

LISANDRO PÉREZ

## *Reflections on the Future of Cuba*

### **ABSTRACT**

Those who have spent their lifetimes studying Cuba know that predicting its future has always been a fool's errand. Given the speculations that arose following the illness of Fidel Castro, I undertook the task, with some trepidation, of reflecting on that future. I argue that, though anything may happen, it is likely that the forces of continuity will prevail, defying the expectations in both Washington and Miami, where the rupture scenario has always been favored in a way that has not led to the formulation of a realistic policy toward the island.

### **RESUMEN**

Aquellos que han dedicado sus vidas a estudiar a Cuba saben que tratar de anticipar el futuro de la isla es tarea de tontos. Pero en vista de las especulaciones que surgieron en torno a la enfermedad de Fidel Castro, me atreví, con cierto temor, a reflexionar sobre ese futuro. Argumento que aunque cualquier cosa puede suceder, es probable que la continuidad se imponga, negando las expectativas tanto en Washington como en Miami, donde siempre ha prevalecido una visión de ruptura que no ha favorecido la elaboración de una política realista hacia la isla.

For nearly a half century little has changed in the basic outlines of the Cuban situation. A government that includes Fidel Castro stubbornly defends a socialist order that has been defiantly erected in the backyard of the United States despite the equally stubborn and persistent efforts of Washington and an exile community to do away with it. Some details, nuances, and characters have changed over the years, but that basic confrontational scenario has not changed since 1961. In such a scenario reigns a climate of suspicion that has effectively precluded any efforts by U.S. social scientists to observe firsthand what is an extraordinary island.

Cuba has always, purposely or accidentally, defied the prevailing historical currents of the time to establish its own place in the world. That was true when the Spanish first colonized it and it is especially true today. Yet U.S. social scientists have not been able to observe it with the instruments of their trade. Some of us have been able to go and investigate and write about how Cuban society has changed and how its social order works, but we have not been able to apply our full repertoire of methodological tools as social scientists. In fact,

at present the prospects for research in the island are dimmer than ever as the U.S. government has entered, with even more vehemence than its Havana counterpart, into the sorry business of restricting travel and exchanges.

Despite those obstacles, some of us have tried, against all odds, to maintain our interest in Cuba, decade after decade. Whatever our motivations or origins, those of us who are sometimes called “Cubanists” have had an almost surreal trajectory as academics. It is akin to sitting in a darkened and virtually empty theater, just a small group of us, watching an interminable drama, wondering whether this is the final scene. Every now and then the theater fills to capacity during some particularly dramatic scenes, especially if there is the anticipation that the final curtain will be coming down. It has happened during boat lifts and other migration crises, the pope’s visit, the saga of a little boy claimed as a trophy by opposing sides in an international conflict. It happened again when everyone thought Fidel Castro was about to die. Once those scenes are over and interest wanes, the theater empties again and the same group of faithful observers is left watching and waiting for the final scene.

Because we have been observing this drama for a long time, we are frequently asked to predict what is going to happen in Cuba. We take the task on with some trepidation, knowing that if there is one thing we have learned about Cuba is that the turns in its history have always managed to surprise us. Predicting Cuba is like hitting in baseball: if you’re batting .300, you’re doing great. So here goes my take on the future.

I live in Miami, where there is one prevailing scenario of change in Cuba, which can be labeled the “rupture” or “fall” scenario. It is the one that has predominated since an exile community in Miami originated, for it is deeply rooted in Cuban history and in a political culture of personalism. The scenario is predicated on the primacy of personal authority, or caudillismo: once *el hombre fuerte* with the power is gone, it all falls like a tower of cards. It is what I call the *sombrerazo* theory of change in Cuba, inspired by the declaration of a woman I once heard voicing her opinion in a call-in Spanish-language talk show in Miami: “once Fidel is gone, the rest can be driven out with just *sombrerazos*” (in other words, by simply being struck repeatedly with a hat, a minimal force).

And why should Cuban exiles not have such a view of how change will occur? After all, that is what happened when other Cuban strongmen have departed the scene: Gerardo Machado in 1933 and Fulgencio Batista in 1959. As soon as they left, the church bells rang and a new order was ushered in, literally overnight. That has been the accepted and practically undisputed scenario of change among exiles: the *caída* or fall scenario, the type of change that will occur on a particular day and that will require, according to one officially drafted local plan of action, all of the best crowd-control strategies of the Miami-Dade County police and fire departments.

With the growing realization over the years that the only place where Fidel may fall is into his grave, the rupture scenario focuses on what will happen when he dies, a speculation that has intensified over Castro's illness. The rupture view still holds: the regime will not survive the death of the caudillo and everything will crumble with his death. The sombreros are ready to swat away any lingering vestiges of the regime.

This scenario would remain something simply picturesque and tropical, like Miami, a quaint ethnic vision, if it were not that it has also become the basis for U.S. policy toward Cuba. The United States, long ago, as part of its Made-in-Miami Cuba policy, subscribed to a vision of change that is based on the exile perspective of how change will occur. In other words, the United States has based its Cuba policy on a rupture scenario.

This view has made its way into the principal documents that constitute U.S. policy toward Cuba. The best exhibit is the 2004 Report of the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, the so-called Powell Report (reportedly drafted by a Cuban-American at the National Security Council under the supervision of former Undersecretary of State Otto Reich). After outlining immediate policy recommendations for tightening family visits and remittances, funding U.S. assistance to dissidents, and other efforts to "hasten" Cuba's transition, the report addresses what the United States would do to assist a transition. It is a blueprint for detailed U.S. involvement in administering a new Cuba, a Cuba with a clean slate that would make possible an intimate U.S. role in virtually all aspects of national life, from health and education, to governance, justice, and the economy, even to the administration of a national park service (complete with the training of rangers), the establishment safe and drug-free schools, ESOL (English-for-speakers-of-other-languages) programs in the schools, and the distribution of toolkits for parental involvement in their children's education. It is not far-fetched to suggest that it is a plan for a protectorate. Such U.S. involvement is predicated on the implicit assumption that there will be a rupture scenario, as in 1933 or 1959, that will transform Cuba virtually overnight and immediately set the conditions for pervasive foreign involvement. For example, plans are outlined for "responding rapidly to changes on the island," including mobilization of humanitarian emergency relief efforts, such as the distribution of nonfat dry milk, immediate immunization programs for childhood illnesses, making sure that schools stay open, public security and law enforcement during the "initial stages" of a transition, and the immediate provision of temporary building materials for housing rehabilitation.

The four hundred-plus pages of the report do not plan for, or even contemplate, a scenario such as the one we now seem to be facing: the continuation of the existing political order beyond the presence of Fidel Castro. No wonder both the United States and Cuban Miami find themselves at an impasse in dealing with the process of succession and possible transition in Cuba. Without

an effective roadmap for dealing with a scenario of peaceful succession in Havana, many in Washington and Miami find that all they can do is engage themselves in inane speculation about the intestines of an eighty-year-old man. Here we are, at last, on the threshold, if not entirely inside, a scenario of political change in Cuba, and yet all we hear are personality-driven analyses of the process, without a blueprint as to how the United States and the Cuban community should react to the gradual disappearance of Fidel Castro and the ascension of institutionally based power largely in the hands of Raúl Castro. The official U.S. response we have heard is therefore to be expected: no movement on the part of the United States because “nothing” has changed in Cuba. That position has been echoed by the Cuban-Americans in Congress. Indeed, that is not only the official position but also the legally sanctioned position, as the 1996 Helms-Burton Law (the final version of which was reportedly drafted by the staff of Representative Lincoln Díaz-Balart) prohibits the United States from declaring a transition and in any way relaxing its policies of isolation while Fidel or Raúl Castro are still in power. That prohibition, more than anything else, speaks volumes about the expected and desired scenario of change, a scenario that is primarily Cuban-American in origin.

Ever since the fall of the Berlin wall, when some Cuban-Americans in Miami were ready to sell their homes in Miami because the “fall of Fidel” was imminent as Cuba lost its support from the eastern bloc, I was arguing that such expectations regarding a sudden change in Cuba were unrealistic and that not only would the government survive the crisis but also change in Cuba would come slowly — it would be evolutionary, not revolutionary. A columnist in a Spanish-language newspaper called me an *aguafiestas* — basically, a downer, a party pooper.

I continue to argue the same thing today. The future could prove me wrong, of course, but I do not see the basis for believing that a sudden change or rupture, what passes as the inevitable prediction in Washington and Miami, is likely. The events since Castro’s illness have supported the view that the forces of continuity may prove more powerful than the forces of radical change. The fact that Cuba has remained stable after the incapacitation of Castro has been an unexpected and sobering exercise that has left most exiles, and Washington along with them, once again feeling powerless, hemmed in by their own expectations and by a strategy that made them unable to influence any changes when the house of cards did not fall. True, the man has not died, and that may well be a critical difference. But he was incapacitated and turned over power. Not a whimper of dissent, of loss of political control, not a single crack in the unity of the ruling elite.

The reasons are complex. For one thing, the Cuban government represents more than a regime. It has successfully portrayed itself as the founder and trustee of an entire social, political, and economic system with institutions that

will likely survive even the loss of the historical leader of the revolution. This is not to say that Cubans, even those in the ruling elite who are discreetly on a deathwatch, will not welcome and support changes. Everyone in Cuba wants changes. But what change means in Miami or Washington is not what change means in Havana.

The Cuban revolution's ability to consolidate its power in the early 1960s was in large measure because of its success in capitalizing on political values and ideals that were part of the process of Cuban nation building in the nineteenth century and have therefore long been part of Cuban national identity. They were values most clearly, though not exclusively, articulated by José Martí during his fifteen years of residence in Gilded Age New York, the place and time that first and most dramatically raised the question of what should be the proper role of government in a society in which so few have so much and so many live desperately poor lives. They were values that the Cuban Republic, from 1902 to 1958, largely failed to realize: sovereignty, social justice, the dignity of all its people, and a national purpose guided by a history of exceptionalism that gave Cubans a particular sense of destiny as an independent nation in this hemisphere. The Cuban revolutionary government played very successfully on those themes. Its redistribution efforts, a real attempt to address the serious socioeconomic inequities of the past, were a success, in terms of both actual accomplishment and political symbolism, vesting the bulk of the population in the revolution's longevity.

But those successes have also entailed costs: a chronic, at times acute, economic austerity and the loss of freedoms. Even committed revolutionaries may well see this loss of freedoms as capriciously imposed, especially in the social and economic areas. Even those who may agree with a one-party system may nevertheless question, for example, why the revolution would be terribly threatened if Cubans had the freedom to travel, to be issued a passport on demand, or to aspire to a level of living commensurate with their efforts and abilities. Fidel Castro, who has been the ideologue-in-chief, may well have to die before measures are adopted that will liberalize the Cuban system and take it into the twenty-first century. But many Cubans — and of course we do not know how many, for surveys are not taken on the island — are not ready to throw the revolution out with Fidel, especially those likely to assume greater power upon his death. Too many have a stake in the continuation of a system that once changed their lives for the better.

The continuity of the basic outlines of the revolutionary system is assured even further by an awareness of a real threat from the outside. The Cuban government nurtures the perception that the exiles represent the past and are poised to return to the island on the coattails of the United States to turn back the clock to prerevolutionary days. Of course, much of the rhetoric coming out of Miami and Washington does little else but reinforce that perception, with

exiles treating the revolution as disposable and encouraging Washington to draft plans, as we have seen, for a protectorate.

The threat from the outside also resonates with Cuban history and the long struggle for sovereignty. The last time the United States intervened, presumably to help Cuba, Cubans lost their sovereignty and self-determination.

In looking at the future, therefore, I argue for the likelihood of continuity, or a slow evolution, rather than rupture. But slowly or not, change will come to Cuba, and one day there will be significant economic and political reforms, and there will be a normalization of relations with the United States. In that process of change only two things are certain.

The first has to do with what will be, in my view, the cultural constraints on future development. Many observers have long noted the formidable challenges posed by Cuba's economy and the difficulty ahead in the implementation of a reform plan that will make the economy efficient, end economic austerity, and restore a significant measure of economic incentives to individuals so as to help the economy grow. It is frequently viewed as the most difficult area for any reform effort. I disagree. Cubans have demonstrated repeatedly that nearly half a century of a fairly inflexible planned economy has not diminished the entrepreneurial values and practices that were engendered by centuries of a port commercial economic culture. In the early 1990s, the Cuban government allowed a certain measure of family entrepreneurial activity and Cubans seized the occasion, stretching the limits of the regulations, spurring economic growth, and demonstrating extraordinary talents in commerce and the creation of opportunities for family economic advancement. Miami is the best example, or testament, to the presence and strength of a Cuban culture of entrepreneurship and business development.

The real problem will not lie in the economic area, but in another aspect of culture for which Miami is also a good example: political culture. Centuries of Spanish absolutism, during which Cuba was ruled as a military outpost, a twentieth-century republic characterized by a political system that had a foreign power as the final authority, a socialist system with little tolerance for dissent, and a tradition that has valued charismatic authority over institution building have all combined to create a political culture that is a dismal topic when it comes to Cuba. Both Miami and Havana live under the unfortunate sway of a culture that has long valued intransigence and intolerance. That is the biggest obstacle to the development of a better society in the Cuba of the future. It will place constraints, as it does now, on the implementation of needed economic reforms. As in most societies, the problem lies in the politics, not the economics.

And in the event of normalization of relations with the United States, moreover, we will see a flow of people and goods that will surprise most Americans. Let me provide one piece of data to support that: in 1948, Cuba

outranked all countries in the world in the total volume of passengers exchanged with the United States. That was before there were 1.3 million Cubans in the United States, before Miami was what it is now, and before jet travel. The actual flight time between Miami and Havana is twenty-two minutes. Havana is closer to Miami than Disney World.

It is in that contact that rests the greatest hope for the future. Cuban culture is deficient, in my view, in democratic political culture and institution building, but it is very strong on interpersonal relations. Cubans value egalitarian interpersonal relations and the minimization of distance in social interaction. The so-far limited history of contact between Cubans in the island and Cubans in the United States suggests that at the interpersonal level Cubans can accomplish a great deal toward national reconciliation, if only they were given the opportunity to have that interpersonal contact.

#### NOTE

This paper was presented at the meeting of the American Sociological Association, New York, August 2007.