



INTERNATIONAL

THE SUSPENDED ISLAND

Cuba deserves full support in carrying out its transition to democracy

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PHOTO: EFE

Hugo Chávez on one of his frequent visits to see Fidel Castro in hospital

Fifteen months after the interim transfer of power from Fidel Castro to his brother Raúl, the communist regime still shows no signs of change and continues to deepen its dependency on Venezuelan petrodollars. Yet Fidel's disappearance from the scene can open an opportunity for Cuba to advance not only towards greater economic openness, but also towards the regime of freedom and democracy for which Cubans long. Within this context, President Bush's speech of October 25 offers proposals for Cuba's future such as the creation of a Freedom Fund for Cuba, thus taking into account one of the FAES Foundation's proposals in "Latin America: An agenda for freedom." Only through similar firmness of principles and change-fostering positive proposals can conditions be established for Cubans to choose liberty in the future. In Europe, the Spanish Government should abandon its stance of complacency with the current Cuban leadership and support unequivocally the forces working for democracy and liberties in Cuba. The recent example of the Ibero-American Summit in Santiago shows where the policies aimed at appeasing the 21st century socialist caudillos lead to.

President Bush's speech of October 25 has brought Cuba's situation to the front pages again, fifteen months after the proclamation by which Fidel Castro delegated his governing functions to his brother Raúl. The pleasant immobility of the regime, suspended between the vigilant oversight of Fidel Castro and the presumed pragmatism of Raúl, keeps Cuban citizens in expectation even as they continue to be burdened by their daily problems with no viable future in sight. In this framework, President Bush's statement has stirred the waters and has opened a debate, once again, on transition or succession in Cuba.

The speech given by Raul Castro on July 26 seemed to foresee a future with "structural reforms" in the economy, a view that has been sent for discussion to the core of the communist party, the local organizations, the Revolution Defense Committees, and the universities. This process has produced heated debates, and has also shown the necessity to seek solutions to the daily problems Cuban citizens face. This is something that any observer can see firsthand by traveling to the island, and something that the Cuban Government knows very well on account of its domestic polling system, which has been used for many years to gauge the social situation and to prevent unease from becoming an actual expression of rejection against regime.

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This same technique was used in the early nineties, in the context of the fall of the Eastern European communist bloc, as a means of seeking solutions in the face of impending supply, market, and technology crises.

The economic reforms of the nineties were both tactical and reversible, as they were necessary to retain power needed for the regime's survival. They were somewhat successful first during the collapse of communist Europe and then after the fall of the Soviet Union. In spite of this fact, the Cuban economy has not yet recovered to the prior its level prior to the "special period."

Weary of years of hardship and unfulfilled promises, the people's expectations now demand an improvement in living conditions that cannot be achieved without greater openness, which in turn may bring Cubans closer to the benefits of stability.

From September 4 to October 5, the International Republican Institute (IRI) conducted a survey in Cuba that produced revealing data regarding the expectations Cubans have.

In the economic realm, the survey shows that Cubans are not satisfied with the situation in the country; they pointed out that the main problems are

low wages and the high cost of living (42.5%), food shortage (11.5%), and the lack of liberties as well as the political system (18.2%).

Even more significantly, 78 percent of those surveyed believe that the current Cuban Government will be incapable to solve these problems in the coming years.

Eighty percent of the interviewees think that a transition to a market economy, with economic freedom, private property, and the possibility for Cubans to establish their own businesses would improve their situation, as opposed to 9.6% who believe this would make it worse.

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This survey shows something about the economic realm about which everyone, including the Government, is aware of: that the current economic system must change in order to meet the citizens' needs. The pace and depth of these reforms is what remains at stake. It does not seem plausible that small changes could offer satisfaction to disbelieving, weary, and unmotivated citizens who do not view their rulers as capable of leading the country towards prosperity.

In addition to the apparent dissatisfaction of Cubans with their economic situation, the survey highlights their isolation from world reality, as it is evidenced by internet access (9.4%) or their access to mobile phones (9.9%), which is in stark comparison to countries like Spain, where there are more mobile phone lines than people.

But perhaps the most significant revelation of this survey is in the political aspect. It has often been said that what Cubans want is economic improvement, and that political change could eventually arrive in a more open society. However, it should be noted that along with their logical personal aspirations for a better life, Cubans also show their desire to participate in the election of their own future, as do citizens of any other country.

Seventy-five point six percent of those surveyed believe that a multiparty democracy that includes respect for freedom of the press, freedom of speech, and human rights would improve their living conditions. 76.3% would rather have several options in the electoral processes than the current system. It is especially significant that 73.9% declares that they would like to be able to choose Fidel Castro's successor.

In this point of stagnation, with a provisional government that opens the door to a debate on internal reforms but adopts none, with a convalescent but stubborn Fidel Castro, and with a people that demand not only political but also economic change and improvement, Cubans are at a crossroads again.

Changes in Cuba must come from within; nobody from the outside is capable of doing what only Cubans can do, i.e. decide over their own future. Therefore, the Cuban government's next steps will be significant. This decision made by Cubans must be inclusive, though. It is the Cuban government which has to take the necessary steps to incorporate its citizens in a debate about their future, including Cuban exiles and emigrants, Cubans living on the island and, of course, the dissidents.

Although Fidel Castro is convalescent, his persona still instills fear among Cuban leaders, and this is being used as an excuse to eschew pursuing any change while he is still alive. It is implausible that Raúl will take on a political course different from that of his brother's, even if he wanted to, due to fraternal loyalty and his own communist background. At best, these conditions may allow him to aspire to reform the regime, not to dismantle it. So, without making decisions, problems only grow worse and expectations become increasingly frustrated.

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The ruling communist system in Cuba cannot reform itself; at most it can adopt measures that may allow for its survival. Nonetheless, in order to face the structural problems that Raúl Castro himself has acknowledged, it is necessary to do something beyond a modest land reform or a betterment of the state enterprises' management. The risk for the regime is that if these reforms exceed the system's boundaries, they could pose a threat to the economic and political fabric of Castro's Cuba.

How can change in Cuba be promoted under these circumstances? Neither the economic embargo nor a policy of complacency has succeeded throughout the years. The revolution has followed its path, in some cases taking advantage of trade and travel restrictions as an alibi for hardship and also by profiting from complacent and dialogue-based policies used by the regime to gain ground and keep its course.

From the outside, it is necessary to facilitate a political climate friendly to change, to make transition and not succession the natural way out for Cuba, and to encourage those individuals who are promoting basic rights such as respect for human rights, defense of public liberties, or promoting the ability for Cuban citizens to take their own initiative.

The complacency, or tact, of Spanish policy toward Cuba can only produce in its leaders a mirage apparently showing that current policies, with a little make up, will enable them to hold on to power, instead of supporting those individuals aware of the population's demands and of a life in democracy and freedom without Fidel Castro.

In the United States, there is interest and anticipation about of Cuba's future and about which U.S. policies could be implemented in response to changes on the island. In this context, the Brookings Institution has formed a group of experts to study possible Cuban scenarios and the influence of possible U.S. policies for the course of two years. The Group's purpose is to seek a dynamic approach to Cuba, so that U.S. policies will not be limited to the turning point, but will reach beyond to make change march in the direction of public liberties and democracy. This effort can generate new approaches in future U.S. policies toward Cuba, policies that should take into account the possible changes prompted by Fidel Castro's absence.

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Speaking for the current administration, President Bush's speech of October 25—the first addressed to Cubans since the interim transfer of power to Raúl Castro—has several achievements and some shortcomings.

The speech triggered irate reactions from the Cuban Government and rejection by all those who oppose any Bush policy in Europe, while it has enjoyed different reactions from the several dissident groups on the island.

However, this speech is important for what it says and on its own merits. It is impossible not to concur with its call for democracy, liberty, and prosperity for Cuba. Its commitment to the dissidents and their relatives is evidence of a policy defined by choosing the goal of defense of freedom over that of stability.

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How can the ideas expressed in President Bush's speech contribute to foster an environment that promotes change? Under the conviction that reforming communist regimes is impossible, it intends to send a message to all those who want to go beyond the reforms, to those who pursue change.

First, there is a call for reconciliation and forgiveness. This is a lesson learned from other transitions. The ranks of democracy have to enroll those who have participated in the regime, those whose hands are clean, and who can envision a certain and better future for their children and for themselves. Therefore, calling upon the security forces and the military, which was interpreted by the regime as a call to rebellion, contains a message of reconciliation in a democratic Cuba.

On the other hand, Bush offered Cubans opportunities for internet access and scholarships. He also mentioned an international fund to promote development in Cuba, although details were not provided.

As we have seen, the IRI poll shows that Cubans' access to the outside world via internet or mobile telephones is very limited. It is not conceivable that Cuba can enter the modern economy if its citizens do not have access to information. This is one of the best proposals for attracting Cuban youth toward change, for it means leaving behind vacuous discourse and empty ideology and putting forward specific proposals to improve Cuban's access to communication technologies and information. Scholarships and internet access are key elements to develop the human capital Cuba already possesses, whereas delaying the access of generations of young Cubans to these tools will aggravate the technological gap between Cuba and the rest of the world.

The international Freedom Fund for Cuba is a positive idea that offers Cubans the opportunities to create businesses, invest in infrastructure, and finance social programs with aid from foreign funds other than Venezuelan petrodollars.

The idea of the fund was already proposed in a Fundación FAES document entitled "Latin America: An Agenda for Freedom" and is also contained in the Cuba Study Group's "Cuban Enterprise Fund" proposal, which appeals to western countries and investors on the basis of the success stories of enterprise funds made available to Eastern European countries during the 1990s.

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Post-Castro Cuba will require rebuilding infrastructure, promoting exports, and keeping social programs running, all efforts which will demand capital. Foreign subventions will not be enough, as demonstrated by past USSR aid and current Venezuelan support. On the contrary, it is necessary to foster Cubans' entrepreneurial ability while making available the capital necessary for private sector development.

The idea of creating an enterprise fund for Cuba also has the advantage of offering Cubans a viable alternative for their future, one which is not linked to Chavez's Venezuela. After fifty years of communist dictatorship, there is no greater danger for Cubans than seeing their future depending on the capriciousness of a populist caudillo.

Nonetheless, these proposals collide with Cuba's stubborn current reality. No course of action, whether from the U.S. Government or European countries, or from private groups willing to contribute to Cuban development,

can be undertaken within the island's current legal and political framework. Not even the possible reforms that the Raúl Castro-led interim government has been voicing would allow for investment, access to property, and credit in order to use those funds.

So, we go back to the starting point of this reflection: How to encourage change from the outside in a way that Cubans have opportunities for choice in both the economic and political realms?

The old dictator's poor health and his eventual disappearance open an opportunity for Cuba to follow a new course, so that instead of deepening failed policies or falling prey to new populist policies, the country can opt for a democratic path for which most Cubans surely wish.

To that end, Cubans and their leaders need to have incentives for change. Proposals for national reconciliation and positive offers, such as the ones mentioned above, can serve as encouragement for reforms. Pressure from the younger generations and belief in a democratic solution, supported by a strong international stance that demands respect for human rights and genuine dialogue among all Cubans, could ease the way towards change.

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And it is here that we see a shortcoming in President Bush's speech. The change has to be nurtured and suitable conditions have to be created in order to attract most Cubans. In this regard, one of the most common requests from Cubans within the island and abroad is greater facilitation of travel. Travel restrictions on Cubans who wish to visit the U.S. and on Americans who want to travel to Cuba may prevent some dollars from falling into the hands of the Cuban Government, but they also prevent many Cubans from having the chance to keep in touch with relatives and friends who have prospered abroad. Furthermore, this prevents Cubans from establishing a closer and more personal relationship with U.S. citizens.

The lifting of travel restrictions and the implementation of the measures announced by President Bush are positive elements to encourage change, even though they would need stronger international support to be effective.

Finally, one more comment on the speech. In an unprecedented move, the Cuban television aired important segments of it, which the newspaper *Granma* also printed. This could be a sign of the great confidence that Cuban leaders have in their control over the people, as well as a signal sent to the world saying they are not afraid of a contagion of ideas because their

revolution is solid and lasting. However, there are others who think that this media action could be the result of the interest of some pro-modernization elements within the regime, who may want to show Cubans alternatives to socialist self-centeredness or Venezuelan aid.

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As usual, in strictly closed regimes such as Cuba, speculations abound. It remains to be seen whether, in effect, these and other proposals for democratization are echoed within the system or, as has happened on prior occasions, they are merely distracting fireworks behind which everything is left unchanged. In any case, western democracies have an obligation to support the Cubans who fight for their liberties, to help them so that Cuba’s future can be decided by the Cubans, and to allow them to journey peacefully to a democratic and prosperous system.