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## **Can Cuba Change?**

*Eusebio Mujal-León* ■ *Carl Gershman* & *Orlando Gutierrez*  
*Jorge Luis García Pérez* “Antúnez”

## **Democracy Assistance: Political vs. Developmental?**

*Thomas Carothers*

## **Violence and the Rise of Open-Access Orders**

*Douglass C. North*, *John Joseph Wallis*, and *Barry R. Weingast*

*Bruce Gilley* on Doubts About Democracy

*Timothy Edmunds* on Serbia

*Diego Abente-Brun* on Paraguay

*Ming Sing* on Hong Kong

*Darren Zook* on Finland’s Clean Politics

## **Debating the Color Revolutions**

*Valerie Bunce* & *Sharon Wolchik* ■ *Mark R. Beissinger* ■ *Lucan Way*  
*Charles H. Fairbanks, Jr.* ■ *Vitali Silitski* ■ *Martin K. Dimitrov*

# Can Cuba Change?

## FERMENT IN CIVIL SOCIETY

*Carl Gershman and Orlando Gutierrez*

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It was more than eighteen years ago that the *Journal of Democracy* published its first and, until now, only article on Cuba. Entitled “Castro’s Last Stand,” the article appeared in the Summer 1990 issue and was written by the prominent exiled Cuban journalist and social analyst Carlos Alberto Montaner. In it, he stated unequivocally that Cuba was in the throes of a “terminal crisis,” the only question being “not whether Castro will fall, but when he will fall.” Montaner’s essay appeared soon after the downfall of communism throughout Central Europe and the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. His article reflected the common view at the time that the communist regime in Cuba would succumb to the wave of democratization then sweeping the world. The fall just a year later of the USSR, which had been Cuba’s main political and military ally and whose economic aid in the form of low-priced oil and other subsidies had underpinned Cuba’s failing economy, reinforced belief in the Castro regime’s inevitable collapse.

There is no question that in the immediate aftermath of the democratic revolutions of 1989, Cuba had entered a deep, systemic crisis. A regime that had coveted its revolutionary image and whose *comandante*, Fidel Castro, had famously declared at his trial in 1953 that “history will absolve me,” suddenly seemed obsolete and on the wrong side of history. Moreover, with the loss of the annual US\$4.3 billion Soviet subsidy, which totaled 21 percent of Cuba’s Gross National Product, the economy went into a tailspin.

The Cuban regime’s survival against most, if not all, expectations is a testament to Castro’s fierce determination to retain power, a quality

that had fatally eroded in the Soviet Union after its defeat in Afghanistan and had disappeared even earlier in communist Central Europe, where regime survival depended primarily on the threat of Soviet intervention against an internal uprising. Unlike the rulers in these countries, Castro had lost none of his will to survive, in keeping with his rallying cry of “Socialism or death!” Under the rubric of a “special period in a time of peace,” his regime adopted a two-part strategy. The first part consisted of austerity measures such as drastic cuts in food rations and basic services, along with modest economic reforms to attract foreign capital. The second involved reinforcing the regime’s instruments of repression and control. Toward that end, the constitution was modified to declare a state of emergency and recognize the “people’s” right to take up arms to defend the Revolution. In addition, the Association of Combatants of the Cuban Revolution was created, made up mostly of military veterans and communist youth (it currently has 340,000 members), for the purpose of political indoctrination and intimidation. These measures were backed up by shrill mobilizational politics, as in the case of the mass demonstrations organized in 2000 during the controversy over Elián González.<sup>1</sup>

But the belt-tightening, reforms, and martial vigilance, important as they were, do not by themselves explain the regime’s survival. A critical additional factor was the weakness at the time of the Cuban movement of civic opposition. To be sure, a stronger civic movement by itself might not have succeeded in achieving a democratic transition. The Cuban regime was simply too determined to hang on, and we know from the Saffron Revolution in Burma that even a mobilized society with unchallenged moral authority is no match for a determined and united dictatorship that is ready to use all necessary measures to defend its power. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the Cuban movement was not in a position in the 1990s to mount a challenge equal to the Saffron Revolution (or, for that matter, to the Burmese student uprising of 1988). The closest that the Cuban opposition could come to asserting itself decisively was the “Maleconazo” of 5 August 1994. This uprising against the deprivations of the “special period” saw thousands spontaneously take to the streets of Havana chanting “Libertad!” But the regime’s security forces were able to disperse the demonstrators after a few hours, and nothing more came of the protests.

Almost fifteen years have passed since the Maleconazo, and the Castro regime, having reconstituted itself in the 1990s, remains firmly in place. The regime faced another period of uncertainty more recently, when Fidel Castro fell ill and had to transfer power to his top military official and then-75-year-old younger brother, Raúl. But from the moment of the 31 July 2006 announcement that Fidel was stepping down as president to Raúl’s formal assumption of power nineteen months later, there were no major disturbances or conflicts. Some took this to mean that the regime enjoyed unchallenged legitimacy and control.

Still, things in Cuba are not as stable as they might seem. The surface calm that prevails, according to a recent authoritative study by the RAND Corporation, conceals “a vast array of dysfunctional legacies from the *fidelista* past” that cumulatively pose an existential threat to the system. These legacies include an “ever-failing economy” with an unproductive labor force; rampant underemployment; vast inequalities between those with access to hard currency and the overwhelming majority who are paid in nonconvertible pesos; systemic corruption and massive theft of government property; a repressed and deformed private sector; and obsolete industrial plants and equipment, much of it dating from the period of Soviet subsidies. On the social level, according to the RAND study and other reports, young people are largely alienated from official politics and increasingly drawn to a subculture of rap music, drugs, and crime. Afro-Cubans, who make up a majority of the populace, have an especially hard lot, making up disproportionately large shares of the poor and those in prison. A low birthrate is leading to a rapidly aging population, with growing demands for pensions and other services that the state cannot meet. Politically, the legacy of *caudillismo* and totalitarianism has created severe weaknesses in institutional capacity (including the ability to find and form new leaders) that could hobble the ability of Fidel’s successors to address the awesome challenges that they face—not the least of which will be that of managing the growing polarization between the regime’s loyalists and an apathetic and resentful populace.<sup>2</sup>

The Cuban system’s many dysfunctions do not necessarily mean that it will soon collapse. But they do mean that it is inherently unstable, and that its future is uncertain. At present, Cuba seems to have no alternative other than a continuation in one form or another of the current regime. The transition that is now underway points toward a postcommunist military regime since the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR) are the dominant institution in Cuba. The military is Raúl’s base, and controls about 60 percent of the economy through the management of hundreds of enterprises in key economic sectors. But the limited reforms that Raúl has made so far—giving Cubans who lack hard currency meaningless official permission to buy expensive consumer goods and patronize luxury hotels—do not bespeak a leadership equal to the challenges that it will have to face. That Raúl’s cabinet consists of the same octogenarians who have ruled Cuba with him and Fidel for the past fifty years also suggests less than nimble hands on the helm.

But that raises the obvious question: Is there a realistic democratic alternative? Much has indeed changed since the 1990s. There is now a far more extensive movement of civic opposition. Although it operates in an extremely repressive environment and has access to very limited political space, it has developed a capacity and even informal structures to reach a wide swath of the population. It is nowhere near as organized and effective as was Poland’s Solidarity movement during its underground

phase in the mid-1980s. Yet Cuba's civic opposition is actually larger in terms of its sheer number of groups—not to mention more varied in its structures and activities—than were the democratic movements of Central Europe and the Soviet Union two decades ago. Those movements consisted mainly of dissident intellectuals, whereas the Cuban movement now encompasses many other sectors of society. To be sure, it is not now in a position to challenge the Castro regime. But neither is it an artificial creation of the United States, as the regime alleges, nor is it a largely feckless and fractious group of malcontents, as some foreign observers claim.<sup>3</sup> Its very existence is symptomatic of a deep malaise in Cuban society, and it is sure to be heard from as events unfold. It is therefore important to understand its history and current condition, as well as the potential that it has to influence the future of Cuba.

### **The Birth of a Movement**

When the upheavals leading to the downfall of communism were taking place in Central Europe two decades ago, the civic movement in Cuba was still in its infancy, consisting mostly of small groups of human rights dissidents living in Havana. The main group of the opposition at the time, the Cuban Committee for Human Rights (CCPDH), had been formed a decade earlier inside Cuba's prisons. The CCPDH brought together a diverse group of socialists and former revolutionaries—among them Ricardo Bofill, Marta Frayde, Gustavo Arcos, and Ariel Hidalgo—who saw in the struggles that were then taking place in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union a new method of opposing the Castro dictatorship, one that reached beyond ideology to the defense of people's natural rights as defined in the UN Declaration of Human Rights. As their ideas spread, the CCPDH and other groups that developed in prison became, in the words of Ariel Hidalgo, an example "of the pluralism of the civic organizations that would one day develop into the independent civic movement."<sup>4</sup> They made the first crack in the wall of Castro's totalitarianism.

The independent civic movement started tentatively in the mid-1990s with the formation of various independent professional associations and trade unions paralleling the official structures, and with the emergence of independent journalists such as Raúl Rivero and Yndamiro Restano, who created the first independent Cuban press agency. Some 135 of these groups came together in October 1995 to form the Concilio Cubano, an umbrella organization that declared its "determination to struggle for an absolutely peaceful and nonviolent transition to a democratic state of law—rejecting all hatred, violence, or revenge, and equally embracing all Cubans everywhere." The Concilio's plans to hold a meeting on 24 February 1996 were blocked by the regime, which arrested many of the leading activists, labeling all the groups "counterrevolutionary grouplets" created by the CIA and the "Miami Mafia" of Cubans living in Florida. The movement showed

persistence and resilience despite repression, eventually expanding to rural areas and engaging the broader Cuban and international public. For example, when the Ninth Ibero-American Summit convened in Havana in November 1999, journalists and visiting dignitaries received a statement titled "All United," in which the dissidents proclaimed that "[i]t is time for the Cuban people to be consulted via the ballot box so that they can decide, on the basis of the law, what the laws which rule their lives should be." Although the regime detained 260 activists, Cuba's opposition had for the first time been able to meet with visiting heads of state.

In another example of the new activism, Ramón Humberto Colás, with his wife Berta Mexidor, created an independent library in their house in Las Tunas after hearing Fidel Castro declare at an international book fair that there were no banned books in Cuba, "only lack of funds to purchase them." They threw open their home and personal library, which included many books and magazines that the Castro regime had in fact banned, and urged others to join the effort to provide the Cuban people uncensored access to literature and information. Despite the founding couple's eviction and forced exile from Cuba, the island now boasts 135 independent libraries with around a quarter of a million regular patrons (in a country of about 11 million people). The regime has jailed nearly two-dozen librarians, with many more forced from their paying jobs and harassed by government-sponsored mobs. Yet the libraries remain open.

### **The Dissidents: Diverse but Unified**

The civic movement that took root in the 1990s brought together a diverse array of Cubans. There were Catholics and Protestants, national revolutionaries and democratic socialists, constitutionalists who focused on restoring the liberal 1940 Constitution, and also members of the pre-1959 parties, such as the *Auténticos* and *Ortodoxos*. Among them were farmers and students, workers and professionals, and even some entrepreneurs working in the microenterprises that Castro had made legal during the "special period." What united these people were the liberal-democratic core principles of Cuban *independentista* thought reaching back to the eighteenth century: that a state's legitimacy flows from its people, and that a government's mandate is to protect its citizens' natural rights. The main split concerned tactics. Everyone agreed on nonviolence, but one faction favored open political defiance. Its leaders were human rights and civic leaders such as Oscar Elías Biscet and Maritza Lugo Fernández, both of whom Amnesty International recognized as prisoners of conscience following their arrests in 1999. Another group believed in creating a civic space for nonviolent popular mobilization. Its leader was Oswaldo Payá Sardinás, a key figure in the Christian Liberation Movement (CLM).

The CLM was founded in 1988 by a group of young Catholics who were part of a tightly knit faith community that had survived a massive

regime effort to repress the Catholic Church. Payá, born in 1952, had never been a Marxist and was too young to have taken part in the Revolution. He was not part of the traditional anti-Castro opposition, but rather belonged to a new generation of Catholic activists who opposed the Castro dictatorship. In fact, Payá was not a political dissident as such but rather an engaged moral witness who drew his inspiration from the New Testament, the social teaching of the Catholic Church, and the thought of Father Félix Varela (1788–1853), the Catholic priest who had initiated the intellectual and moral movement for Cuban independence from Spanish colonial rule. During his stirring visit to Cuba in January 1998, Pope John Paul II had repeatedly invoked Varela's name, calling him "the foundation stone of the Cuban national identity."

Payá was drawn to Varela's legal perspective and his early attempts to work within the framework of Spanish law to bring about greater freedom in Cuba. Following that model, and feeling encouraged by the Pope's visit and the cries of "¡Libertad!" that it roused at masses attended by hundreds of thousands of Cubans, Payá launched the Varela Project. Seizing upon a provision in the Cuban constitution that empowers citizens to put to a national referendum any proposal receiving at least 10,000 signatures from registered Cuban citizens, the Project circulated a referendum petition calling for a vote in favor of freedom of association and expression, freedom of the press, free elections, the right to operate private businesses, and an amnesty for political prisoners. In May 2002, Payá personally delivered to the National Assembly a referendum petition signed by 11,000 Cubans. He continues to circulate the petition, and today the number of signatures exceeds 40,000.

As soon as it became public, the Varela Project began attracting significant international attention and support. Former U.S. president Jimmy Carter, in a nationally televised address delivered from the very hall at the University of Havana where rests the urn holding Varela's ashes, praised the project and urged that the referendum petition be published so that all Cubans could read and weigh it for themselves. Czech president Václav Havel and hundreds of parliamentarians from around the world nominated Payá to receive the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002. He also received the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, and as the result of pressure from the European Union was allowed to travel to Strasbourg to accept it in December 2002.

The regime's reaction to the Varela Project was harsh. The National Assembly refused to consider the petition, and the government rammed through a constitutional amendment making the communist system in Cuba permanent and immutable. On 18 March 2003, with international attention fixed on the imminent U.S. invasion of Iraq, the regime arrested 75 leading human rights activists, including 25 members of the Varela Project, along with independent librarians, journalists, and trade unionists.

The regime believed that it had dealt a crushing blow to what Payá had



called “the Cuban spring.” But just as in the aftermath of the crackdown on the *Concilio Cubano*, the civic movement rebounded and expanded. Within two weeks of the arrests, the wives and other relatives of the imprisoned dissidents began gathering every Sunday at St. Rita’s Church in Havana and marching after Mass to a nearby park. Modeling themselves after the Argentine *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, who demanded information about their children who had been “disappeared” by the military junta, the Cuban women dressed in white and wore buttons showing the photos and jail sentences of their relatives. The fame and credibility of the *Damas de Blanco* quickly grew, as could be seen from a poll that the Spanish NGO *Solidaridad Española con Cuba* conducted in Cuba in 2005. This survey found that 68 percent of respondents believed that the women should be allowed to continue their weekly protests. That same year, the European Parliament awarded the *Damas* its Sakharov Prize.

Other initiatives showing that the movement remained active included an opposition congress convened on 20 May 2005 by the Assembly to Promote Civil Society, a coalition of 365 independent civil society groups. The meeting drew more than a hundred delegates, and authorities had to resort to openly turning away a number of European parliamentarians who were trying to attend. A rural women’s group known as FLAMUR began a national and eventually international campaign against the harshly discriminatory system of dual currencies that the regime uses to attract tourists and others with hard money to spend. Under this system, most Cubans are paid in nearly worthless nonconvertible pesos, and are unable to supplement their meager rations by purchasing food in stores that accept only convertible pesos. Like the Varela Project, FLAMUR gathered more than ten-thousand signatures on a petition to present a legislative proposal to the National Assembly abolishing the two-currency system. On 5 December 2007, FLAMUR held an international day of solidarity that featured demonstrations on behalf of its cause in Argentina, Bulgaria, Germany, Mexico, Poland, and Spain.

Dissent in Cuba is sufficiently widespread that it appears to be penetrating the state’s mass organizations, universities, research centers, and even the state bureaucracy itself.<sup>5</sup> A number of recent incidents show a greater propensity by artists, writers, and students to speak out for reform and against censorship. In January 2007, Antón Arrufat, Cuba’s most celebrated playwright, wrote a harsh public letter in reaction to signs that Raúl Castro was about to bring back to power Luis Pavón Tamayo, an official responsible for Stalinist-style cultural purges in the 1970s. Arrufat’s letter stimulated a flood of sympathetic Internet messages from dozens of intellectuals within the government-controlled culture apparatus, many of them calling for artistic freedom. The exchanges were unprecedented in Cuba for their temerity and depth. Similar expressions of discontent and desire for change were heard at the Seventh Congress of the National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists when it convened in April 2008.



Also noteworthy were two incidents that took place within official student organizations. In one, 92 of 100 delegates boycotted the preparatory meeting for a national student congress, charging that the lack of democracy in the selection of issues and leaders made the event useless. And in another, students at the elite computer-science university secretly videotaped a sharp confrontation they had with National Assembly president Ricardo Alarcón. The video of his flustered responses to student questions about economic injustices and restrictions on personal freedoms found its way to the BBC and CNN and also was spread rapidly across Havana by students using computer memory sticks and clandestine Internet connections.<sup>6</sup>

### **A Civic Movement Slowly Gains Strength**

In addition to the activities of opposition groups and dissent within official structures and institutions, young Cubans and others at the grassroots are increasingly expressing themselves and speaking for their communities in a self-organized and spontaneous fashion. One example is the emergence of a “blogger underground.” Writers on the island have found ways around tight Internet restrictions to post blogs describing daily life and events from an independent perspective. Since the regime limits Internet access and blocks sites, the audience for this “community journalism” is mostly international, which nonetheless helps to give some visibility and protection to the bloggers.

A much more widely known form of independent expression in Cuba is the underground rock-music movement. Independent rock bands whose lyrics are highly critical of the regime and its policies have emerged throughout the island, giving illegal concerts in abandoned theaters or performing impromptu in cafes or private homes. The most successful of these bands is *Porno para Ricardo*, a punk group that has gained national and international recognition through its surreptitiously recorded compact discs. Its leader, Gorki Aguila, met political dissidents in prison when he was first arrested in 2003. He especially credits Oscar Elías Biscet for having given him lasting inspiration and a greater focus for his artistic dissidence. Following his release, Aguila proclaimed in one song, “I’ve lost my fear, I’ve already been a prisoner.” In another, he addressed himself defiantly to Fidel with the words “No more lies, old man.” His arrest again last August became something of a cause célèbre. Writers and musicians from around the world signed a petition demanding his release, and civil society activists and underground rock musicians protested in his defense at a government-sponsored concert in Havana, provoking a violent police response that seriously embarrassed the regime. Gorki’s supporters were undeterred. They filled the courtroom at his trial and cheered when he got off with only a fine for “civil disobedience.” “This is a victory not just for Gorki and *Porno para Ricardo*,” wrote the prominent blogger Yoani

Sánchez, who had joined the protests. “We triumphed because of our own efforts, and because of this, it became a triumph for all of Cuba.” She added, “We have forced them to move back, to undo the injustice they were carrying out, and that is a very important precedent for us and an extremely dangerous one for ‘them.’”<sup>7</sup>

Spontaneous protests of this kind, along with the increased outreach of independent civil society groups and the greater international recognition that they are receiving, bespeak a civic movement that has established a permanent presence in Cuba and is slowly gaining strength despite severe repression. This trend is reflected in the “Steps to Freedom” reports published annually by the Cuban Democratic Directorate (Directorio). The first report in 1997 documented 44 actions of civic resistance. Nine years later, in 2006, the report described 2,768 such actions—a 64-fold increase. Behind these skyrocketing numbers, moreover, lies a transformation in the character and scope of the movement. What were once small cells of dissident intellectuals are now independent civil society institutions, and an opposition once confined mostly to Havana has now spread across the country: Only 13 percent of recent civic-resistance actions have taken place in the capital. The central provinces, especially Villa Clara and Matanzas, now account for the bulk of the independent civic activity. Significantly, these were the very provinces where the most determined and protracted anti-Castro guerrilla uprisings occurred in the 1960s.

As it has grown, the Cuban opposition has not become a vertical, centralized movement. Rather, it is more like a horizontal patchwork of overlapping centers of independent civic activity. It is not leaderless but it is multipolar, and its leadership, moreover, has multiple levels. It is this decentralized and plural organizational structure that has allowed the movement to survive campaigns of assault and subversion by the regime’s formidable intelligence and state-security apparatus. Because the movement is not particularly hierarchical, the authorities’ normal tactic of trying to insinuate its own agents into key spots cannot defeat it. Indeed, even if whole groups are knocked out or subverted, Cuba’s civic movement as a whole is diverse and diffuse enough to carry on, often with new groups that arise to replace the neutralized ones. Interestingly, this pattern of organization follows a tradition of spontaneous resistance and rebellion that has roots in Cuban history, and especially during the three decades of resistance to Spanish rule that stretched from 1868 to 1895.

The expansion of the Cuban civic movement has alarmed the regime. A year before his retirement, Fidel Castro called on the Cuban people to commit “acts of repudiation” against prodemocracy protests. He specifically referred to a 22 July 2005 government-sponsored mob attack against peaceful protesters just four days earlier, praising it as an expression of “patriotic fervor.” Once again, though, the civic movement demonstrated its resilience, this time organizing a noncooperation campaign across the 800-mile-long island and working with exiled activists to spread the word

abroad. The campaign started with fasts in dozens of homes and then built to a boycott, launched in October 2007, of the National Assembly elections (featuring one, Communist Party–approved candidate per seat) that had been called as part of the plan to legitimize Raúl Castro’s assumption of supreme power.

Since the Communist Party is the only legal party in Cuba and voters are not given a choice among competing candidates, abstention or denial of support to the official slate is the only way for Cubans to express “electoral” noncooperation. Needless to say, the regime goes to great lengths to ensure both universal participation and support. Its cadres go door-to-door to make sure that people vote, and there is a constant barrage of propaganda from the official media insisting that people go to polling stations and check the box for the official slate. Refusal to vote or to affirm the regime’s handpicked candidates, therefore, takes courage. The regime admits to more than 1.4 million abstentions, which the noncooperation campaign sees as a significant victory: Its new slogan is “We are now more than a million strong.”

### **Among the Alienated**

The noncooperation campaign has great potential because it can speak to three large and marginalized groups: young people, Afro-Cubans, and workers. The youth, says Damian Fernandez of Florida International University’s Cuban Research Institute, “constitute the single most potentially explosive social group for the regime and its successors.” Fernandez is speaking mostly here of the “desocialized” and marginal youth—the dropouts, the jobless young people who make up nearly three-quarters of Cuba’s unemployed, and those who are drawn to drugs, crime, and prostitution. But the alienation of the young reaches into the mainstream and expresses itself in the angry lyrics of rock musicians; the bloggers’ depictions of the frustrations and tawdriness of everyday life; the frequent evasion of agricultural work, voluntary service, and neighborhood committee meetings; and the general disengagement from politics that is the fruit of a half-century of coerced participation and force-fed political propaganda. As the Alarcón video shows, even the elite young are chafing at the sharpening contradictions between official ideology and the sordid hypocrisy that they see all around them.

Youth alienation is also a huge challenge to the civic movement, since activism requires hope rather than apathy, resentment, and withdrawal. Nonetheless, the student movement has emerged as the most vocal sector of the opposition. In the latter part of 2007, hundreds of students at the University of Santiago demonstrated against squalid living conditions and the failure of university authorities and the police to respond to the rape of a female activist. The university was closed for two weeks and ten student leaders were suspended or expelled, but this only sparked fresh

student actions. Scores of young people were arrested soon thereafter in Havana for protesting against the sham elections and for wearing bracelets reading “Cambio” (Change), which soon became a symbol of the protest movement. A month later, at a public meeting attended by the international press and diplomats from Hungary and Poland, Néstor Rodríguez Lobaina and other student leaders from across the island presented a petition signed by five-thousand students and professors demanding university autonomy and an end to the regime’s ideological hammerlock on academic life. Once again, when some student leaders were arrested, others rose up, with a protest in a church in Santiago provoking a police tear-gas assault on the house of worship and the arrest of still more students.

### Afro-Cubans Make Themselves Heard

Afro-Cubans are another sector of the populace that is deeply aggrieved and increasingly active in the civic-resistance movement. Together, black and mixed-race Cubans constitute at least half the country’s population. They live mostly in central and eastern Cuba, where poverty is worst. Since the large Cuban emigration has been overwhelmingly white, Afro-Cubans are much less likely to receive remittances from abroad, but that is only a small factor accounting for the growing racial inequality. Afro-Cubans are rarely seen in the media, positions of power, or choice jobs. In the relatively dynamic tourist industry, for example, white managers often insist that prospective employees conform to standards such as “having a pleasant appearance (*buena presencia*)” that are interpreted to exclude Afro-Cubans. Growing numbers of nonwhite Cubans have found themselves forced to seek informal work or migrate to a less-than-welcoming Havana (from which thousands of *orientale* migrants have been forcibly returned to the provinces, highlighting the growing racial and regional tensions that beset today’s Cuba).

It should not be surprising that the civic-resistance movement has become active in the more heavily nonwhite provinces, or that its leaders prominently include such Afro-Cubans as Oscar Elias Biscet, Vladimiro Roca, and Jorge Luis García Pérez (better known as “Antúnez”)—the last of whom has contributed the reflections on opposition principles that appear on pages 48–49 of this issue. This is not to say, however, that the movement there has become a racist phenomenon. Indeed, what is truly noteworthy is how resolutely its protests transcend race in favor of addressing the plight of all oppressed Cubans.

The 43-year-old Antúnez is a case in point. During his more than seventeen years in prison (he was released in 2007), his fellow inmates came to call him “the black diamond” because of his courage and unbreakable spirit. Antúnez frankly acknowledges that racism has played a role in his own oppression. “The authorities in my country,” he has said, “have never tolerated that a black person [could dare to] oppose the

regime. During the trial, the color of my skin aggravated the situation. Later when I was mistreated in prison by guards, they always referred to me as being black.”

Yet the nonviolent protests that he has been leading in the central Cuban cities of Placetas and Matanzas never raise the issue of race, even if most of the victims are black, but focus rather on specific injustices that harm white and nonwhite Cubans alike—the terrible living conditions in poor neighborhoods, the evictions of destitute residents, the police harassment and beatings of innocent citizens, and the imprisonment and torture of political dissidents. Antúnez and other nonwhite dissident leaders are especially dangerous to the regime precisely because they have united Cubans of different races and frustrated attempts by the authorities to borrow a page from the old Spanish-colonial playbook and exploit white fears of a “black takeover.” The multiracial opposition movement reflects the syncretic character of Cuban culture and society, where regional and economic differences have always played a stronger role than race in defining social cleavages. It also appeals to the dominant nationalist ideology according to which all Cubans are part of the same nation. Not least, it underlines the importance of class divisions in a society where about nine-tenths of the populace forms an economically and politically oppressed underclass. Using the principles of democracy and human rights to unite and mobilize this vast, dispossessed majority in the face of a highly repressive regime is the key to peaceful change.

### **Labor and Its Discontents**

Even the Castro regime has at least acknowledged (though it has done no more than that) the dire conditions surrounding Cuba’s working people, the third critical source of discontent. In his speech on the revolutionary holiday of 26 July 2007 (the day commemorates Fidel Castro’s abortive 1953 assault on the Moncada military barracks in Santiago), Raúl admitted that “objective conditions” were “extremely difficult,” and that “salaries [were] still not enough to satisfy” people’s needs. With the nomenklatura and its minions benefiting from special privileges and cronyism, workers express their anger by tardiness, moonlighting to earn hard currency, and stealing or destroying government property.

A key target of worker noncooperation has been the Cuban Workers Confederation (CTC), the mass organization that the constitution designates as the sole representative of Cuban workers. Far from representing workers, however, the CTC is the regime’s principal instrument for controlling them and implementing Communist Party directives in the field of labor. Workers have no rights to associate freely or to strike, but only duties—to join and pay dues to the CTC, to participate in the Territorial Troop Militias by volunteering a day’s pay, and to submit to military discipline in state-run enterprises. Workers are exploited in

## A WORD FROM THE OPPOSITION

Jorge Luis García Pérez “Antúnez”

*For someone like me, separated from society for almost two decades by a harsh and unjust imprisonment, the emerging Cuban civil society and the maturity of the civic movement is an invigorating phenomenon and reality. This is because, even at the beginning of the 1990s, activities as simple as vigils for freedom of the press were unthinkable. Independent journalism, among other things, was nonexistent. As a consequence, the repression of dissident voices was more brutal and pronounced, and almost nobody heard about the horrors being committed in Cuba. But the impulse for freedom and emancipation continued to live among a people that would not resign itself to slavery.*

*Today, across the country, there exists a large and effective civic movement composed of citizens from diverse spheres of society.*

*I would like to consider briefly some of the fundamental principles and strategies of this movement.*

*First, there is its pacifist character. Inspired by the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., the Cuban forces for democracy have made nonviolent struggle into an effective bastion for the fight against totalitarian intolerance. And with this, the myth that has held sway in our nation—regarding the necessity for violent solutions and for the violent overthrow of governments—falls apart. Peaceful action disarms oppressors in a moral sense. They may impede some actions, but never the spirit or the goal that propels these activities.*

*Second is the open and forthright character of the movement. A great deal of time has passed since the Cuban opposition moved beyond the local sphere and broke through the walls meant to hold it. Many years have passed since the days of secret meetings. Tireless political effort and outreach have done much to raise the level of consciousness among the people. In this, an important role has been played by the campaign of noncooperation, a fruitful initiative conceived in Cuba that has profoundly touched the conscience and heart of every Cuban.*

*Third is the identification of the people with opposition politics. In this regard, there have been advances not just in a quantitative sense but in a qualitative one as well. To put ourselves in the place of ordinary Cubans and to speak to them in their own language is a positive experience, one that goes beyond political, social, and cultural projects, and beyond pronouncements and proclamations.*

*It is to be there with them, to share the same destiny. The recent protests in Santa Clara that prevented the demolition of eight homes (whose inhabitants cried “Long live the defenders of human rights!” in the presence of the repressive forces of the Castro regime) testify to how much political space has been gained, and how much may yet be gained.*

*Fourth are civil resistance and disobedience as methods of nonviolent struggle and civil confrontation. The display of peaceful opposition, aside from being a strategy in and of itself, is also a vital necessity for those who carry out opposition activities. It is invaluable to have the international media cover opposition events, as has been happening in Havana, because it is advantageous that the world sees and hears what is actually going on in Cuba. But even more important than the international response, or making known to the world the faces and stories of those working for change, is that the manipulated, misinformed, and oppressed Cuban nation should know that there is an opposition movement, as well as whom it includes and what its objectives are. It is necessary that Cubans see for themselves the faces of the real defenders of their rights and human dignity. To counteract this, the Castro regime boasts that the streets belong to the revolutionaries—a clear threat to those who try to use them for the purpose of protest and an expression of visceral fear of the gains that opposition activities signify.*

*The repressive forces of the Havana regime spread across the country, occupying and controlling every institution and proscribing any type of association or initiative not directly under their control. Members of the Cuban opposition, who are harassed 24 hours a day all over the island, join forces via a diverse set of groups and individuals against a common adversary and with a single objective. Given the diversity of groups involved, I consider it necessary to give priority to the issues that unite us while smoothing over those that divide us. It is also necessary that we demand of the Castro regime the immediate and unconditional release of those hundreds of Cubans who remain in prison for their ideas, while firmly insisting in the meantime on humane treatment for these brothers. I reiterate that freedom of the press must be the first goal for any civic initiative or agenda.*

**Jorge Luis García Pérez “Antúnez,”** one of the leaders of Cuba’s democratic forces, spent seventeen years in jail. For more about him, see pp. 46–47 of the article by Carl Gershman and Orlando Gutierrez. This essay was translated from the original Spanish by Brent Kallmer.



the most egregious ways, such as by having 95 percent of wages earned from joint-venture companies confiscated by the state; or by being sent abroad to work, under conditions resembling slavery, for wages that are used to pay off state debt (as was revealed recently when three exiled Cuban workers successfully sued the Curaçao Drydock Company in a U.S. court). The role of the CTC in such instances is not to defend the workers; it is to protect the state against them.

Significantly, Cuban workers, at great personal risk, have formed independent unions, grouped together in two federations. One of them, the United Council of Cuban Workers (CUTC), is affiliated with the Christian International Labor Movement. Members of the CUTC live in fifteen provinces and work in education, health care, construction, tourism, and transport; some are self-employed or retired. The other group, the Independent Workers Confederation of Cuba (CONIC), has 65 unions spanning twelve provinces and the agriculture, healthcare, education and social-service sectors. State-security agents spy on these unions, raid their offices, and send their leaders to jail or exile. Seven of the most influential leaders, including Pedro Pablo Álvarez of the CUTC, were arrested on 18 March 2003. Álvarez was eventually exiled to Spain, from whence he sought to represent the independent Cuban unions at the March 2008 founding congress of the Labor Confederation of the Americas (CSA). The organizers, however, decided that having Álvarez address the congress would be politically inconvenient and blocked his invitation.

### **Where Is the Worldwide Labor Movement?**

The failure of the international labor movement to take up the cause of the independent unions in Cuba is a glaring exception to its long-held policy of solidarity with oppressed workers everywhere. The issue is now on the agenda of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). As of this writing in late 2008, it is laying plans to send a delegation to Cuba in early 2009, but so far it has coordinated only with the CTC and has bypassed the independent unions.

A 13 July 2008 letter in which 250 independent Cuban unionists stated their desire to meet the delegation still awaits an answer. The letter envisioned the potential ITUC visit as “an exceptional opportunity to support trade union freedoms” and to end “the political and police persecution” by the CTC of independent workers and their unions. It did not oppose the anticipated ITUC mission meeting with “different Cuban authorities,” presumably including leaders of the government-run CTC. But the signers of the letter specifically requested “that meetings with organizations representative of the independent unions” be held, and it warned that “a poor handling of this visit and mission could result in the de facto recognition and legitimization of the leadership of the official unionism and of its methods.” Again, as of this writing, the independent Cuban workers

have received no answer to their appeal, and no ITUC official has communicated or met with them or expressed interest in doing so.

The international labor movement's reluctance to speak out more vigorously against violations of workers' rights in Cuba reflects a much broader disheartening tendency in the international community to downplay, rationalize, and even in some cases to justify the oppressive character of the Cuban system. The reasons for this are well known and have a great deal to do with Fidel Castro's shrewd use of his conflict with the United States to gain sympathy in "progressive" circles, even to the point where practices such as turning mobs loose on peaceful dissidents or exalting violence and extreme nationalism go virtually unnoticed. In any event, the real threat to the Castro regime comes not from any foreign power, but from its own failures, its loss of revolutionary energy and any purpose other than regime maintenance, and the gradual awakening of its people.

### **Havel and Payá**

Václav Havel, together with other leaders and former dissidents in Central Europe, has established an International Committee for Democracy in Cuba to provide political support. The committee's greatest value, however, may lie in the moral solidarity that it extends to the otherwise isolated Cuban movement, and the link that it gives them to the experience of the dissident Central European democrats who triumphed over communism two decades ago. An example of the value of this association was an exchange between Havel and Payá in 2003. Drawing on his own experience, Havel told Payá—in a letter bearing the highly symbolic date of November 17, the anniversary of 1989's Velvet Revolution—that "Each democrat who opposes a totalitarian regime should behave today as if power were to be handed over tomorrow." Havel's point was that the opposition needs to prepare itself to take on the responsibility of governing in the event of a sudden regime collapse, as happened in Czechoslovakia in 1989.

Inspired to speedy action by Havel's suggestion that democratic dissidents should prepare responsibly to take up the tasks of governance, Payá in 2003 began a national dialogue in which thousands of Cubans, in groups of two to twelve, started meeting secretly in homes and churches to make policy recommendations on issues ranging from economic and political reform to education and health, the environment and public order, privatization of the media, and reuniting with the exile community. Overall, fourteen-thousand Cubans participated in the process, which Payá called the Cuban Forum. In May 2006, he unveiled a 170-page "All-Cuban Plan" that he called "a bridge between our current situation and democracy."<sup>8</sup> This whole exercise, of course, was premised on the assumption that Payá and his associates in the Cuban opposition could

find themselves at some point, as the Czechoslovak dissidents did in 1989, scrambling to make the transition from underground outcasts to government ministers.

This seems improbable, though the regime's paralyzed response to the back-to-back hurricanes of August and September 2008 (during which Raúl Castro vanished from public view for more than two weeks) along with Fidel's repeated criticism of "opportunists" from his sickbed, indicate that the crisis and divisions within the Cuban leadership may be more acute than is commonly thought.<sup>9</sup> Still, the dialogue's main achievement, as Payá himself has discovered, has been to overcome the fear of repression as well as all the other fears that Castro has used over the years to intimidate and immobilize the Cuban people. These include the fear of change and what it might bring—from chaos to ruthless capitalism to domination by the United States and hordes of rich returning exiles. Payá has said that the process was "psychologically liberating," not just because it showed that Cubans could reason together even in the face of repression, but because it helped to "dispel the myth that a transition will mean catastrophe for Cuba."<sup>10</sup>

### The Legacy of José Martí

In the course of their struggle for freedom, Payá and the civic movement have united around two ideas that form the core of Cuban democratic nationalism and connect the movement to its roots in the thinking of José Martí (1853–95), who is often called the "Apostle of Cuban Independence." The first is a concept of democracy that gives people not only liberty, which Martí called "the essence of life," but also the means (political parties and suffrage) that he said were needed to correct the flaws in the system and defend the interests of the most needy and vulnerable citizens. Martí lived in New York City during the era of the robber barons, and he saw all the abuses of unregulated capitalism, the caricature of modern capitalism against which Castro loves to inveigh. Yet in an essay on Henry George, who twice ran as a socialist candidate for mayor of New York, Martí called the vote "an awesome, invincible and solemn weapon; . . . the most effective and merciful instrument that man has devised to manage his affairs" and to resolve "the social problems that announced themselves to the world with such formidable proportions" a century earlier.<sup>11</sup> It is Martí's vision of an egalitarian democracy that Payá echoes in repudiating the *fidelist* view "that we must deprive ourselves of democratic rights to gain social benefits," and in asserting that "a true democracy" is "based on principles of humanity and social welfare."<sup>12</sup>

The second intellectual rallying point for dissidence is the concept of national sovereignty. This is the core principle of the unity statement that Payá signed with Marta Beatriz Roque and other leaders of the Cuban op-

position in April 2007. The signers proclaimed that “achieving changes in our society is a task corresponding to Cubans and only Cubans, to define and decide freely and democratically the future of Cuba, as an independent and sovereign country, without foreign intervention.” Here, too, in their national pride and self-reliance, the modern Cuban democrats echo Martí, for whom democracy and independence were the two fundamental and interrelated elements of Cuban nationalism. Martí fervently hoped that the bravery and organizational prowess which Cubans brought to their war of independence against Spain (he died fighting early in that struggle, on 19 May 1895) would prove that Cubans could govern themselves and thus stop the drift toward annexation by the United States. “We love the land of Lincoln,” he wrote, “just as we fear the land of Cutting” (Francis Cutting was a leading militant of the American Annexationist League). Martí hoped that “the land of Lincoln” would support the democratic aspirations of Cuba’s “productive population” against “its oligarchical and useless class,” which favored U.S. annexation to protect its interests. He was a staunch believer in both an independent, democratic Cuba and the prospects for friendship between such a free Cuba and its large neighbor to the north. The contemporary Cuban opposition stands with the tradition of Martí and against the cynically confrontational and poisonous nationalism of Castro.<sup>13</sup>

Cuban national identity was built around a national struggle for freedom in which Cubans of different races, regions, and classes came together to forge a civic polity based on democratic principles. From its beginnings in the humanist philosophy of Varela in the early nineteenth century to its fruition in the political ideas and organizational leadership of Martí near that century’s close, Cuban nationhood became synonymous with a polity based on political freedom and equality of opportunity. So deeply was belief in these principles ingrained in the Cuban national character that Castro did not dare to announce his communist credo until he was firmly in power, for fear of the popular reaction that his dictatorial betrayal would arouse. Today’s movement of civic resistance against dictatorship is driven by the inextinguishable desire to restore Cuba’s national identity. This means reawakening the values for which Cubans fought during their long independence struggle and their persistent attempts thereafter—carried out until the Castro revolution cut them off—to establish a free and democratic order. That movement was not strong or mature enough to prevail in the aftermath of 1989, and it still faces an unusually formidable and determined foe. But its time will come.

## NOTES

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