



FR-02-96

Prospects For The New Cuba

With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet alliance, Cuba was tossed into a sea of troubles; internationally adrift, politically weakened, economically crippled, geographically isolated, military vulnerable.

Many observers believed the regime could not survive under such perilous conditions, that the communist government was destined to meet the same fate as its former ideological partners in Eastern Europe.

But despite the fury of the tempest, Cuba remains afloat. Last year's minuscule upturn in the economy may mean that the worst is over. Indeed, there has been an absence this year of the bloody Havana riots of 1994. And whereas the government was unwilling to stage the usual May Day festivities last spring out of fear that crowds could turn unruly, Fidel Castro himself led hundreds of thousands of "anti-imperialist" marchers down the Malecon in early August to show that he was back in control.

So far, the government has relied on a predictable increase in repression to retain a grip on power, along with a remarkable, if limited, measure of flexibility in the economic arena.

Our conclusion is that the chances for a continued but slow process of reform is 85 percent for 1995-1996, with the prospect of violent change at no more than 15 percent.

The vast majority of factors favor the road to peaceful change, but intransigence by President Castro and the existence of small but militantly anti-Castro groups in South Florida contain the potential for violence. Meanwhile, the economic crisis remains severe. If the Cuban people see their government as an impediment to the development of a better life for themselves, the possibility of a violent upheaval cannot be discounted.

The Alternatives

1. A sudden and violent political change. The possibility of a civil war cannot be discounted during a violent process to oust Fidel Castro from power. Cuba has a solid military force and a well-trained militia. The ultimate product of violent change is impossible to foresee. This is not a probable outcome, but avoiding disaster will require the active participation of all major players, including the exile community and social and political forces on the island.



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2. The continuation of Castro's dictatorship. This scenario would require the majority of the population to bear a heavy burden of difficulties for an indefinite period of time without open rebellion. Given Castro's age (69) and other prevailing conditions, the status quo seems unlikely to continue unless there is a marked improvement in the economy. Any improvement, in turn, would likely trigger greater political and social changes.
3. A peaceful transition. This means a change toward a recognizable democracy without upheaval and bloodshed. Under the present circumstances, this is the most likely way for Cuba to emerge from the era of hardship.

It is important to note that Fidel Castro has suggested, most recently in his state-of-the-nation speech on July 26, that he considers the Chinese and Vietnamese models as the proper paradigms. From his point of view, this is the ideal solution-economic change without political and social reforms.

Cuba, however, is part of the Western world. The strategy that seeks to transplant the Asian model to the Caribbean is probably doomed to failure because it is out of context, difficult to put into practice and inconsistent with Cuban society. The economic changes that have taken place so far have already sparked the creation of an embryonic entrepreneurial class that belies the possibility of economic change that does not carry political and social consequences.

Social Forces

1. **Religion.** The Roman Catholic Church remains the most dominant religious organization on the island. In the shadows for 30 years, it is now led by a new, Cuban-born cardinal who has aroused a wave of expectations. Protestant denominations are a smaller force, but they represent the most dynamic religious sector, growing from a few thousand 30 years ago to millions in 1995. In spite of restrictive efforts by the regime, more and more young people are going to church. Meanwhile, Santeria retains its traditional popularity in the Afro-Caribbean culture; it has a substantial following among black Cubans, but a growing number of mulatto and white individuals have been attracted to Santeria rituals as well. These groups are strongly committed to reform by peaceful means.
2. **Crime.** Given the prominent role played by criminal elements in contemporary Russia, Cuba's emerging crime picture merits a closer look. It is a growing force, largely committed to the status quo.



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An impediment to reform, but unlikely to resort to violence unless criminal activity is threatened. There are several important areas of criminal enterprise:

- (a) Illegal gambling. An extended "bolita" or illegal numbers game is flourishing in Cuba, with an estimated take of 800 million to 1 billion Cuban pesos a year. This is controlled by senior military and security officers.
 - (b) Prostitution. Still largely uncontrolled, it is a growing phenomenon, virtually unheard of in communist Cuba until after 1989.
 - (c) Drugs and narcotics. A serious problem throughout the Caribbean, the Castro brothers themselves are believed to have been involved in large-scale smuggling to the United States until the Ochoa affair in 1989. Current level of activity is hard to access.
 - (d) The black market. The illicit traffic in dollars and related activities is the most extended and powerful of the outlawed practices, with operations estimated to run in the range of 2 billion Cuban pesos, or \$250 million a year. If political and economic reforms implied the abolition of the black market, this could be a powerful force of resistance to change, even by violent means.
 - (e) The migrant traffic. This involves the payment of large sums of money by Cubans living abroad to extricate their kin from Cuba. A relatively new but fast-growing practice, controlled by officials from the Ministry of the Interior who might offer violent resistance to any important changes.
3. **Racial prejudice.** This is perhaps the most explosive social factor in Cuba. The large black and mulatto population probably has less to say about the affairs of the nation than in any other Caribbean country. However, they mistrust the exile Cuban community more than they mistrust Castro. Committed to peaceful reform, but a violent outbreak should be not excluded.
4. **Party affiliation.** Membership in the Communist Party (720,000) and the Communist Youth Union (580,000) was once the only road to power and influence. Today, it is no longer an asset since the state is deprived of wealth, and therefore would not stand in the way of peaceful change.

Economic Issues

In general, the economic crisis darkens the road of peaceful transition. The more acute and prolonged the crisis, the greater the chances of an explosion. The unemployment rate may reach 30 to 35 percent if and when the government



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decides to proceed with the 500,000 layoffs it has said are necessary to make the economy more efficient. Both the failure of the so-called "Alimentary Program" and the deep reduction in the food supply pose a major potential for violence. In addition, much of the product earmarked for low-price popular consumption winds up on the black market.

The introduction of the private peasant market has relieved much of the pressure on both farmers and food consumers, but Castro's frequent insistence that "nothing is irreversible" raises questions about the future.

For the moment, economic reforms are the most positive pro-transition factor. By the same token, unemployment and hunger pose the greatest risk of social violence. The acute food shortage in Santiago de Cuba, Camaguey, Holguin and Guantanamo could spark outbreaks of violence in those places.

Government and Political Forces

1. **The armed forces.** This is the best-organized institution in Cuba. The military has developed the capacity to adapt to a transition, branching out into the tourist industry and the export sector and guiding the process of reconversion of military industries and facilities to civilian production. Nearly 100 percent of the officer corps is committed to peace, and most of its members favor reform.
2. **Interior Ministry.** The ministry never recovered its previous strength within the system after the purge of 1989-1990 following the Ochoa affair. Its effort to develop a civilian business sector comparable to that of the military has fallen short. Some extremists within the ministry (former members of special force units or State Security) are inclined to violence, but the institution is committed to peace.
3. **The Communist Party organization.** The party remains the vanguard of the revolution and continues to play a very strong role in Cuban society. Ostensibly, the Politburo, headed by Fidel Castro, is committed to hardline socialism at any cost, but some individual members are more inclined to accept a peaceful transition, and a few, such as Vice President Carlos Lage, are openly committed to economic reform and its consequences.
4. **The National Assembly.** There are signs that under the leadership of Ricardo Alarcon de Quesada this institution is developing a capacity to debate and settle issues of political and ideological conflict, such as the recently announced new Investment Law, and is no longer a mere echo chamber for the thoughts of President Castro. Part of its strength derives from Cuba's need to show a more "democratic" face to the world. Decidedly committed to peaceful change, with the exception of a few powerful members.

External Factors



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1. **The U.S. Government.** The Clinton Administration is committed to a peaceful "solution" to the Cuban dilemma and would like to see a dialogue between Castro and the exile community. The door is closed to exile groups that simply want to see Castro removed by any means. Some Republicans on Capitol Hill have a more aggressive stance, proffering the Helms-Burton bill as a way to tighten the noose on Cuba. Meanwhile the Pentagon has gone on record as saying that Cuba no longer represents a threat to U.S. national security.
2. **The U.S. business community.** Once a resolute foe of the regime, the community now seems more open to a settlement of differences with the Castro government and a transition to peace. Enticed by the business prospects on the island, but confused about the risks.
3. **Non-government organizations.** Some liberal groups remain opposed to the embargo, but their influence is limited. Meanwhile, the Cuban issue is no longer the priority it once was for traditional U.S. conservatives. Religious groups are actively seeking more humanitarian assistance, as well as an improvement in human rights. Often characterized by a lack of knowledge of Cuban affairs. On balance, a force in favor of peaceful reform.
4. **Cuban exiles.** A very important external factor, primarily because Cuba is a priority issue for them. The Cuban-American National Foundation, by far the largest and best-organized group, is adamantly opposed to Castro and has enviable connections on Capitol Hill and in the business community. By and large, the exile community simply wants to rid Cuba of communism as soon as possible, but the passage of time has diminished the intensity of the dump-Castro movement. Generally committed to peace, with important exceptions.
5. **The European Community** and the Socialist International are strongly committed to some sort of peaceful transition. They share a consensus against the U.S. embargo, while urging Castro to step up the pace of reform. They would welcome the development of a Cuban Social Democratic party. (Cuba's former allies in the vanished Soviet bloc are not much of a factor due to a preoccupation with their own problems. In general, they believe Cuba should embrace free-market reforms while it can still do so peacefully.)
6. **Latin America.** Mexico and other Latin American countries are committed to seeking peace in Cuba. Mexico and Argentina, among others, want Cuba to develop more realistic economic structures in order to improve the business climate.
7. **Canada and the English-speaking nations of the West Indies** share a commitment to peaceful change in Cuba. They oppose the U.S. embargo and want to see trade liberalization and improved human rights.



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