime Suchlicki, “Challenges to a Post-Castro Cuba”, Harvard International Review, 2007

40 The Freedom House, at: www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/fop09/FoP2009_World_Rankings.pdf

own any newspaper. Instead, political organizations like the Communist Party or the Young Communist League of Cuba are in charge of informing the citizens. The main national newspapers in the island are Granma and Youth Rebel, publications delivered by the Communist Party of Cuba and the Young Communist League of Cuba, respectively. Therefore, it is self-evident that the Communist Party is endowed with the benefit to mold the public opinion of Cuban society.

On a different note, Raul Castro has recently postponed for next year what would be the first Community Party Congress since 1997. Among other issues, the agenda of the meeting is likely to discuss the party's political future and decide whether Fidel Castro will continue to be officially the party leader.

International Influences

Ever since the Cuban Revolution overthrew the U.S. -backed dictator of Cuba Fulgencio Batista in January 1959, the government has been under constant pressure to convert its political system into a multiparty democracy. The international community was convinced about the benefits of a peaceful democratic transition. However, the most influential and powerful leader in the history of Cuba thought otherwise. Fidel Castro, without doubt one of the most charismatic leaders in the last half century, believed his country had to follow a socialist path guided by the Communist Party of Cuba. History proved that it was Fidel, and not the international community, who would decide on the political system in his country.

The international pressure imposed by the *bloqueo*, a commercial, economic, and financial embargo led by the United States against Cuba in the early 1960s, did not persuade Fidel Castro to change the development path of his country. Instead, he decided to adapt an isolated Cuba to cope with the new reality. The so-called “third wave” of democratization, a global trend that initiated in the mid-1970s, did not impede Fidel Castro to continue with the construction of a socialist state. In the early 1990s, many scholars believed that the collapse of the Soviet Union, with the loss of the annual USD4.3 billion in Soviet subsidy, which accounted for 21% of Cuba's Gross National Product, would determine the end of communist Cuba.⁴¹ Aware of the need to reshape the country, Fidel Castro ordered a slight opening of the Cuban economy and, one more time, he adapted Cuba to the new pressuring environment. Moreover, stronger relations with China and Venezuela have nurtured the stability of the Castro regime.

History presents sufficient evidence to belief that political liberalization could be achieved only if the change is originated from within the government. Continuous international pressure over the last five decades has proven insufficient. The endurance of the Castro regime seemed to feed on that pressure.

41 C. Gershman and O. Gutierrez, “Ferment in Civil Society”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 20, No. 1, January 2009

Instead of collapsing, the Castro regime has always been able to reconstitute itself and remain firmly in place.

However, the current world financial crisis, together with the transition of power from Fidel Castro to his brother Raul, appears as a new threat to the subsistence of the regime. In view of the 6th Congress of the Communist Party likely to be held in 2010, Raul Castro has launched a nationwide consultation to evaluate how to tackle economic problems produced by the world financial crisis. For the Economist Intelligence Unit, there is “widespread expectations that the eventual outcome of the discussions will be profound economic reforms that will involve political as well as ideological challenges.⁴² However, the same unit discards the “possibility that dissent could strengthen sufficiently to present a significant threat to the political system.”⁴³

In the case of Cuba, international pressure, either political or economic, does not play a vital role in deciding the political system of the island. Impermeable to international factors, the Cuban system of government only responds to domestic considerations. As long as domestic actors are not determined to alter the political status quo, the country will inevitably continue with its current political system.

No one could illustrate this argument better than Fidel Castro. In a speech delivered in the University of Havana on November 17th, 2005, Fidel Castro said before a multitude of students that “this country could destroy itself, this Revolution could destroy itself, but they [the enemy] cannot destroy it. We could destroy it ourselves, and it would only be our fault.”⁴⁴ On a more recent date, his brother Raul Castro said in a speech to parliament that “Havana is ready and willing to start a dialogue with Washington, but political and regime change are not up for negotiation.”⁴⁵

Conclusions

Confirming the statement that the survival of communist Cuba has demonstrated that it consists of more than just Fidel Castro, this report has analyzed the characteristics of the most important actors in Cuban politics. Over the last fifty years, the Cuban regime has been able to overcome major obstacles to

42 The Economist Intelligence Unit, “Country Report: Cuba”, October 2009

43 The Economist Intelligence Unit, “Country Report: Cuba”, October 2009

44 Speech delivered by Fidel Castro, University of Havana, November 17th 2005, at:

<http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/2005/ing/f171105i.html>

45 CNN, “Cuban president vows to defend socialism”, August 2009, at:

<http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/americas/08/02/cuba.us.castro/index.html#cnnSTCtext>

achieving a socialist state. Despite heavy sanctions from the United States since 1961, the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, and a global trend towards democratization starting in the mid-1970s, the regime has strived to keep alive its vision to construct a socialist state. Over the decades, the development of solid institutions has permitted Fidel and Raul Castro to remain in power.

In present-day Cuba, the one-party authoritarian state exhibits a high degree of influence on every aspect of Cuban society. There is no clear distinction between the judiciary, legislative, and executive branches of government. With the excuse of protecting state security, the government reduces the opposition through repressive measures. The Cuban security apparatus rapidly wipes out the emergence of growing demands that the state cannot meet. The Cuban Revolutionary Armed Forces, a key entity in the Cuban regime, exerts control of the economy and the Communist Party, the only political party recognized by the Cuban constitution, has close ties with the major political institutions, including the Council of State and the Council of Ministers. Under the Cuban political system, the same person, Raul Castro, occupies the presidency of the recently mentioned bodies. In Cuba, the way political and military institutions work with one another is essential to the stability of the authoritarian regime.

However, the existence of many dysfunctions in the Cuban system does not necessarily mean that it will collapse. Solid historical evidence has suggested that unless the leaders of the Communist Party decide otherwise, Cubans will have to live under a one-party authoritarian state for many years to come. Neither growing demands for economic needs, nor international influence has persuaded Cuban leaders to revise their vision of a Cuban socialist state. The lack of strong opposition has not permitted the expression of dissident views. An effective security apparatus led by the leaders of the Communist party hinders the appearance of an opposition capable of challenging the government and the party. That is to say, the future of Cuba may not lie in the hands of the majority of its citizens, but rather in the will of the leaders of the Communist Party.