



THE CUBAN CIVIC MOVEMENT: STEPS TO FREEDOM

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During the 1990s, the dissident movement in Cuba has grown in effectiveness, popular participation, and international support. While facing a first-generation totalitarian regime, with a sophisticated repressive apparatus, the civic movement in the Island has persevered and grown in spite of constant persecution, offering hope for political, social, and economic change from within Cuba itself. This essay seeks to provide a brief overview of the civic movement in Cuba covering its social origins and growth, theoretical repercussions of its existence, major leaders and initiatives, its relationship with the Cuban exile community, its ideological history and development, international support, and its current status in light of recent events affecting political conditions in the Island. Born initially out of dissident cells within Cuba's revolutionary movement and the Communist Party, the dissident movement in Cuba has transformed itself into a microcosm of a re-emerging civil society through which Cuban citizens are reclaiming their sovereignty and constructing the blueprint for a new Republic. The Varela Project is of particular significance for the development of the civic movement in Cuba.

THE QUEST FOR INDEPENDENCE

It is important to recall briefly the deeper historical trends and currents which contributed to molding Cuban national identity in order to place the Cuban civic movement within its proper context in the narrative of Cuban nationalism. The American intervention in Cuba in 1898 helped bring an end to Spanish domination of the Island. However, as Hugh Thomas argues, the American intervention on behalf of the cause of Cuban independence and liberty did not signify a true and profound change of the status quo on the Island for determined Cuban rebels, exhausted after almost thirty years of intermittent guerrilla warfare, but resulted instead in the perpetuation of an uneasy situation that would create deep underlying tensions within the Cuban body politic (1998: 470).

The end of the first American occupation, in 1902, heralded the birth of an independent Cuban republic, albeit one beholden to American oversight. Theodore Draper points out that, although the political class which had led and fought for independence achieved political power on the Island, the pro-Spanish classes retained a great degree of control over the Island's economy and bureaucracy (1965: 107). This created a profound sentiment of "an unfinished revolution" among Cubans.

Thousands of Cubans died in concentration camps set up by the Spanish on the Island in order to suppress the insurrection. Hence, veterans of that struggle had the bitter memory that the fruits of such a huge sacrifice had not been fully borne out by the new republic. Repressed nationalist sentiment was not so much directed at the Americans, who were seen with sympathetic eyes by Cubans, but at the pro-Spanish elements who retained a great deal of power in spite of having lost the war.

The Treaty of Paris (1898) between the United States and Spain signaled the recognition of Cuban independence, but the Spanish monarchy demanded and received U.S. protection of remaining Spanish economic interests in Cuba. This socio-economic tension at the heart of Cuban politics would serve as a recurring destabilizing factor in Cuban politics, as the stigma of repressed nationalism emerged to haunt the politics of the nascent Cuban republic. Ironically, Fidel Castro is himself the son of a Spanish soldier who came to battle with Cuba's freedom fighters, and remained to occupy the land no doubt guaranteed in the Treaty of Paris at the expense of Cuban nationalists.

The democratic aims of the 1933 Revolution, above all an effort at nationalist affirmation by the newly risen Cuban middle class and the watershed event of the republican era, were tragically aborted by a coup led by Fulgencio Batista. Although Batista eventually presided over free elections, and helped guide the drafting of a new Constitution for the Island in 1939-40, he returned to power through a coup staged a few weeks prior to the general elections. Batista's permanence in power resulted in a violent uprising, which transformed itself into a national insurrection.

The political goal of this later Revolution against Batista was the restoration of the much heralded Constitution of 1940. Fidel Castro was one of the main leaders of the Revolt and publicly declared this objective, as well as independence from any foreign influence, as his revolutionary

program, documented in a 26 July Manifesto transmitted over radio on the occasion of the assault on the Moncada Barracks. The latter was preserved from obscurity by Roberto Padrón Larrazábal (1975: 195). In fact, Castro seized absolute power, steering the Island toward the establishment of a totalitarian state based on the Marxist-Leninist model in the midst of a direct confrontation with the United States. Castro established a subservient alliance with the Soviet Union, which provided him with the economic and military support necessary to remain in power in the face of considerable domestic opposition.

CASTROISM: AN OVERVIEW

Yet Castroism cannot be understood simply as a Cuban variant of the Marxist-Leninist phenomenon. Rather, Castroism is an ideology which emerged from the revolutionary heritage that prevailed in Cuban politics from the uprising against Machado in the early 1930s to the overthrow of Batista's second dictatorship in 1959, as Draper asserts (1965: 132-33). Cubans prospered rapidly in economic terms during the years of the republic, 1902-1959. Despite the political turmoil, the Island enjoyed consistent economic improvement. The lack of correlation between economic progress and political stability contributed to the rising frustration of the middle class. Cubans wanted a national state that would reflect the successes and effectiveness of their national economy. Mario Llerena relates that, moreover, there was an emotional or sentimental need by the Cubans to publicly affirm the moral values they cherished at the private and family level (1978: 42-43).

The Revolution which triumphed in 1959 was about a moral and nationalist affirmation of Cuban political identity. It was this passionate nationalist ingredient which Castro transmuted masterfully into the main fuel for the radical transformation of the country's political culture. Castro portrayed his Revolution as an effort against politics itself, against the workings of a democratic state which he portrayed as having fallen short of the true possibilities of Cuban nationhood (Llerena 1978: 60-61). While presenting the Cuban Revolution and Cuban nationalism that he brought to power as a leap toward a better socialist and communist future, in political terms, Castroism signified a return to the type of politics to which Cubans had become accustomed during their long domination by Spain: a strong centralizing state intent on subduing Cuban society for the benefit of an entrenched military class. This reflected the true nature and composition of

Castroism from the outset. This, then, was the "real ideology," cloaked with socialist and revolutionary rhetoric. Thomas records that Castro himself referred to his rule as Spartanism: a collectivist state ruled by a militaristic class of overseers--led by the son of a Spanish colonial soldier (1998: 1347).

Castro's attempts at subduing and absorbing Cuban civil society into the framework of his revolutionary totalitarian state resulted in prolonged and bloody internal conflict. Castro's propaganda, as well as the work of regime apologists abroad, has sought to portray this protracted conflict between Cubans as a mere extension of Castro's confrontation with the United States. However, upon closer scrutiny, it seems that the contrary may have occurred. Actually, Castro used his conflict with the United States to justify his deviations from the true nature of the internal civil war he had sparked. Notably, opposition to Castroism came from within the ranks of his own Rebel Army: men and women who refused to accept a totalitarian turn to a Revolution for which they had fought and bled in pursuit of the restoration of the democratic state promised by the 1940 Constitution (Encinosa 1994: 139).

To this split in the rebel ranks was added an uprising of *campesinos* or farmers, whose traditional Catholic faith and independent lifestyles clashed directly with the new order envisioned by the Castro regime. With its base in the mountain ranges of the central province of Las Villas, Castro's main worry and greatest challenge came not from U.S.-sponsored attempts to overthrow him, but instead from the prolonged civil war marked by the *campesino* uprisings from 1959 to 1966 (Clark 1992: 105). However, by 1966, Castro defeated the rebels, and by 1970, crushed armed opposition inside the country, establishing full control over the population. Castro squelched independent manifestations of civil society in Cuba, parallel with his success against the uprising. In brief, the greater the defeats that Castro inflicted on the rebels, the safer he felt in trampling the few independent associations left in the country (Encinosa 1994: 59).

And yet, as Gene Sharp, perhaps the world's foremost expert on non-violent struggle, points out, try as it may, dictatorships will not succeed in completely eliminating the cells of independent civil institutions, since these constitute loci of social power that are the natural constitutive elements of any civil society. Under duress, such loci of social power continue to exist, even if only in a dormant state, as their origins lie within a society's historical and traditional milieu. Hence, to erase them completely would be

impossible given the organic nature of human communities (Sharp 1980: 27-42). Having triumphed against his domestic opposition, hailed as a Third World champion, and fully backed by the Soviets, Castro structured a totalitarian state where citizens were spied upon and monitored closely by the state (Valladares 1986; HRW 1999; Courtois 1999).

THE EMERGENCE OF THE CIVIC MOVEMENT IN CUBA

While the Castro regime ensured by 1970 that its political opposition was either dead, exiled, or incarcerated, Cuba's political prisons unexpectedly became the place where independent civil society survived. Tens of thousands of Cubans imprisoned for their beliefs and anti-communist activities kept alive the political, religious, social, and fraternal institutions that characterized the pre-1959 order. Contact in the late 1960s between these prisoners and the newly arrested dissidents from the Marxist regime signified a turning point in the history of dissent in Cuba.

In the mid-1980s, the civic movement in Cuba emerged from within the folds of the communist regime itself. The reason for this was the fact that the regime itself was an amalgam of diverse left-wing and revolutionary movements that Castro coalesced into a single Communist Party. These overlapping networks of relationships reflected at some level the complex patchwork of opinions, loyalties, and alliances that could facilitate the survival of certain independent cells in a totalitarian society, as illustrated in the case of Ricardo Bofill (Encinosa 1994: 62).

Bofill, Elizardo Sanchez Santacruz, Marta Frayde, Adolfo Rivero Caro, Ariel Hidalgo (1994), as well as other founders of the Cuban Committee for Human Rights, were committed revolutionaries and Marxists who for one reason or another ran afoul of Castro's ambitions and wound up in prison. As Bofill relates, upon entering Cuba's political prisons, they became aware of the magnitude and extent of human rights violations in the country. Furthermore, being more in touch with world events than many of the "counter-revolutionary" leaders who had already spent years in prison and isolation, they realized that a new method of struggle against Castroism had to be invented, one more suited to the international of the 1970s and 1980s (Bragado 1998: 28).

Of great influence on these individuals were the events taking place in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union at the time, especially the signing of

the 1975 Helsinki Accords by the U.S.S.R., the Charter 77 activities in Czechoslovakia, and Andrei Sakharov's work in the Soviet Union. The universal nature of human rights discourse served as an international standard to which Cuba's embryonic dissident movement could cling in an effort to address somehow the rampant violations of human rights taking place in Castro's Cuba (Bragado 1998: 23-25). Thus, while the traditional opposition to Castro espoused nationalist or left-wing alternatives to the regime, the Cuban Committee for Human Rights, founded in 1976, insisted that its aim was to defend the citizens' natural rights as defined in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights above and beyond the ideology espoused by any given regime (Encinosa 1994: 63-67).

The human rights committees were small at first, with their statements and denunciations of human rights abuses finding little echo outside of Cuba. However, as the information they provided on the state of Castro's political prisons proved reliable and realistic, their prestige and credibility grew despite persecution and repeated arrests. As Cuba's relationship with the Soviet Union deteriorated from the mid-1980s onward, dwindling resources exacerbated the regime's international isolation, bringing this foreign policy orientation into question, which in turn provided dissidents in the Island with a greater degree of maneuverability.

Aided by the establishment of the U.S.-sponsored Radio Marti short-wave broadcasts to the Cuban people, as well as other exile shortwave stations such as *La Voz del CID*, the greater Cuban population became increasingly aware of the existence of dissident groupings in Havana. Also, human rights campaigns initiated at the level of the United Nations by diverse exile organizations generated unprecedented international pressure on the Castro regime to improve its human rights image. It was in this context that the human rights movement began to grow both in numbers and geographical extension, from embryonic dissident cells to a national civic movement.

FROM DISSIDENCE TO CIVIC RESISTANCE

The first generation of dissident leaders in Cuba was intensely aware of the power that their statements and denunciations could gather internationally. They saw themselves as part of an international effort aimed at achieving a peaceful transition to democracy in Cuba. They had faith that the international community would be able to guide and steer such a

process. However, given the constant repression on the Island, mobilizing great numbers of Cubans for civic resistance as a means of pressuring the regime to bring about political reform seemed an unattainable goal. Nevertheless, massive anti-government protests took place throughout Cuba between 1993 and 1995, and during the Papal visit in 1998, which ushered in a new generation of civic leaders who believed that active civic resistance and nonviolent political defiance were not only possible on the Island, but constituted the only viable means of bringing about true change. This represented the thinking of such Cuban civic leaders as Dr. Oscar Elias Biscet and Maritza Lugo Fernández, recognized as prisoners of conscience by Amnesty International (2000).

The fundamental premise of nonviolent civic action (*lucha civica nonviolenta*) is that power in any given society is generated not from the top down, but instead from the bottom up. Citizens do not wield social power inherent in this principle in a lonely manner as isolated individuals, but instead through natural intermediary institutions that gather and channel collective action at different levels and through different means. Thus, Peter Ackerman and Jack Duvall conclude in their study of twentieth-century nonviolent movements, *A Force More Powerful*, that totalitarianism can suppress and interrupt the actions of diverse institutions--from the most basic, such as the family, to the most elaborate, such as labor unions, political parties, or religious denominations--for a time, but not permanently, since these institutions are the naturally occurring result of the exercise of natural rights by individuals (2000: 502-5).

There were many different ideological, social, and class identifications in the anti-Castro camp and in the political prisons. There were Catholics, Protestants, national revolutionaries, democratic socialists, constitutionalists intent on restoring the 1940 Constitution, and members of the pre-1959 political parties, such as the *Auténticos* and *Ortodoxos*. There were also farmers, students, workers, professionals who belonged to the emerging middle class, as well as businessmen. Each group had their own political program and social blueprint, but what they truly had in common was the desire to reconfigure the Cuban state so that it would respond to the popular will and not vice versa (Encinosa 1994). It was this notion, that the state is a result of social power, and that its legitimacy comes from its mandate to protect the natural rights of citizens to which it is beholden, that became the key principle of the tradition of Cuban *independentista* thought reaching back to the eighteenth century.

Father Felix Varela (1788-1853), the Catholic priest who initiated the intellectual crusade for an independent Cuba, was a social contract thinker who disagreed profoundly with the authoritarian and militaristic thinking of the Spanish monarch, Ferdinand VII, and his military subordinates. Varela, whom Cuban scholars identify as the Father of Cuban Nationality, inspired not just José Martí and other nineteenth-century independence leaders, but also those in the twentieth century who struggled to defend liberal ideals against the Machado, Batista, and Castro dictatorships. As the Castro regime weakened in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the re-emerging Cuban civil society would include the strain of Catholic social thought embodied by Varela's intellectual legacy as an important component of its struggle.

THE CHRISTIAN LIBERATION MOVEMENT

As the Castro regime maneuvered to prevent further international isolation, the much repressed Catholic Church had greater space to operate within Cuban society. In its early stages, the regime launched a massive effort to de-Christianize Cuban society. Among the measures undertaken by the communist dictatorship were the closing of religious schools, the expulsion of priests, the abolishment of Christmas as an official holiday and discouragement of its celebration, harassment and heckling of the faithful on their way in or out of places of worship by government-organized mobs, and restriction of access to institutions of higher learning for believers (Clark 1992).

The Church survived with a few priests and tightly-knit faith communities capable of weathering all sorts of persecution and repression. It was in this context that the Christian Liberation Movement was born in 1988. Founded by young Catholics who lived intensely their commitment to the faith, the aim of the movement was to create a civic space of public, nonviolent political opposition to the Castro regime.

The CLM's key figure was Oswaldo Payá Sardiñas, a young civil engineer greatly respected within the surviving Catholic community in Cuba. Payá had never been a Marxist, nor did he participate in the Revolution against Batista, for he was too young when it took place. He belonged to a new generation which was distanced from both the Castro regime and the traditional anti-Castro opposition. Payá did not consider himself a political dissident, but rather part of a new domestic and nonviolent opposition inspired by the New Testament, Catholic social doctrine, and the thought of

Father Felix Varela (Encinosa 1994: 184). A fundamental principle was evident in Payá's manifestos and statements dating back to the beginning of the Christian Liberation Movement: the belief that power emanates from the people, and that it is only through the mobilization of the Cuban people that change could take place. While other dissident leaders centered their strategies on other aspects, such as mobilizing international public opinion or trying to engage the regime in negotiations, Payá focused on finding ways to mobilize the Cuban citizenry for change.

The popular protests that took place in Cuba throughout 1993 to 1995, as well as the shouts of "Freedom!" that hailed Pope John Paul II's visit to Cuba in 1998, signaled to leaders such as Payá that the time for popular mobilization had arrived. Other civic movement leaders inspired by Christian thought, such as the imprisoned Dr. Oscar Elias Biscet, chose to confront the regime directly through nonviolent resistance. But Payá believed that ways had to be found within the existing governmental legal framework to confront the regime.

THE VARELA PROJECT

Inspired by Father Varela's legal perspective, and his early attempts at working from within the framework of Spanish law to bring about greater freedom for Cuba, Payá capitalized on articles in Cuba's socialist Constitution that tentatively recognized the right of Cuban citizens to request a referendum on pertinent issues. Building on the legacy of the Papal visit, and encouraged by the growth of the civic movement, activists gathered some 35,000 signatures for the Referendum Petition in 1998, which sought to initiate an electoral process whereby Cuban citizens would legally re-establish their civil rights, and begin a peaceful process of democratic reform from within Castro's byzantine legal framework. The Varela Project was thus an eminently civic human rights initiative, appealing to the promises contained in Cuba's Constitution. The Petition's major proposals centered on the right to freedom of speech, press, and assembly, general amnesty for all political prisoners, reconciliation, the right of Cubans to create enterprises, and a new electoral law.

The Varela Project received considerable international support. Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter praised the effort in a televised address at the University of Havana during his 2002 visit to Cuba. Former Czech President Václav Havel nominated Payá for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003.

Hundreds of parliamentarians from around the world supported Havel's nomination with their signatures. In 2002, the European Parliament awarded Payá the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, while pressure from the European Union was instrumental in persuading Castro to allow Payá to travel to Strasbourg in order to receive the Prize.

To counter the growing momentum of the Varela Project, Castro illegally amended his own Constitution so that it could not be used in any way to change the socialist status quo in the Island (Anita Snow, *Associated Press*, 27 June 2002). That, however, was only Castro's first step in suppressing the growing challenge of the civic movement in the Island. In March 2003, on the eve of the Iraqi war, scores of civic activists were arrested throughout Cuba. Of the 75 detainees, more than half were involved in gathering signatures for the Varela Project. The activists received draconian sentences of between 6 and 28 years in prison (Freedom House 2004). The regime believed that it had dealt a crushing blow to what Payá called "the Cuban Spring."

Covered extensively in the *Miami Herald*, the Varela Project was criticized for diverse reasons by leading members of the pro-democracy movement inside and outside of Cuba. Some felt that the Project was not inclusive enough of the diverse opinions in the opposition, while others thought that working from within the framework of Castro's socialist legality would prove later on to be an inextricable trap for a future democratic transition. Another criticism held that the Varela Project was too weak in certain key areas, and that it could eventually be manipulated by the regime. Yet others believed that its call for a general amnesty for political prisoners was too limited, and that, furthermore, it did not fully specify the role of political parties in a democratic reform process (Nancy San Martin, *Miami Herald*, 10 Jan. 2003). Nonetheless, beyond the controversy, the Varela Project proved to be the tip of the iceberg: a demonstration of the enormous potential that the civic movement had attained in organizing and mobilizing the Cuban citizenry for political change. The dozens of activists, arrested on 18 March 2003, are a lasting testament to the regime's enduring concern over the growth and impact of the civic movement.

THE GROWTH OF NONVIOLENT STRUGGLE

The Varela Project, as well as other initiatives of the civic movement in Cuba, such as the Assembly to Promote Civil Society, an independent

library movement, independent journalists, human rights committees, among others, are but part of an overall trend in Cuban society: thousands of men and women of different age groups are looking for, and finding, ways to struggle and resist the totalitarian regime. This resistance takes on many different forms and methods: from Ladies in White--wives and mothers of political prisoners who, dressed in white, march on the sidewalks every week after attending Sunday Mass--to independent journalists who work to gather and disseminate news about what is going on inside the Island that the regime wants neither the Cuban people nor the world to know.

In fact, the array of methods and techniques available to those engaged in nonviolent struggle is quite varied and diverse. In his tireless endeavor to fully document and analyze nonviolent struggle, Sharp (1973) lists multiple categories and diverse means used throughout history to defy tyranny without resorting to outright violence. From fasting and prayer to nonviolent sabotage, Sharp's classifications cover a broad range of means of nonviolent resistance (1973: 26). These categories serve as a basis for a unique annual publication, entitled *Steps to Freedom*, produced by the Miami-based Cuban Democratic Directorate, a Cuban exile pro-democracy organization. *Steps to Freedom* has chronicled civic resistance activities taking place in Cuba since 1997, with relevant information arranged on a monthly basis. This has allowed the *Directorio* to generate consistent statistical data and analysis with which to objectively measure the growth of the civic movement in Cuba.

Sharp divides nonviolent methods and techniques into three broad categories: protests and persuasion, intervention, and non-cooperation. Each reflects different stages in the evolution of nonviolent struggle. Protests and persuasion actions are designed to demonstrate to the population that resistance and struggle against the dictatorship are possible. Intervention refers to the point at which the nonviolent movement can successfully interrupt or intercept the normal functions of government. Non-cooperation is perhaps the most ambitious and effective stage, when large segments of the population withdraw their allegiance from the regime by refusing to obey its dictates or participate in its official activities (Sharp 1973: 7-12).

In 1997, *Steps to Freedom* documented forty-four civic resistance actions of diverse types throughout Cuba, with activity concentrated most heavily in Havana. That number has increased steadily over the years to some 3,314 civic resistance actions reported by 2005 (CDD 2005). This considerable growth in civic actions signifies that the Castro regime now

faces determined and growing resistance throughout the country. Cuba's burgeoning civic resistance is still decentralized, local, and often desperate, but it has also proven to be constant and unremitting. This became especially evident on 26 July 2005, two years following the massive arrests of 18 March 2003. On this date, the 52nd anniversary of his initial revolt against Batista, Castro warned his faithful followers in a speech at the Karl Marx Theater in Havana that the dissident groups should not be underestimated, and could not be allowed to take to the streets. This signaled the beginning of a systematic campaign of government-organized mob attacks (*actos de repudio*) against the homes of civic activists throughout the Island that continues to this day.

TRANSITION OR SUCCESSION?

There are two simultaneous movements taking place in Cuban society today, and they are on a collision course with each other. One is the top-down effort, carried out by the regime, to consolidate its hold on power, and make a smooth hand-off from Fidel to Raul Castro or someone else in the Party or military hierarchy who seeks to replace him. The other movement is a natural, bottom-up effort, undertaken by the Cuban people to assert themselves and recover their sovereignty as citizens. The first of these movements may be defined as an effort at succession; the second, as an effort at transition. The pillars of succession are the Communist Party, the Armed Forces, and the Ministry of the Interior. In order to insure that the succession takes place, and that the power of the dictatorship is perpetuated, the regime has increased repression across the country. Furthermore, it has sought to re-empower the Communist Party, while attempting to modernize the Armed Forces with foreign support (Frances Robles, *Miami Herald*, 14 July 2006).

To perpetuate its rule, the regime seeks to prevent the dissident movement from becoming a united national force that cuts across the divides of Cuban society, and brings citizens out into the streets to demand true democratic change. What is at stake for Cuba, however, is not just political transformation, but the life of the nation itself. Under communism, Cuba has developed extremely high abortion rates, as documented by the United Nations Population Fund Research (Dalia Acosta, *IPS News*, 1 June 2006), and suicide, as documented by the World Health Organization (2005). In addition, Cuba's birth rate is below the normal replacement level, as stated in the country's United Nations Population Fund Profile (2006).

At present, a new generational leadership is emerging within the civic movement in Cuba. These leaders are painfully aware of the high stakes involved in the struggle for democracy in Cuba, and choose to face the consequences by joining the noblest aspirations of the Cuban nationalist spirit with courage and self-discipline required of nonviolent civic struggle. Jorge Luis Garcia Perez "Antúnez," a young Cuban languishing in prison on regime charges of "oral enemy propaganda," perhaps best sums up the essence of Cuba's nonviolent civic struggle for basic human rights and freedoms: "We are not moved by feelings of hate, rancor, revenge or personal interest, and that is how we plan to reach the inevitable process of a true transition to democracy. That is not our goal but rather the necessary point from which we can begin to rescue and reaffirm the moral, democratic, and ethical values we need to construct a new homeland" (CDD 2004: i).

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