

A CUBAN TRANSITION . . . IN MIAMI?

Lisandro Pérez

Florida International University

Any discussion of a transition in Cuba, and especially of U.S. policy alternatives in response to changes in the island, must include an analysis of the political dynamics of the Cuban American community. Influential Cuban Americans and Florida electoral politics have been largely credited with the maintenance and intensification of a U.S.-Cuba policy designed to bring about change in Cuba through isolation, the strangulation of the flow of currency to the island, support for dissidents, and, in general, efforts to destabilize the Cuban government.

A U.S. policy of hostility and isolation towards Cuba has been in place since 1960. Throughout the 1960's and 1970's, Cuban exiles functioned primarily as supporters and implementers of a Cold War policy originating in Washington that was intent on overthrowing the Castro government for its misdeeds against the U.S. The Bay of Pigs was the epitome of that period, with Cuban exiles filling the ranks of a U.S.-planned and directed invasion of the island. It was not until the early 1980's, with the creation of a Washington-based lobbying organization, the Cuban American National Foundation, and the rise of a significant voting bloc of Cuban Americans in Florida, that Cuban émigrés become protagonists in U.S.-Cuba policy, applying pressure and influence in Washington to expand and intensify both the scope of the embargo on Cuba and the range of U.S. government activities designed to destabilize the regime in Havana. In the 1990's and in this decade, Cuban American influence on U.S.-Cuba policy has been amplified by the presence of Cuban Americans in Congress and in high levels of the Executive Branch of several administrations, especially the present one. It is not an exaggeration to say that while current U.S. Cuba policy was historically conceived in Washington, it has for some time now originated in Miami. In the absence, until recently, of any meaningful constituency for changing or softening U.S. policy towards the island, and with Cuba in a deep backburner in terms of national priorities, the design and maintenance of a hardline and isolationist policy has essentially been left in the hands of those who have Cuba as their steadfast priority and who represent a significant voting bloc in a key electoral state, that is, Cuban Americans. In case anyone had any thoughts of disregarding the importance of that constituency in the national electoral picture, the 2000 presidential election served as a jolting reminder.

The mounting data from survey research in Miami, especially the periodic Florida International University polls, show that Cuban Americans are not of one mind with respect to U.S. Cuba policy, with significant fault lines by age, year of arrival, and socioeconomic status. Yet, the traditional electoral year wisdom, espoused forcefully by those with access to the Congress and the White House, has been that Cuban Americans can be easily swayed by a candidate or administration that can show that it is doing something, anything, hostile to the Castro government. It has been that logic that over the

years has resulted in the major legislative and executive actions that have shaped the current outlines of U.S. policy towards Cuba, actions implemented by administrations, Republican and Democrat, that have been in office since the day in 1983 when Ronald Reagan visited Miami and had lunch at La Esquina de Tejas at the invitation of the Cuban American National Foundation. Those actions were: the creation of Radio Martí in 1983 and TV Martí in 1990; the passage by Congress of the 1992 Democracy in Cuba (Torricelli) Act and the 1996 Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity (Helms-Burton) Act; and the adoption by the President of the recommendations of the 2004 and 2006 Report of the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba. Note that virtually all of those measures were enacted in even-numbered years.

To see the current U.S.-Cuba policy as a Made-in-Miami policy is to understand why both the U.S. 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 both Miami and Washington find that all they can do is engage themselves in inane speculation about the state of an eighty-year old's intestines. 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 U.S. and the Cuban community should react to the gradual disappearance of Fidel and the ascension of institutionally-based power largely in the hands of Raúl. We do not have that blueprint because the U.S. long ago, as part of the Made-in-Miami policy, bought into a vision of change in Cuba that is based on an exile perspective of how that change will occur. It is a perspective 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*" (by simply being struck repeatedly with a hat, a minimal force). And why shouldn't Cubans 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 in Cuba: the *caída* or fall scenario, the type of change that will occur on a particular day and which will require, according to one officially-drafted local plan of action, all of the best crowd-control strategies of the Miami-Dade police and fire departments.

Consider how this view has made its way into the documents that constitute U.S. policy towards 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 skips to what the U.S. 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 such 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 programs in the schools, and the distribution of toolkits for parental involvement in their children's education. It is not a stretch to say that it is a plan for a protectorate. Such U.S. involvement is predicated on an unstated assumption that there will be essentially a "rupture" scenario, à la '33 or '59, 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 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 400-plus pages of the report does not plan for, nor 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, and therefore, to repeat, it offers no blueprint as to how the U.S. and the Cuban community should react to the gradual disappearance of Fidel and the ascension of institutionally-based power largely in the hands of Raúl. The official U.S. response we have heard is therefore to be expected: no movement on the part of the U.S. since "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 the legal-sanctioned position, since the 1996 Helms-Burton Law (the final version of which was reportedly drafted by the staff of Congressman Lincoln Díaz-Balart) in effect prohibits the U.S. from declaring a transition and in any way relaxing its policies of isolation while Fidel or Raúl are still in power. That prohibition, more than anything else, speaks volumes about the expected and desired scenario of change, a scenario, that I argued, is primarily Cuban American in origin.

Should we therefore be resigned, even in the face of a succession in Cuba, to more of what we have faced in the last five decades in terms of U.S.-Cuba rapprochement, that is, fundamentally, nothing?

If one looks at the three settings, Havana, Washington, and Miami, around which the drama of U.S.-Cuba relations unfolds, one could argue, as I am about to, that since the news of a succession first surfaced with the illness of the Cuban President, there has probably been more movement in Miami towards change than in any of the other two locations. The seeds of change were planted by the denunciation by many moderate and humanitarian exile groups of the draconian measures that were implemented by the Bush administration in 2004 following the release of the Powell Report. Through those measures the contacts of Cuban Americans with their families in Cuba were further limited to the point where Cubans in the U.S. would henceforth only be allowed to travel to the island once every three years. No exceptions are to be granted, not even for emergency humanitarian travel. Furthermore, the definition of the family changed to include only parents, children, siblings, and spouses. Uncles, aunts, and cousins were no longer family for the purpose of lawful remittances and travel. The measures were seen

by many as a serious threat to the viability of the Cuban family. Those measures were proposed by the earlier exiles with influence in Washington, that is, those who are not likely to have family in Cuba, at the expense of more recent, less influential and poorer Cuban Americans who are most likely to have family members still in Cuba. They were, in short, measures that for many simply went too far. It appeared that the politically-connected exiles may have overplayed their hand. Opposition grew in various quarters, including the creation, in April of 2006, of the Emergency Network of Cuban American Scholars and Writers (ENCASA), the first concerted and collective effort by many in the substantial community of Cuban American academics, writers, and artists to voice their opposition to the isolationist and hostile policies of the U.S. government. ENCASA's statement of principles was aimed primarily at the impact of the measures on Cuban families, but also criticized the new restrictive policies on academic and student travel to the island.

The illness of Fidel Castro set into motion a reconsideration of the soundness of the strategy that depended on waiting for a sudden change after Castro's demise. The fact that Cuba has remained stable after the incapacitation of Castro has been an unexpected and sobering exercise that has left many exiles once again feeling powerless, hemmed in by their own expectations and by a strategy that made them unable to effect any changes when the house of cards did not fall.

Then came a series of events in the Fall of 2006, ostensibly unrelated to Castro's illness. There was the release of the General Accounting Office's Report on the lack of accountability and failure to achieve objectives of the millions of dollars that have been disbursed by USAID, as authorized by the Helms-Burton legislation and the regulations that followed the Powell Report. The funds went to NGOs and academic organizations in the United States who were supposed to use the funds to "break the information blockade" and "empower Cuban civil society" with outreach to dissident groups. The GAO Report concluded that in addition to fiscal accountability problems and questionable expenditures, there was little evidence that any assistance actually reached dissidents in Cuba. One evident reason: the U.S. government's own restrictions on traveling and sending resources and money to Cuba. Not only, it turns out, were the restrictions harmful to the Cuban family and obviously ineffective in bringing about a change in Cuba, but now they were being seen as counterproductive. In case there was any doubt about that, the release of the GAO report was followed by a letter signed by top dissidents in Cuba, including some of those favored and supported by the hardline in Miami, saying that easing remittance and travel restrictions would help them in their work, adding that the restrictions "in no way help the struggle for democracy we wage inside our country."

That statement may well have opened the floodgates. No one in Miami is accorded more legitimacy in the anti-Castro struggle than those who are viewed as dissenters inside the island. A few days after the release of the letter, U.S. Representatives Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and Mario Díaz-Balart appeared on a popular Miami Spanish-language evening television talk show to argue for maintaining the restrictions, claiming it is the right strategy and one favored by the overwhelming majority of Cuban exiles. During the

program, the station conducted a call-in automated viewer poll and the results showed that most callers favored lifting the remittance and family travel restrictions. A few days later, a program on the same topic in a competing station was also showing the same results from viewers until the poll was cancelled by the station, allegedly because of technical difficulties.

These events were followed, late in 2006, by the statement of an umbrella group of influential and mainstream Cuban exile organizations calling itself *Consenso Cubano*. It issued a statement denouncing the restrictions by both governments on the free movement of people to and from Cuba: “measures that limit or deny Cubans their fundamental rights and liberties to travel freely in or out of Cuba for humanitarian reasons or family reunification, to have access to fluid communications, and to freely send and receive personal and family assistance, violate the fundamental rights of Cubans, harm the Cuban family, and constitute great ethical contradictions.” The signatory organizations included traditional anti-Castro groups such as the Cuban American National Foundation, Brothers to the Rescue, and *Movimiento Democracia*, and also groups supportive of the dissidents and the human rights movement in Cuba. Groups who fashion themselves as opposition parties in exile, such as the *Unión Liberal Cubana* and the *Partido Social Demócrata* also signed the document. In other words, a broad cross section of mainstream, even hardline, organizations came out against the restrictions.

If, as I have argued, U.S.-Cuba policy has been made in Miami, that is, it has been the product of the insistent interest and participation of many Cuban Americans, it would appear that at least with respect to the restrictions on the free flow of people and resources, especially family visits, remittances, and humanitarian aid, the table is now set for the success of efforts aimed at easing those restrictions in the new Democrat-controlled Congress. And it is probably from Congress that change can be most readily expected. Some longtime opponents of U.S. Cuba policy, such as Rep. Charles Rangel, John Conyers, and José Serrano, will be occupying key leadership positions, and they will be joined by some Republicans who have also been supportive of lifting restrictions.

Support for maintaining the restrictions now seems limited to the Cuban-Americans in Congress and in the Executive Branch and to orthodox hardliners in Miami. The Bush administration has shown a tendency to give great weight to the advice of those sectors of the Cuban community, especially the Cuban American members of his own party, which is why Congress is a more likely venue for change than the White House. While Congress does not typically make foreign policy, in the Cuba case there is a tradition of Congress taking matter into its own hands, as it did most notably with the passage of *Helms Burton* in 1996.

The most intriguing aspect of the recent developments in Miami is whether or not the opposition to the 2004 restrictions on family visits and remittances extends to the broader framework of U.S.-Cuba policy, notably the embargo. On the one hand one could interpret the statement by *Consenso Cubano* as simply a strategic position because the restrictions hamper the work of the dissidents and the general efforts to destabilize the

Cuban government. Support for lifting those restrictions may therefore not translate into support for lifting the embargo or for allowing U.S. tourists to travel to the island or for the reestablishment of full commercial and diplomatic relations. On that there may not be *consenso*.

On the other hand, perhaps the opposition to the restrictions may be part of a growing broader dissatisfaction among Cuban Americans with the poor results obtained by sticking to the same approach for five decades. It would be appropriate to invoke here a wonderful term used by Cuban economists in the 1990's to refer to the need for changes in the old centrally-planned system: *la agotación del modelo*. Perhaps there is a growing recognition that the longstanding approach to Cuba is indeed an exhausted model. That perception may have received a big boost when upon learning about Castro's illness, Cuban Americans found that there was little else they could do but honk their horns as they passed by the Versailles Restaurant on Calle Ocho. The realization that isolationism is a two-way street may be the most important legacy for Cuban Americans of the succession in Cuba. Such a change, if indeed it is in the offing, could have tremendous implications for U.S.-Cuba policy.