

Social Explosion in Cuba: The Ignored Signals

July 21, 2021



Alina Barbara López Hernández is a historian, university professor and a friend. Her contributions to La Joven Cuba, one of the most important blogs in the island have been enormous because of her intelligence, political culture, integrity, and courage in the face of a difficult political situation. - Samuel Farber

It hurts to see the social explosion in Cuba; however, it is not at all surprising. The social sciences may not be exact, but they are not blind. If those in power close their eyes to reality, we women and men of science must not do so. Our credibility and, more importantly, the lives of many people and the future of the country are at stake.

The Signals

In an interview for *On Cuba* a little over a year ago, Alex Fleites asked me if I believed that a new historical moment was incubating on the island and what would be its most visible signs. This was my answer:

Yes, I think. A crisis is not a crisis until social actors become aware of it; that's when the subjective factor is decisive. It is a kind of malaise of the times, to put it in a way that some critics will find metaphorical. It is almost always related to the exhaustion of a model, note that I am not talking about a system (...).

In my opinion, there are two determining factors that have led to this moment of malaise. On the one hand, the inability of our rulers to channel a successful reform path. It has been more than three decades since the collapse of the socialist camp and two periods of attempted reforms, one in the 1990s and another since 2010, the latter including in a formal way and with a large amount of supporting documentation. On the other hand, there is the ability of citizens to submit this incapacity to public judgment, which is something new. The breakdown of a one-way information channel makes the warning signs visible. And those in power are well aware of this, but have been unable to respond adequately.

My view is that we are witnessing the definitive exhaustion of an economic and political model, that

of bureaucratic socialism. Those in power are unable to move the nation forward with the old methods, but are unable to accept more participatory forms, with a greater weight of citizens in decision making.

Twelve months later, I published in *La Joven Cuba* the article "Cuba, the trees and the forest", where I stated:

In Cuba, the objective conditions for a transformation have been mature for some time. There is no doubt that the nation has stopped moving forward: the economy has not been growing for years, the foreign debt is steadily increasing, as are poverty levels, and yet reforms have been inexplicably delayed. It is clear that those at the top can no longer administer and govern as before. But what about those below?

Without the maturation of the subjective factor, such a transformation was not possible. It required the will of the people to want to change, a civic energy that had been crushed by political, educational and media conditioning. "Learned helplessness" also exists in a socialist model in which the system controls to some extent how its citizens behave.

In the absence of the subjective factor, objective conditions alone would determine nothing. However, there are now very clear signs of its existence. Such signs have not been understood by the ideological apparatus, which wrongly reduces the manifestations of discontent to "a soft coup," to "widespread manipulation," or to "the creation of negative opinion matrices about the government"; without my categorical denial that this is also happening. The leadership of the country has not yet located itself in:

- The new environment created by mass access to the Internet and social networks, which has deprived them of the absolute monopoly on information they had for decades and democratized its dissemination and generated the possibility of campaigns and denunciations of arbitrariness.
- A state of permanent polemic, visible in the networks and fomented by the country's own leadership as a result of the popular consultation to draft the new Constitution; perhaps they thought that once the consultation was over and our views were no longer needed, we would stop offering them, naive on their part, we now have the means and don't need their calls.
- The declaration of Cuba as a Socialist State under the Rule of Law, which made the prerogatives of Cuban men and women more visible and forced them to demand the freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution itself.
- The existence of young generations, questioning in themselves, which found repercussions in the older generations, already tired of unfulfilled promises and delayed or interrupted reforms.

This coexistence of objective and subjective conditions for social transformation is completely new in the evolution of the Cuban socialist model. The question at stake now is not whether to change, but how to change (...)

At the point where Cuba finds itself today, there are two paths to social change: peaceful or violent. The first, to which I fully subscribe, would mean taking advantage of legal spaces - many of which would have to be created first - to press for economic, political, and legal changes within a national dialogue in which there is no discrimination based on political creed (...)

I warn that this is a very serious moment in this country. A potential for conflict is gathering in a scenario that is being very badly analyzed, not only by the government, but also, unfortunately, by intellectuals and social scientists whose theoretical training and ability to interpret social facts should separate them from a merely ideological statement (...).

They are our girls and boys, let's dialogue with them and with the Cuban civil society that desires paths of change and peace. If the government chooses violent confrontation as a response, what we have already seen in Vedado can happen on a larger scale: a peaceful group of young people being assaulted with pepper spray; or what happened in Parque de la Libertad in Matanzas on Saturday night: a small group being assaulted by members of the State Security. It doesn't matter that they prevent access to the Internet for a few hours. Everything is known, and everything is prosecuted.

My conscience does not allow me to remain silent.

The Result

The intellectuals who for months warned the government about the possibility of a social explosion of greater magnitude were called mercenaries. The party and the government apparatus negligently ignored the warning signs. This is the result of their attitude.

On Sunday, July 11, thousands of people demonstrated in many cities and towns on the island. Alongside those calling for change, better living conditions and political freedoms, as is common in any conflict of this scale, there were also those who sought only to commit crimes and vandalize, but this was the exception, not the rule.

President and First Secretary Miguel Díaz-Canel reacted to these events, unprecedented in Cuba's recent history, with the following appeal: "The order to fight has been given. Let the revolutionaries take to the streets."

In his first television appearance, he acknowledged that there were confused revolutionary people among the demonstrators. In his second appearance, on the 12th, he claimed that they were all counter-revolutionaries and mercenaries and that what happened was the result of a plan conceived from the outside. This is the narrative that has been sustained ever since. For him, the thousands of protesters are not part of the people. Big mistake.

The forces of law and order - from the Interior Ministry, the FAR, the Special Troops, the cadets from the military academies, and even the reserves - have violently suppressed them. Some groups of protesters have also been violent.

At least one person is known to have been killed and others injured, beaten, and detained. Some of them were released the next day. This has not been the case in other cases, such as that of Leonardo Romero, a young physics student at the University of Havana who was arrested two months ago for raising a banner saying "Socialism yes, repression no." He was walking near the Capitol with a pre-college student of his. The boy tried to film the huge demonstration that had gathered there. He was viciously attacked. He was a minor and Leonardo defended him. Both were arrested.

It is impossible to know exactly what happened, because the internet service in Cuba was cut off at 3 pm that day. We are a blind people, without the right to information and without the possibility to express ourselves. The official journalists show with their attitude that they are merely propagandists for the government. May all the shame of the profession fall on them.

Justified and sometimes incoherent statements have set the tone for the government. The Political Bureau met today in the presence of Raúl Castro, but nothing came of what was discussed. Apparently, there is no roadmap designed to resolve an internal situation like this explosion, which is presented to public opinion as a major international conspiracy that has emerged from the SOS Cuba label.

They have limited themselves to demanding the elimination of the US blockade. Not a single self-

critical admission about delayed reforms and constitutional transgressions. Not even an invitation to dialogue. They believe, or want people to believe, that the inconvenient blackouts of recent weeks are responsible for the discomfort of citizens, without acknowledging the immense social debts accumulated over decades.

Bruno Rodríguez Parrilla, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, said in a conference with the accredited foreign press that in Cuba “nobody goes hungry.” This statement is further proof of the government’s level of disconnection with ordinary people. It is comparable only to Raúl’s criticism in his “Central Report” to the 8th Congress as outgoing Secretary General, of the “certain confusion” that some leading cadres had in attacking the “supposed inequality” that dollarized commercialization has created in Cuba.

The desperation of the people threw them into an explosion of mass protests in the middle of the worst moment of the pandemic on the island. One can expect to see a huge increase in contagion, both among the protesters and among the forces of law and order and in the rapid response groups gathered in workplaces to show support for the government.

Added to all this is the political opportunism of some exiled voices calling for a military solution for Cuba. They should know that affecting national sovereignty with the thesis of a humanitarian intervention is totally unacceptable to a large majority of these people, including many of those who are demonstrating today against the government.

Addressing the foreign press, Rodríguez Parrilla argued lightly that this was not the worst moment Cuba had ever experienced. It is true that in the 1990s we had a terrible crisis and *maleconazo*; however, I remind you that at that time we had a leader with enough vision to offer short-term change and a people with hope that, in the face of the fall of real socialism in Europe, the government would have enough intelligence to channel a rapid and continuous path of change.

None of these things exist today. But asking the Cuban government to listen to signals is, as we have seen, plowing in the sea.

July 15, 2021

*Original **La Joven Cuba**, translated by **Observatorio Internacional**.*