

Will Cuba Be the Next Egypt?

Developments in Egypt over the last two weeks brought Cuba to my mind. Why does a similar rebellion against five decades of repression there still appear to be a far-off dream? Part of the answer is in the relationship between the Castro brothers—Fidel and Raúl—and the generals. The rest is explained by the regime's significantly more repressive model. In the art of dictatorship, Hosni Mubarak is a piker.



AMERICAS
By Mary Anastasia O'Grady

That so many Egyptians have raised their voices in Tahrir Square is a testament to the universal human yearning for liberty. But it is a mistake to ignore the pivotal role of the military. I'd wager that when the history of the uprising is written, we will learn that Egypt's top brass did not approve of the old man's succession plan to anoint his son in the next election.

Castro has bought loyalty from the secret police and military by giving them control of the three most profitable sectors of the economy—retail, travel and services. Hundreds of millions of dollars flow to them every year. If the system collapses, so does that income. Of course the Egyptian military also owns businesses. But it doesn't depend on a purely state-owned economy. And as a recipient of significant U.S. aid and training for many years, the Egyptian military has cultivated a culture of professionalism and commitment to the nation over any single individual.

In Cuba there are no opposition political parties or nonstate media; rapid response brigades enforce the party line. Travel



Cuban President Raúl Castro

outside the country is not allowed without state approval. If peaceful dissidents with leadership skills can't be broken, they are eventually exiled. Or they are murdered.

The most striking difference between Cuba and Egypt is access to the Internet. In a March 2009 Freedom House report on Internet and digital media censorship world-wide, Egypt scored a 45 (out of 100), slightly worse than Turkey but better than Russia. Cuba scored a 90, making it more Net-censored than even Iran, China and Tunisia. Cellphone service is too expensive for most Cubans.

Yet technology does somehow seep into Cuba. When Fidel took the life of prisoner of conscience Pedro Boitel in 1972 by denying him water during a hunger strike, the world hardly noticed. By contrast, news of the regime's 2010 murder of prisoner of conscience Orlando Zapata Tamayo hit the Internet almost immediately and was met with worldwide condemnation. The military dictatorship was helpless to contain the bad publicity.

In a similar fashion, when the Ladies in White—a group of wives, sisters and mothers of political prisoners—walking peacefully in Havana were roughed up by state security last year, the images were captured on cellphones and immediately showed up on the Web. It was more bad PR for the Castro brothers and their friends like Mexican President Felipe Calderón and Spanish President José Luis Zapatero.

Technology-induced international pressure is making the regime increasingly reluctant to flatten critics the old-fashioned way. In an interview in Argentina's *Ambito Financiero* on Jan. 27, internationally recognized Cuban blogger Yoani Sánchez said the "style" of state repression has shifted from aggressive arrests and long sentences to targeted attempts at defamation and isolation. Ms. Sanchez also said that uniformed police are "distancing themselves from the political theme, not by orders from above, but because they no longer want to be associated with the repression." Now, she said, the intimidation and arbitrary arrests are

largely carried out by the secret police in civilian clothes.

A little more space has emboldened the population. Ms. Sánchez also said in the interview that she is "optimistic about the slow and irreversible process of interior change in Cubans. In that the citizen critic will grow, will have less fear, and will feel that the mask is increasingly unnecessary and that it doesn't any longer translate into privileges and subsidies."

Last week a leaked video of a Cuban military seminar on how to combat technology hit the Internet. It demonstrates the dictatorship's preoccupation with the Web. The lecturer warns about the dangers of young people with an appealing discourse sharing information through technology and trying to organize. Real-time chat, Twitter and the emergence of young leaders in cyberspace—aka "a permanent battlefield"—are perils outlined in the hour-long talk. The lecturer also shares his concerns about U.S. government programs that try to increase Internet access outside of officialdom on the island.

On Friday, the regime further displayed its paranoia by charging U.S. Agency for International Development contractor Alan Gross with spying. Mr. Gross has been in jail for 14 months for giving Cuban Jews computer equipment so they could connect with the diaspora.

With very limited access, Cubans are already using the Internet to share what has until now been kept in their heads: counterrevolutionary thoughts. If those go viral, even a well-fed military will not be able to save the regime. But for now, Cubans can only dream about the freedoms Egyptians enjoy as they voice their grievances.

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