

The Cuban Democracy Movement: An Analytical Overview

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Executive Summary

Through more than 30 years of existence, the Cuban democracy movement has demonstrated a resilient capacity to both survive and expand through alternating periods of relative tolerance and brutal harassment by the State. The movement has diversified to include elements of different civil society sectors such as independent journalists, human rights groups, political parties, or labor unions. According to some reports, the movement counts with tens of thousands of supporters throughout the island. Also, the democracy movement has been able to exert influence on the state of relations between the Cuban government and the international community. These trends indicate increased activity and visibility, but they provide little insight into the movement's real ability to build a broad-based movement and influence State-society relations. With some important exceptions, Cuban democrats have been largely unable to establish strong connections with the broader population and successfully appeal for its active engagement. This paper takes a critical look at the status of the Cuban democratic movement, analyzes its strengths and weaknesses, and provides suggestions to build broad constituencies for reform.

Introduction

In his seminal book *Conflict and Change in Cuba*, the late Enrique Baloyra refers to the state of the opposition¹ in the island in 1992 in the following way: “the dominated society had yet to resurrect itself. There was no opposition leader comparable to Fidel Castro, or at least there was none capable to challenge the regime effectively or emerge as a credible alternative. Mass protests were yet to take place, and apparently opposition was a long way from reaching a level that would force the government to engage in large scale violent repression to maintain control of the street.”² In the fifteen years since that statement was made, the democracy movement has grown in size, diversity, geographical extension, international relevance, and intensity. Through the years, important milestones have helped the movement leap forward and consolidate in Cuban society. For example, during the 1999 Ibero-American Summit of Heads of State in Havana the movement gained significant international relevance when opposition leaders were able to secure meetings with a number of Heads of State. In 2002, with the delivery of more than 11,000 signatures petitioning a referendum to the National Assembly, the Varela Project boosted the movement's relevance in Cuba and abroad. Other episodes, such as the concession of the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize to Oswaldo Payá and the *Damas de Blanco*, had similar effects.

However, it is appropriate to ask ourselves how different is the situation in 2008 from the setting described by Baloyra in 1993? Two historical moments give us a hint at a possible answer. On August 5, 1994, as the worst days of the Special Period's economic crisis loomed, an event that would be known as the “*Maleconazo*” took place in Havana. One of the most serious episodes of political instability since 1959, the “*Maleconazo*” was a spontaneous outburst of thousands of people in anger protesting and chanting “*libertad*” at the centric *Avenida del Malecón*. After hours of chaotic demonstrations, the government dissolved the masses and stabilized the situation. That day and the following weeks a fragile opposition movement made no attempts to reach out, organize the population, or channel tensions into a peaceful but decisive push for change. Opposition leaders exercised prudence and considered it an impossible task at that time.

¹ In this paper I will use the terms democracy movement and internal opposition interchangeably.

² Baloyra, Enrique. 1993. “Socialist Transitions and Prospects for Change in Cuba.” In *Conflict and Change in Cuba*, Enrique Baloyra and James Morris, eds. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press. (38). As quoted in Lopez-Gottardi, Cristina. 2005. “The Growth of Opposition in Cuba: Problems and Prospects for Democratization.” Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Miami. Miami, FL. (110).

Twelve years later, on July 31st, 2006 Fidel Castro announced by surprise the transfer of power to his brother Raúl, as he was going to undergo urgent medical surgery. While the authorities sought to control the situation and even positioned military troops in strategic posts through the country, the unexpected announcement shocked the population and, naturally, generated great levels of uncertainty as to events to unfold in the following months. Time passed and the gradual succession process from brother to brother took place largely on the timing and pace of the government's choosing. Just like in 1994, the movement did not capitalize on the historic circumstances, reach out to the population, and build citizen pressure for social change. However while in 1994 the movement was weak and had no record of significant achievements, by 2006 the Varela Project had gathered over 24,000 signatures of support, the *Asamblea para la Promoción de la Sociedad Civil* (APSC) had brought together over 300 independent organizations, and a nationwide network of thousands of activists existed. Still, the movement maintained a cautious low profile and avoided public activities that could spark a confrontation with the authorities. For some observers, their restraint during that crucial phase was truly surprising, and it may have been an implicit acknowledgement that they were not confident enough to push for reforms at such a critical impasse.

Historical context

According to Enrique Pumar, Communist regimes usually face two significant waves of opposition.³ The first wave occurs early on, as the new regime settles in and seeks to consolidate power. The second wave emerges much later, once total government control begins to erode and the post-totalitarian symptoms of regime decay begin to surface. In the Cuban case, the first wave of opposition lasted approximately nine years (1959-1968). The second wave, started in 1976 with the foundation of the *Comité Cubano Pro Derechos Humanos* (CCPDH), gained momentum in the early 1990s and has lasted to this day.

The CCPDH was the seed from which the Cuban movement for democracy evolved in decades to come. Today, the community of democracy groups is the only expression of autonomous and organized civil society beyond the Catholic Church and other religious organizations. Since its surge in the early 1990s, the democracy movement has proliferated to include hundreds of civic, human rights, and political opposition organizations. These groups are relatively small in size and include approximately 15 independent press agencies, 100 independent libraries, 10 independent unions, over a dozen political parties, and hundreds of human rights organizations and independent professional associations, such as lawyers, teachers, or farmers. Evidence suggests that active democracy advocates may be estimated in the several thousands island-wide.⁴ While less than 50 acts of civil disobedience were reported in 1997, in 2003 reports totaled more than 1,300 episodes, and during 2006 the movement conducted over 2,300 acts of nonviolent protest and resistance.⁵ This trend indicates a phenomenal increase in activity and visibility; yet, it says little of the movement's relative effectiveness. Comparatively, the Cuban democracy movement is significantly larger in size than many of its counterparts in Eastern Europe in the 1980s. However, the movement has faced a

³ Pumar, Enrique. 1999. "The Internal Opposition and Civil Society: An Assessment." In *Cuba in Transition*, vol. 9, Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy, eds. Washington, DC: Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy.

⁴ The estimate is based on showings of support for different initiatives at different moments in time. The *Ayuno Vida y Libertad* included over 5,000 participants in 1999, the Varela Project gathered over 24,000 signatures in 2002, the *Corriente Socialdemócrata Cubana's* consultation on human rights gathered opinions from over 30,000 Cubans in 2003, and FLAMUR's petition on a single currency gathered over 10,000 signatures in 2007.

⁵ Directorio Democrático Cubano. 2007. *Steps to Freedom*. Miami, Rhodes Printing.

number of chronic challenges that have impeded more durable and effective impact, such as limited organizational, communications, mobility, and coordination capacity; limited strategic planning; ineffective use of social marketing techniques; the presence of infiltrators and suspicion of fellow activists; self-censorship; and plain fear. While none of these limitations are exclusive of the Cuban case, they have certainly conditioned the capacity of the Cuban movement. Moreover, the opposition has faced the need to chronically regenerate layers of activists, as scores of them either go to jail or exile from Cuba in physical and mental exhaustion. Given these and other constraints, the movement periodically fluctuates from a defensive stage, where it fights to survive as it reacts to the government's strikes, to a stage of emergence and consolidation, where it proactively engages the authorities in a struggle for sociopolitical change.

To date, the democracy initiative most successful in incorporating the participation of the average citizen has been the Varela Project. Led by Oswaldo Payá, the Varela Project brought together 150 democracy groups to gather 10,000 signatures in support of a call for a referendum. In total the petition drive collected more than 24,000 valid signatures, an unimaginable feat up to that moment. Fearful of such success, in March 2003 the government launched the most brutal crackdown against the democracy movement in decades, imprisoning almost 80 leading democracy advocates for a combined total of over 1,400 years in prison. As a result of the clampdown, the burgeoning democracy movement was forced back into a stage of mere survival. Since 2003 the movement has regained presence throughout the island and its relevance and visibility abroad has skyrocketed. New independent journalists have substituted those imprisoned, new independent libraries have opened, and new cadres have appeared nationwide to replace grassroots activists in prison. On May 20, 2005 the APSC organized an unprecedented opposition congress in the outskirts of Havana, with over 100 activists meeting for two days. In 2006 Oswaldo Payá's *Movimiento Cristiano Liberación* (MCL) released the results of the National Dialogue project, a plan of transition based on the input of over 5,000 citizens. More remarkably, since 2003 a group of women relatives of political prisoners known as the *Damas de Blanco* has demonstrated every Sunday morning in the streets of Havana's Miramar neighborhood demanding the release of their relatives. Always dressed in their characteristic white clothes and holding *gladiolos* on their hands, they have also taken their public protests to other centric areas of Havana, including Vedado, Habana Vieja, the Council of State, and the Ministry of Interior.

After the announcement of Fidel Castro's illness in July 2006 the whole country paused as it witnessed the historic transfer of power to Raúl Castro. The opposition movement was no different. The *Damas de Blanco* continued their weekly demonstrations undeterred. However, for several months most groups went into a wait-and-see mode, waiting for events to unfold. Expectations for an opposition upsurge during that historic period were unmet. Democracy groups moved cautiously, reportedly deterred by increased government monitoring, threats, and harassment.⁶ The democratic leadership made a valuable effort towards unity by signing the *Unidad por la Libertad* declaration. However, as months passed the document's intentions remained largely rhetorical and little practical result came out of it. In 2007 the movement caught its breath once again and increased the intensity of its activism. One of the most outstanding developments during the year was the creation of the *Consejo de Relatores de Derechos Humanos*, a well-coordinated nationwide network of activists monitoring and reporting on human rights violations. Another extraordinary campaign was the *Federación Latinoamericana de Mujeres Rurales*' (FLAMUR) *Una Misma Moneda*, a year-long campaign that gathered over 10,000 signatures of concerned citizens requesting the abolition of the Peso Convertible and the strengthening of the Peso Moneda Nacional (MN).

⁶ Directorio Democrático Cubano. 2007. *Steps to Freedom*. Miami, Rhodes Printing. (5)

SWOT Analysis

To analyze the movement we may benefit from using an analytical tool known as SWOT. The SWOT is a strategy planning tool commonly used by public and private organizations to identify and evaluate the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) involved in a project or a business venture. The SWOT helps identify and visualize the internal and external factors that are favorable and unfavorable to achieving a particular objective. The participatory nature of SWOT makes it an ideal tool for a group to work together in identifying problems and solutions to its work.

In general terms, the democracy movement must be recognized for the extraordinary resilience and rejuvenation power it has demonstrated. As is the case in any asymmetrical conflict, mere survival in front of a phenomenal adversary such as the Cuban government may be a nonviolent movement's greatest achievement. However, the movement has historically fallen short when it comes to mobilizing its own constituency. The opposition's capacity to connect with the average citizen and stimulate engagement has been weak. Through time the movement has found itself much more focused on condemning the government's violations than constructing a broad base of popular support and appealing for citizen engagement and participation. While clearly there are legitimate and understandable reasons for that (such as constant repression and harassment, social ostracism, psychological isolation, fear, suspicion, self-censorship, etc), the reality is that the movement has yet to become a "preferable alternative"⁷ for the average Cuban.

STRENGTHS

Survival and resilience capacity

As is the case in similar struggles for social change, the Cuban democracy movement is outmuscled and outnumbered by the government. Becoming a public activist requires enormous courage, commitment, and determination to accept the challenges ahead. Democracy activists are socially marginalized, banned from State sector jobs and other means of employment, commonly denied access to the education system and in some cases health care attention, they are subject to arbitrary arrest, imprisonment, and other forms of persecution, and their families are subject to constant arbitrary harassment. Still, through more than 30 years of existence the movement has been able to rise from the ashes after every wave of repression. In 1976, the creation of the CCPDH was a direct result of repression during the 1968 Microfaction affair.⁸ In 1996, after the *Concilio Cubano* crackdown and the shoot down of the Brothers to the Rescue planes over the Florida straits, the movement resurged and gained great prominence during the 1999 Ibero-American Summit in Havana. Earlier that year, it had carried out the *Ayuno Vida y Libertad* with the participation of over 5,000 people throughout the country. As a response to the Varela Project's success, the March 2003

⁷ Przeworski, Adam. 1986. "Some Problems in the Study of Transitions to Democracy." In Transitions from Authoritarian Rule Comparative Perspectives, Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead, eds. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press. According to Przeworski, "regimes change not when they lose legitimacy but when a viable, preferable alternative becomes available."

⁸ In 1968, 36 members of the Communist Party were tried and condemned for "counterrevolutionary activities and enemy propaganda," in what was known as the Microfaction Affair. This was one of the most visible episodes of intra-elite dissent. Those condemned were seeking to *perfeccionar la Revolución*. They had held informal meetings to discuss Castro's cult of personality and the need to replicate in Cuba the economic reforms pursued in the Soviet Union, which Castro opposed. CCPDH founder, Ricardo Bofill, was among those condemned.

crackdown brought to jail 75 of the most capable civic leaders in the movement. Only six months later the Varela Project countered by delivering a second batch of 14,000 new signatures and the *Damas de Blanco* were formed to become a formidable advocate for the release of political prisoners.

The movement is not only challenged by State repression, but also by the effects of chronic migration and exile. Still today the most common choice of those Cubans dissatisfied with the status quo is not to stay in Cuba to contribute to change, but to exit the island and look for a better future elsewhere. This larger social dynamic has a strong impact on the movement. Drove of rank-and-file activists have departed to exile after suffering years of harassment, ostracism, and imprisonment. Many prominent leaders such as CCPDH founder Ricardo Bofill, independent journalist and poet Raúl Rivero, or labor leader Pedro Pablo Álvarez have also exiled through the years. In such trying circumstances, the movement's capacity to periodically renew its ranks with new blood is of enormous merit.

Moral authority

The democracy movement is winning the moral struggle for “the hearts and minds” both inside Cuba and abroad. Despite the government's accusations of activists being terrorists on the payroll of the US Government, the record has amply demonstrated the movement is genuinely Cuban, nonviolent, and advocating for a peaceful transition to a democratic system. Some civic initiatives have had a large symbolic impact. Thanks to *Radio Bemba* (word-of-mouth), the extensive presence of satellite TV antennas in parts of the country, and, ironically, the negative but insistent coverage of some government media outlets, sustained civic initiatives such as the Varela Project, the *Damas de Blanco*, or Guillermo Fariñas' hunger strike demanding access to internet have become well-known in many quarters on the island. These events showed determination, confidence, strategic value, and a high degree of moral authority.

The sheer brutality of episodes such as the March 2003 crackdown has helped drive an important wedge between the Cuban government and public opinion in Cuba and abroad, including a portion of its traditional supporters. According to two surveys, sympathy inside Cuba towards democracy groups is considerable. In 2005 a poll by the Spanish NGO *Solidaridad Española con Cuba* found that 68% of respondents believed the government should allow the *Damas de Blanco* to protest in public areas (an additional 23% of respondents were undecided), and 53% admitted to sympathizing with the Varela Project. In 2007, a similar poll by the US NGO International Republican Institute found that 60.1% of respondents would prefer to vote for “a leading member of the internal opposition” rather than Raúl Castro in a future Presidential election.⁹ At the international level, surveys have found Fidel Castro to be one of the least liked world leaders in Spain and Latin America.¹⁰ Public figures friendly to the government such as Cuban artist Pablo Milanes and author Jose Saramago

⁹ Solidaridad Española con Cuba. <http://www.solidaridadconcuba.com/noticias/encuesta.htm>. International Republican Institute.

<http://www.iri.org/lac/cuba/pdfs/2008%20June%205%20Survey%20of%20Cuban%20Public%20Opinion,%20March%2014-April%2012,%202008.pdf>

¹⁰ According to the Latinobarómetro surveys, in 2007 Fidel Castro was the less liked Latin American leader for Latin Americans, and in 2008 the second less liked for Spaniards. ElPais.com. “Chávez supera a Bush como líder extranjero peor valorado en España.” 28 Mayo 2008.

http://www.elpais.com/articulo/internacional/Chavez/supera/Bush/lider/extranjero/peor/valorado/Espana/elpepuint/20080529elpepuint_14/Tes. Noticias24.com. “Latinbarómetro: Castro y Chávez, los peor evaluados de América Latina.” 16 Noviembre, 2007. <http://www.noticias24.com/actualidad/?p=9767&cp=2>

have openly expressed their condemnation of human rights violations in Cuba. A similar case is that of the protest letter organized by the web magazine *Encuentro de la Cultura Cubana* in the aftermath of the 2003 crackdown, which was signed by a number of public figures who have historically sympathized with the Revolution, such as Pedro Almodóvar, Joaquín Sabina, Joan Manuel Serrat, or Ana Belén.

Transnational solidarity and support networks

In the past 6-8 years international solidarity towards the movement has solidified enormously, as illustrated by a good number of important public recognitions and awards, such as the two Sakharov Prizes awarded by the European Parliament to Oswaldo Payá and the *Damas de Blanco* in 2002 and 2005, respectively. Particularly in Europe, the days when mentioning “Cuba” and “human rights violations” in the same phrase raised skeptical eyebrows are for the most part long gone. Solidarity is strong, it has diversified beyond Exile entities and “usual suspects” such as the Spanish conservatives, and it has a serious impact on Cuba’s foreign policy towards partners in Europe and the Americas. The government’s diplomatic relations with numerous international actors must always include a human rights and democracy component, much to the chagrin of the government.

The most tangible output of international solidarity is the progressive build up of a transnational network of solidarity groups spanning Europe, the US, and Latin America. Their surge came about particularly after the 2003 crackdown, which opened the eyes of many people abroad to the realities of repression in Cuba. Currently dozens of organizations in these regions provide some form of support for peaceful change in Cuba, be it through moral solidarity, advocacy and media initiatives, education and transfer of information, or other means. These networks have also been crucial in delivering sustained humanitarian assistance to Cubans. Given that most activists and their families are expelled from their jobs and excluded from other means of subsistence, external humanitarian assistance is often the only lifeline available to activists for their daily survival. Assistance may come from relatives in Exile, private donations, or humanitarian aid from NGOs primarily in the US and Europe.

WEAKNESSES

Weak connection to the average citizen

While Cubans desire change, they are generally too atomized, apathetic, or fearful to demand it and they see no available platforms to pursue it. Up to date, the movement has not been effective at engaging average Cubans as active constituencies for change. In contrast to those involved in the Microfaction Affair in 1968 and the Ochoa case in 1989,¹¹ the movement stands at and breathes from the grassroots level of society. While some leaders have come from within the system (Vladimiro Roca, Oscar Espinosa Chepe, or Marta Beatriz Roque), the movement is largely led by common folks like Oswaldo Payá, José Luis García Pérez Antúnez, Juan Carlos González Leyva,

¹¹ In 1989, Arnaldo Ochoa, a revered military general, “Hero of the Revolution,” and member of the Communist Party’s Central Committee for more than twenty years, was accused of serious acts of corruption, dishonest use of economic resources, and drug trafficking. He was condemned during a televised trial and executed after being found guilty of treason. Other prominent military, among them brothers Tony and Patricio de la Guardia, were also condemned during the case. It is widely assumed in both Cuba and abroad that Fidel Castro perceived General Ochoa as a sympathizer of the Soviet perestroika and a serious threat to his power.

and many others at the base who have always been disenfranchised. Yet, with some notable exceptions, Cuban democrats have been generally unable to incorporate the average citizen as active supporters. On one side, the government has been quite effective at demonizing and ostracizing them; on the other side, the movement has not engaged sufficiently in reaching out to the population to dismantle propagandistic stereotypes.

Of particular note is the disconnect from receptive social sectors such as the youth. Since the 1980s deep disenchantment with the promises of the Revolution has fueled the increasing de-socialization of Cuban youth. The surge in the 1990s of youth underground subcultures such as the *frikis* and the rappers is testament to the imperative desires to find an alternative self-identity and socialization. In 2006 Fidel Castro warned of the urgent need to recapture youth into the Revolution, a call that his brother Raúl has highlighted since taking power. The recent and well-publicized incident at the *Universidad de las Ciencias Informáticas* (UCI), where Ricardo Alarcón, the President of the National Assembly, faced unprecedented incisive questioning on inconsistencies of the system, serves to highlight the level of frustration among youth. However, the movement appears to have done only timid efforts to understand and capitalize from the political disengagement of youth. The opposition speaks a political language that youth tend to dismiss as over-politicized or “*la otra cara de la misma moneda*” (the other face of the same coin). Some democratic leaders even admit that they simply “do not know how to connect with youth because there is a generational gap that they are unable to bridge.”¹² As a result, still today the most common choice of disenchanted young (and adult) Cubans is not to participate in the push for reform but, rather, to somehow accommodate to a life of *doble moral* or opt for exiting the country.

“Internal exile” hinders outreach

In his paper *La Sociedad Civil en Cuba: Exilio Interno*, Javier Corrales presents the concept of “internal exile” to shed light into the nature of independent organizations in Cuba. For Corrales, “*al igual que el exilio (externo), las asociaciones [independientes] en Cuba brindan a los disidentes cubanos la posibilidad de encontrar un refugio, un respaldo, un albergue. Más aún, brindan un ámbito -limitado pero real- donde ejercer la voz.*”¹³ In other words, democracy groups have a crucial function of building up social capital among activists, creating a sense of belonging and protective brotherhood that helps them go through the hardships of dissident life. As Corrales notes, the camaraderie that develops “*es saludable en todo sistema político, pero insuficiente para democratizar al país.*”¹⁴ A strong sense of internal loyalty and bonding is formed but, by the same token, a lack of trust towards outsiders develops. Such feeling of “us against them” often leads to a “bunker mentality” that plays an important role in maintaining commitment and motivation but, at the same time, hinders the activist’s capacity to relate to non-activists and build bridges with them.

It is because of the “bunker mentality” that sometimes activists feel as if they are the only ones willing to take a stand in their society. This is not a result of arrogance or elitism in any way, shape

¹² Havana-based leader of a main democracy organization. Interview with the author.

¹³ Corrales, Javier. 2004. “La Sociedad Civil en Cuba: Exilio Interno.” Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. Washington, DC. Translation: “Just as it happens in the (external) exile, [independent] associations in Cuba provide dissidents with the possibility to find refuge, support, a home. Even beyond that, they also provide a limited but real environment where they can exercise their Voice.”

¹⁴ Corrales, Javier. 2004. “La Sociedad Civil en Cuba: Exilio Interno.” Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. Washington, DC. Translation: “it is healthy in all types of political systems, but insufficient to democratize the country.”

or form. Rather, it comes from the empirical conclusion that the average Cuban is generally too afraid or apathetic to “get involved.” Such assumption is probably true in many cases. However, it may also lead activists to develop a “martyr mindset” of sorts, under which “the odds are so overwhelmingly against us that the only thing we can do is to at least show our courage and determination.” Activists expect such courage to generate admiration (and subsequent active support) among the population; in practice, it does generate admiration but it also scares away the average Cuban, who associates activism with subscribing to permanent suffering and harassment for no tangible result.

The “martyr mindset” dismisses the general population as a player in the equation for power. It contributes to create a strong social bond between fellow activists based on trust, loyalty, and camaraderie. That social bond strengthens the core but weakens the links to the average citizen. Often times the opposition is perceived as if it existed in a vacuum, in an imaginary boxing match against the authorities with the population as passive spectators. The population needs to be brought back into the equation. The opposition should avoid behaving as a *fuera de choque*¹⁵ going head to head against the government. The opposition’s strategy should seek to impact government policy not only through direct confrontation, but also by incorporating broad-based citizen engagement effecting targeted pressure on the government to change behavior. Ultimately, no nonviolent social movement stands a chance against an authoritarian system until it wins the willful participation of the average citizen.

Underdeveloped organizational structures

As is the case for many other social movements in authoritarian environments (e.g. Uzbekistan, Zimbabwe, Vietnam, Belarus, etc.), Cuban democracy groups generally possess weak organizational structures that increase their vulnerability to repression. Many are loosely organized while others, interestingly, possess countless position titles and departments with little practical utility given the small size of organizations. Roles and responsibilities are often vaguely or informally defined only informally and the leadership style in some groups is excessively personalistic.

The harsh environment is obviously a deterrent to the neat set up of organizations. In Cuba it is impossible to have office spaces, membership recruitment is dangerous, open advocacy is illegal, and constant harassment makes the coordination of tasks extremely challenging. Resources that are taken for granted in other places (such as paper, pens, laptops, phones, and other ordinary office devices) are unavailable, illegal, or extremely expensive. A factor that is virtually impossible to address by the groups is sustainability. Hardly surprising, the authorities routinely cut activists off economic opportunities and force them to depend on the assistance of external actors such as family, friends, and international NGOs.

In general terms, organizations are caught up in the grind of daily survival and, consequently, spend little to no time on strategic planning, analyzing their own strengths and weaknesses or those of the State, understanding what makes their target constituencies tick, or designing initiatives that appeal said target constituencies. Coalition-building capacity is weak. While groups may be able to align around common goals, they are rarely able to coordinate common action. Activist recruitment appears to depend excessively on strong links of interpersonal trust, which minimizes the risk of infiltration but also reduces the capacity to reach larger and diversified pools of people.

¹⁵ Translation: “assault force.”

Communications continue to be a serious challenge for democracy groups. E-mail, phone, and fax are either insecure or unreliable, and transportation is either unavailable or excessively expensive. Certain disconnect between activists in Havana and those in the rural areas continues to exist, as the latter often feel orphan from and forgotten by the more visible activists in the capital city.

The Varela Project was a rare example of organizational strength. The surprising success of the petition drive can be at least partly attributed to several key factors related to organizational and strategic issues, such as the representative and shared leadership structure of *Todos Unidos* (the platform behind the petition drive); the consensus around one specific and recognizable objective, which allowed for easier coordination and networking; and the legal quality of the initiative, which endowed the Project with systemic legitimacy. Another positive example is the *Consejo de Relatores de Derechos Humanos*. The Consejo has a well-defined decentralized structure of activists monitoring and reporting violations. The network appears to be well-coordinated among provincial representatives. Its good work became evident during the episode of Alarcón's visit to the UCI. A few days after the clandestine video of the Q&A broke out, the mother of one of the students appearing in the clip notified the *Consejo* that the State Security had picked up her son. The *Consejo* moved swiftly to report on the government's action, forcing the authorities to quickly come out with a public statement explaining that the student was not detained but, rather, he was being taken to an interview on State TV in Havana to "clarify" his remarks in the video.

Strategic planning and tactical variety

Most organizations have a sense of a vision for a better Cuba but they rarely organize their initiatives within the parameters of carefully designed strategies or campaigns. Groups tend to focus exclusively on tactical initiatives with little strategic vision behind them. They have a natural tendency to implement actions based more on instincts than strategic logic. This affects both the strategic value of actions as well as the effectiveness of their implementation, limiting the overall impact of otherwise courageous actions and initiatives.

There has been little effort placed on diversifying tactics and customizing them to target different audiences. If we take a look at Steps to Freedom 2006, we see that out of approximately 1,800 resistance activities reported as organized by democracy groups that year, 1,314 are categorized as *vigilias* and *reuniones* (vigils and meetings), which normally take place inside homes of opposition activists and have reduced public impact. While there are over 20 different types of activities reported, the top 5 activities (*vigilias*, *reuniones*, *ayunos*, *declaraciones*, and *misas*) cover over 85% (1,580 activities) of the total activities.¹⁶ There has also been a lack of attention to message development. The movement's message has remained basic and static: freedom, human rights, and democracy. While, clearly, these are correctly the overall goals of the movement, honing the message to appeal different social groups is crucial to successful outreach. As Damián Fernández notes, "decades of coerced participation in a hyperpoliticized environment have led to widespread political exhaustion."¹⁷ Short-term, "bread and butter" concerns such as housing, food availability, and transportation are in the minds of most Cubans. Thus, focusing on highly political issues that are detached from the daily experiences of regular Cubans may be considered a strategic weakness.

¹⁶ Directorio Democrático Cubano. 2007. *Steps to Freedom*. Miami, Rhodes Printing. (16).

¹⁷ In Gonzalez, Edward. 2004. *Cuba After Castro: Legacies, Challenges, and Impediments*. Santa Monica, CA, RAND Corporation. (43).

To be sure, there have been a number of well-planned, strategically and tactically sound initiatives. One of the groups that have demonstrated greater tactical and strategic skill has been the *Damas de Blanco*. For a number of years the *Damas* limited their public activism to a set of routine activities on Sundays. However, since 2005 they have diversified the type, timing, and location of activities beyond their standard Sunday demonstrations, thus introducing an element of surprise that has effectively given them a psychological and symbolic edge over the authorities. They have been proactive at using public spaces to promote their message, making sure all their activities include their recognizable branding elements: white clothes and *gladiolos*. Often they have sought to engage passers-by and observers during their public activities, sharing with them flowers or white pins and breaking the psychological distance between them. Strategically, they are disciplined in maintaining their actions and public statements to the parameters of their essential demand: the liberation of political prisoners. Their name-recognition has grown through the years. Field research conducted by *Solidaridad Española con Cuba* in 2005 and by Freedom House in 2008 indicates that a sizeable portion of Cubans (at least in Havana) recognize the name of the *Damas*.¹⁸

Another successful campaign was FLAMUR's *Una Misma Moneda*, a year-long campaign that gathered over 10,000 signatures of concerned citizens requesting the abolition of the Peso Convertible and the strengthening of the Peso Moneda Nacional. FLAMUR was able to strike the right note by developing a whole campaign around a key "bread and butter" concern for most Cubans: the enormous devaluation of the Peso Moneda Nacional, the currency with which most Cubans get paid.

OPPORTUNITIES

Decreased loyalties towards the government during the transitional uncertainty

The current process of transition provides a unique window of opportunity to the movement to exert a decisive push for reform. With an elite transition in motion, popular expectations for real and tangible reforms are enormous, to the point that satisfying them without weakening the government's grip on power might prove to be an impossible task. Up to date, Cubans appear to consider Raúl's measures as insufficient to address the grave social and economic problems they face. While Cubans hope for real reforms, they remain highly skeptical and distrustful of Raúl's real intentions. Already in the 1980s and 1990s Cubans were deeply disappointed at processes of apparent reform that ended up in increased repression and centralization. In recent months a number of incidents with little precedent have vividly illustrated the fervent desire for change in the island. These incidents indicate that at least some Cubans have begun to shed their fear to speak up in public about their concerns on socioeconomic matters. Most visible among them was the aforementioned incident at the *Universidad de las Ciencias Informáticas* (UCI) in February 2008. A few weeks earlier, during a government meeting with workers employed by ACOREC,¹⁹ workers erupted in loud protests as new taxes on hard currency tips were announced. Subsequently, Cuban employees at the German embassy circulated an open letter via e-mail protesting the measures. In similar fashion, during the 7th Congress of the National Union of Artists and Writers (UNEAC) last April, a number of prominent artists and intellectuals (among them historian Eusebio Leal and painter Kcho) questioned the validity of some of the limitations on travel, communications, and

¹⁸ Solidaridad Española con Cuba. <http://www.solidaridadconcuba.com/noticias/encuesta.htm>; Freedom House. May 2008. Unpublished field research note.

¹⁹ State employment agency in charge of providing Cuban workers to companies with joint foreign investment.

property rights. Other official institutions, such as *Juventud Rebelde* or *Revista Temas* heeded Raúl Castro's calls for increased criticism and transparency with poignant articles on critical issues that are usually taboo in the official media. While these are not signs of liberalization and some observers question their authenticity, these are important symptoms that loyalties within the official institutions might be significantly affected by the dynamics of the succession process.

Restless and creative youth are yearning for an alternative future

Expectations for reform during the post-Fidel era increase bottom-up pressures on the government. This is particularly true of youth, who have their whole life ahead of them and are eager to see Cuba transform into a place where they can pursue their aspirations. For approximately 30 years, sectors of Cuba's youth have defied the dictates of the government through de-socialization and passive engagement in the system.²⁰ While confrontation has rarely existed, many youth have either created parallel social circles or have sought to leave the country into exile. Youth are typically alienated from the realm of politics, both official and opposition, and as such tend to turn down approaches by activists from the democracy movement. They are not necessarily fearful; rather, they are frozen by apathy, hopeless about the available political options, and consumed by an ingrained *cortoplacismo*²¹ that makes them worry more about short-term individualistic concerns than common goals for the future. Yet, experience from elsewhere clearly indicates that youth are of critical significance during processes of social change. If they were to perceive the existence of viable alternative political forces, youth may reengage to seek a better future for themselves and the country they love. The Cuban government is aware of these dynamics. Very strategically, for years it has opened cultural and social spaces within the parameters of the Revolution to persuade youth away from uncontrolled alternative lifestyles. The government has pledged to put the *Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas* (UJC) and the *Federación de Estudiantes Universitarios* (FEU) more in tune with the realities of Cuban youth, they have created MTV-style TV shows and festivals, and they have established entities such as the Agencia Cubana de Rap, a government-organized institution formed in the late 1990s to channel the production and commercialization of Cuban rap music. The government will also try to accommodate to expectations of increased availability of material goods. However, while some youth might be satisfied with increased opportunities for consumerism, others will remain frustrated by the strict sociopolitical parameters maintained by the Revolution. This gap will be an important window of opportunity for the movement.

THREATS

The movement remains cautious during the succession/transition window of opportunity

The most important threat to the democracy movement is the movement itself. In almost 24 months since the transfer of power they have demonstrated only isolated signs of self-confidence. Key leadership actors have maintained a wait-and-see mode, maybe trying to monitor the pace of Raúl's reforms. The words and actions of the opposition have been of only relative consequence to the succession environment. For all intents and purposes, the government has been able to manage the succession process at a pace and timing of its own choosing. In the next 12-18 months the

²⁰ Fernández, Damián. 1993. "Youth in Cuba: Resistance and Accommodation." In *Conflict and Change in Cuba*, Enrique Baloyra and James Morris, eds. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press. Gonzalez, Edward. 2004. *Cuba After Castro: Legacies, Challenges, and Impediments*. Santa Monica, CA, RAND Corporation.

²¹ Translation: "short-term mentality."

government may seek to intensify the economic liberalization process, which may open new avenues to reach out to sectors of the population and build bottom-up pressures. An important sector to monitor will be that of the *cuentapropistas*, who are desperately waiting for a liberalization of their tight regulatory framework. The movement must become a resource for *cuentapropistas* and other sectors in protecting their interests during this time of increased dynamism.

Raúl Castro succeeds in alleviating short-term pressures for change

There is wide consensus that the short-term priorities for most Cubans are meaningful reforms in the economic realm, leaving reforms in the political arena as a secondary concern. The government understands this reality and has launched a series of measures that address some of the immediate social and economic concerns of the population. So far he has liberalized and decentralized the agricultural sector; allowed the sale of cell phones, computers, DVDs, and certain home appliances; allowed Cubans to stay at tourist hotels and rent tourist cars; increased pensions and salaries in some economic sectors; and liberalized property rights over cars and homes. Some expect that Cubans will soon be allowed to travel internationally and that the regulatory framework for *cuentapropistas* will be liberalized.

Raúl's reforms were in large part intended to alleviate internal pressures for change once Fidel was out of power. So far, the long-term impact of the reforms is debatable. While some of the measures may have significant potential effects, their real impact will be thwarted until structural reforms are passed. Key among these is balancing the tremendous disparity between consumer prices and real income. However, in the short-term, if the reforms have the expected psychosocial effect they may satisfy immediate expectations, reduce internal tensions, and decrease the motivation among some sectors to push for difficult long-term structural reforms. In this scenario, mounting support for the democracy movement might be even more difficult than it has been to date.

European Union-Cuba dialogue process

The European Union, led by the Spanish government, might be able to pull important agreements from their Cuban counterparts during the renewed bilateral dialogue process. So far Spain has been able to get Cuba to sign the UN's two key treaties on human rights: the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. It has also obtained the liberation of several political prisoners, even though these were immediately forced into exile. Also, Martin Schulz, the leading German social democrat at the European Parliament, has proposed the opening of a Havana office for the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, as a sign of goodwill. While some of these moves could have positive implications for the democracy movement, the dialogue process is a double-edged sword. The historical record gives ample evidence of the Cuban government's mastery at reaping political benefits while ceding minimal concessions during diplomatic processes. If inadequately handled by the EU, the dialogue may allow an easier environment for the government to stabilize internal pressures for structural change and maintain dissent at a controlled and manageable level.

Conclusion

Against all odds, the Cuban movement for democracy has been able to carve a solid space that the government is simply not able to eliminate. The mere fact of having survived three decades of harsh repression may well be considered a phenomenal success. The opposition has demonstrated a strong

capacity to regenerate after serious setbacks, grow in size and geographic presence, increase the intensity of its actions every year, and even take the government by surprise with the success of some of its initiatives. This was the case of the Varela Project, the *Ayuno Vida y Libertad*, the demonstrations of the *Damas de Blanco*, or the APSC Congress in 2005. In the Cuban environment, these are indeed evident indications of success. However, the movement is clearly not yet close to accomplishing its mission of achieving sweeping and systemic social, political, and economic reforms.

The movement must grow to become a credible threat to the status quo. The opposition is not yet a major concern for the survival of the system. Even though the authorities cannot eliminate them, the stability of the system is not directly threatened by the existence and the activities of the movement. There has been clearly an increase in the reported events of civil disobedience, as evidenced in the Steps to Freedom reports. However, increased action does not necessarily imply an increase in impact. Still today, a large part of reported opposition and civic activities take place in enclosed spaces and among democracy activists. Without a doubt, these events are courageous and valuable, particularly to build internal solidarity among activists. Yet, their impact beyond the activist community is often smaller than desired.

To a large extent, the streets still “belong to the Revolution.” The *Damas de Blanco* are among a few cases of successful capture of public spaces. While there have been many courageous and bold efforts to demonstrate publicly, these tend to be of a small size, very localized, and violently suppressed by government-organized mobs or State security. The opposition should examine this reality, try to identify strategies and tactics with public impact that minimize physical confrontation, and design appealing messages to be more effective in this regard. Clearly this is no easy task, but to build a social base it is imperative that the population stops perceiving the opposition as “the suffering side.” Ultimately, the purpose of public actions is to solidify a base of support at the grassroots through visibility and the stimulation of an image of success, of possibility, sending the message to the population that 1) supporting the movement is the correct thing to do, and that 2) “it is possible” to succeed at demonstrating peacefully and publicly.

Ultimately, the medium-term objective of the movement should be to inspire trust and confidence among average Cubans that the movement is indeed a preferable alternative for the future. The movement has not yet achieved such status. To get there it must be able to mobilize and capture public spaces. Particularly in the past 2 years Cubans have become more defiant and restless. Criticism, including that of a political nature, is increasingly common in cities and other highly populated areas (and less so in small communities). Individual acts of defiance such as illegal economic schemes and the use of illegal satellite and internet connections indicate a predisposition to defy abusive and absurd laws and regulations. Everyday defiance is so commonplace that, in some cases, the tables have turned and the government has opted for accommodating to the social realities. For example, last April the government announced the launch of a new 24-hour TV channel exclusively with foreign content, with the hopes that it will reduce the appeal of illegal satellite antennas among the population. The movement has yet to seriously capitalize on these new dynamics, which could bring them one step closer to broadening the active constituencies for reform.