

Cuban Politics after 1990
Marifeli Pérez-Stable

Had the wave that brought down the Berlin Wall also washed away Castro's government, Cuba would have faced the painful onset of capitalism and democracy together with the old Soviet bloc. Latin America, too, was already – or would soon be – on the paths to democratization and economic liberalization. And Cuba would have partaken of both the hopes and the frustrations that third-wave democracies generated. In lieu of a transition, however, Cuba managed a reconstitution that secured the regime against all expectations. Castro called the new era the “special period in time of peace” and set in motion a program to stem the economic collapse and preempt a political implosion. Modest reforms loosened state control over the economy, citizens were allowed to engage in limited private enterprise, and the Constitution was modified to permit multiple forms of property. No similar concessions to a limited political pluralism were ever made, however: Uncontested one-party rule has remained burned at the core of official Cuba. While modest economic reforms have permitted the citizenry to become somewhat versed in some market practices, comparable legal spaces for political diversity have not been sanctioned. In short, the crisis weakened the state's control over economic activity, but the state retained – or attempted to retain – a stranglehold on politics.

During the 1990s, the dissonance between rhetoric and reality that had been piercing the polity for decades reached unprecedented levels. The Communist Party itself recognized as nefarious the pervasive *doble moral* – the practice of saying one thing in public while believing another – but has proved unable or unwilling to eliminate it. While citizens are doggedly fixated on their daily livelihood, the leadership has refused to engage in a full economic restructuring, conducting, instead, *la batalla de ideas*, a shrill, ideological battle with real and imagined enemies at home and abroad. Still, the regime's reconstitution stands as the most significant political fact after 1990. In the 1960s, when the island was awash in revolution or even after 1970, when the leadership tried to establish a state-socialist normality of sorts, the government stood on platforms that engaged important sectors of the population. The twin goals of survival and reconstitution, in contrast, have magnified the dissonance between official Cuba and the overwhelming majority of its citizens – including regime members and supporters – who clamor for substantive economic reforms. Instead of reform, however, Castro has led his government in retrogression since the mid-1990s. In October 2004, for example, the government pared back licenses for some forty private gainful activities, among them clowns, magicians, masseurs/masseuses and seller-producers of sundries like soap, mousetraps and funeral wreaths. The state, it was argued, could once again better provide these services.

The Cuban government could have turned to an alternate model of state socialism: the radical economic restructuring that the communist parties of China and Vietnam have successfully effected. But the Cuban leadership could not – or would not – fully assume the political consequences of earnest, steady, and encompassing economic reforms. Normalization has always required that communist parties switch their focus from ideology, mobilizations, and historical callings to economics and the everyday concerns of ordinary citizens. Once having reached a consensus on market reforms, these ruling parties also transformed their style of governance. That is what happened in Hungary after the 1956 revolution and what has been happening in China and Vietnam. But just as Castro looked askance at Hungary in the 1970s, so

has he dismissed the ways of his Asian counterparts, though admiring their ability to maintain one-party rule. Market socialism is almost as much of an anathema to him as full-blown capitalism. The *Comandante* simply cannot envision summoning the Cuban people around a platform of “getting rich” as Deng Xiaoping did in China in the early 1990s. In Cuba, half-hearted economic reforms underscore the leadership’s inability or unwillingness to put the living standards of ordinary Cubans at the center of the political system. Politics work against the grain of economics, something that is unlikely to change until after Castro’s physical or mental passing.

The Cuban Communist Party

The Communist Party and the armed forces are the institutional foundations of Cuba’s political system. Even so, the military is clearly the primal institution: Armed struggle led to the victory of the revolution, and Castro has a praetorian understanding of politics. There is, moreover, only one way to run an army: through a command structure that enforces strict and unyielding discipline. Over decades, officers and soldiers have borne the defense of *la patria* and engaged in the pursuit of regime goals abroad as well as taken up many civilian tasks at home. The boundaries between civilian and military matters are blurred one way: from the military to civilian life; the opposite is unthinkable. Unlike the Soviet Union, Central and Eastern Europe, and China, where the military tended to be under civilian control, the Cuban Communist Party simply does not supervise the armed forces. That, indeed, is a key measure of the party’s relative weakness or, said differently, an indication that it has never fully functioned as communist parties traditionally did when they were in power.

During the 1990s, two party congresses were convened (1991 and 1997), regular assemblies were held at all levels and the party ranks expanded. More than 700,000 Cubans were members, 51 percent of whom had joined in the 1990s. The congresses offered pointed contrasts. The one in 1991 took place amid uncertainties regarding the regime’s survival. In 1990, the Communist Party had called an unprecedented series of island-wide meetings for citizens to express their views on the country’s problems. By most accounts, people spoke, if not freely, at least without the usual strictures. Calls for reopening peasant markets and holding direct elections of National Assembly deputies were repeatedly registered (the congress, however, only authorized the elections, the markets not being sanctioned until 1994). The Central Committee integrated younger and better educated individuals, a more numerous cohort from the provinces, an increased representation of Communist Party cadres, and a marked addition of ordinary citizens.

More important than the congress itself was the debate over the authorization of Cuban-owned private enterprise that took place over the subsequent years, a debate that was joined by the Communist Party, the National Assembly, the media, trade unions, and the island’s intellectuals. Had that authorization been approved, economic liberalization would have been thrust to the forefront of the Communist Party’s agenda. Discreetly, some senior officials and mid-level cadres also proposed innovative political ideas such as changing the name of the Communist Party – to *Partido de la Nación Cubana* (Party of the Cuban Nation), which suggested a Mexican PRI-like governing institution – and separating the government’s executive

functions among a prime minister, the party secretary general, and a president, with the goal of giving official Cuba different faces besides Castro. Easing tensions with the United States also figured prominently in these reform proposals and, indeed, their implementation may have prodded Bill Clinton's administration to respond with what then-Secretary of State Warren Christopher called "calibrated measures." By mid-decade, unfortunately, the window of reform was closed: "All openings have brought us risks," Castro affirmed then. "If we have to open up some more, we will. For the time being, it's not necessary." Reforms were held in abeyance until 2003, when partial retrenchment set in.

By 1995-1996, the leadership had regained its footing. The Communist Party turned inward and the composition of the Central Committee reflected the new orientation: Cadres increased their share by a third while ordinary citizens saw theirs reduced by nearly two-thirds. While ordinary citizens were nicely symbolic, they were jettisoned in favor of the *ejército político*, i.e., the party and its cadre of trustworthy officers. In the second half of the 1990s, the Communist Party rotated the elite within its ranks as well as in the ministries and other institutions. For the most part, staffing alterations were routinized, thus virtually eliminating the stigma of *persona non grata* historically associated with communist regimes. Elite rotation without stigma had begun in the 1980s when no one imagined the tsunamic changes in 1989 that would end the cold war. That the Communist Party found its bearings and resumed politics as usual under such trying circumstances no doubt demonstrated a certain resilience.

Nonetheless, it has been Castro, not the party, who has propelled all crucial policy shifts since the 1960s, and it was no different in the 1990s. Under his leadership, the party survived when, without him, it may have imploded. The *Comandante*, however, has wielded an impregnable veto over the economic transformations that, if implemented, might leave the Communist Party in a stronger position after his passing. He not only has obstructed further economic reforms, but has also shifted to high-intensity mobilizational politics. During the Elián González crisis in 2000, Castro raised his politics-centered vision to levels unseen since the revolution's halcyon years. Mass demonstrations, televised roundtables that discuss the issue of the day in *la batalla de ideas*, weekly open forums in a selected city or town and brigades of revolutionary vigilance culminated in a 2002 referendum that declared socialism irrevocable and led the National Assembly to amend the constitution accordingly. The referendum and constitutional amendments were an overstated, hyperactive, and theatrical response to Oswaldo Payá Sardiñas and the Varela Project, which had gathered more than 11,000 signatures petitioning a referendum on political and economic changes in accordance with Article 88 of the Cuban constitution. In May 2002, former President Jimmy Carter had mentioned the Varela Project in a speech broadcast live at the University of Havana.

The Cuban Communist Party should have called a congress in 2002 or 2003. Though not specified in its statutes, party congresses have been customarily held every five or six years. A Communist Youth meeting – which is usually followed sometime later by the party's – was held in December 2004. Castro has resisted the unavoidable discussion on the economy that a party congress would necessarily entail and therein lies the paralysis that afflicts official Cuba. Yet, even prior to Castro's emergency intestinal operation in July 2006 and the temporary transfer of power to his brother Raúl, signs of life – or what passes as such in a one-party regime — were

evident in the Communist Party. At the end of 2005, the elder Castro himself noted the centrality of the Communist Party as guarantor of the revolution and socialism. In the spring of 2006, the younger Castro affirmed the party as the only heir to Fidel's authority. No one, he implied, could fill his shoes. The party secretariat — an executive body within the Central Committee that had been disbanded in 1991— was restored which, presumably, will enhance the leadership's ability to supervise and control implementation of its policies. In early July 2006, Raúl Castro presided over a plenary meeting of the Central Committee that reinforced the charge to bolster party at the heart of the political system. He knows he needs more than his generals to govern Cuba. The year 2007 could finally see the long-postponed congress of the Communist Party. An old joke asks: What are the revolution's successes? Health, education, sports. What are its failures? Breakfast, lunch and dinner. Raúl may well heed the joke. Fortunately, he doesn't have charisma and needs to get Cubans to listen – most have turned off politically – by reforming the economy.

On July 31, 2006, Fidel Castro's proclamation of the temporary transfer of power revealed a lot about how he has wielded power, extraordinary and unchecked. Raúl assumed his charges as party leader, commander in chief of the armed forces and president of Cuba; four other men have been assigned his duties in the health, education and energy programs; three more are now handling the transfer of funds – which he had personally overseen – to these key programs. Micro-managing was his trademark until his health forced him to cede power. He simply could not live by the insight he expressed to Lee Lockwood in 1965 : "All of us ought to retire relatively young." Likewise of interest in the proclamation was the absence of the economy and the lives of ordinary Cubans on their own terms, another trademark of his long reign. What are shoes for the kids, a functioning transportation system, decent housing, and rice, beans, maybe a little pork for dinner when history and the world's stage beckon?

The Association of Combatants of the Cuban Revolution

The *Comandante* sees politics through praetorian eyes. In 1993, the foundation of the Association of Combatants of the Cuban Revolution bore his unmistakable imprimatur. Today the association has nearly 340,000 members and more than 12,000 chapters in neighborhoods throughout the island. Fifty percent of the members are Communist Party or Communist Youth affiliates and only six percent women. Membership is voluntary and open to veterans of the Rebel Army and the urban-based armed struggle against Fulgencio Batista in the 1950s, the various campaigns against the revolution's opponents in the 1960s, internationalist missions like the guerrilla movements of the 1960s and the wars in Angola (1975-1989) and Ethiopia (1977-1978), as well as active armed forces and Interior Ministry members with at least 15 years of service. Its main charge is to defend the revolution unconditionally. Members are the trusted bearers of the revolutionary legacy and, thus, considered the best role models of patriotism in their communities, particularly among the young. Besides conducting civic-education programs in schools, they train young people in the handling of weapons by holding frequent target-shooting practice.

Though not much is known about the Association of Combatants, its very creation highlights the leadership's regimented understanding of politics and the emphasis placed on ideology. Combatants are the most trusted vanguard, the keepers of the flame, even if only half

belong to the Communist Party or the Communist Youth. In the event of U.S. military action against Cuba, they would form a neighborhood-based line of defense to repel the invaders, block by block. Absent an invasion, their task is to guard the revolutionary legacy and transmit it to young people so that they can raise the torch on their own when the time comes. Armed with correct ideas and military skills, the next generations would be ready to advance the revolution.

Though many of its members might well welcome a China or Vietnam transition scenario, the Association of Combatants may never have been founded had Cuba emulated Asian communists after 1989. Its creation was part of a series of measures taken in the 1990s that underscored the fact that official Cuba is more attuned to military imperatives – whether they have to do with warding off the United States or preempting the growth of an organized internal opposition – than to the daily needs of civilian life. Never shy about its resolve to remain in power, the Cuban leadership in the early 1990s began making its battle for permanence the central element of the survival strategy. In 1991, the Communist Party congress took the first step when it passed a resolution empowering the Central Committee to take all necessary steps to uphold the government, including the suspension of civilian institutions. In 1992, when the constitution was modified, three new security-related articles were included: the declaration of a state of emergency, the establishment of a National Defense Council, and the recognition of the "people's" right to resort to armed struggle in defense of the revolution. In 1994, the National Assembly of Popular Power passed a defense and national security law. A year earlier, General Sixto Batista had tersely summarized the official will by affirming that the public arena is for revolutionaries only: "We are going to crack heads." In other words, a situation like Tiananmen Square would never be tolerated in Cuba. Recently, the National Assembly again legislated on military matters: a new law of the military prosecutor's office which further reinforces the armed forces and the Interior Ministry as guarantors of the revolution, echoing the 1991 party resolution on the suspension of civilian institutions.

Fidel Castro never took issue with the idea of one-party government. Submitting his freedom to decide at will to the give-and-take that even the old Communist parties required to make policy was another matter altogether. The Cuban Communist Party well reflects Castro's ambivalence: from the party's limited development in the 1960s to today's still pending party congress. Building the party has always been Raúl Castro's purview: from the institutionalization of the 1970s to the revitalization of the party apparatus in 2006. Succession and transition are not a dichotomy: the first may be a prerequisite for the second. Since the *Comandante* is unlikely to return to power or survive for long, the succession is already in progress. Under Raúl, Cuba will truly have a collective leadership – undemocratic, to be sure – which, nonetheless, will mean a step back from the abyss. The party and other institutions will perforce gain a prominence never possible under the elder Castro. Not good news, I know, but not bad either. Cuba's last free election was in 1948. There are no straight lines for getting from where we are now to a democratic Cuba. Taking advantage of the possible in order to move forward is a political skill that should be summoned by all concerned. Patience is, indeed, a virtue.

