The Future of Cuba—Part One

written by Samuel Farber | February 13, 2023

Cuba is going through such a difficult situation that it would be foolhardy and even imprudent to predict its future. Nevertheless, it is possible to analyze the various ways in which it might evolve by basing ourselves on a series of indicators that can help us understand where things stand and in what direction they may possibly be moving, which would allow us to formulate a clearer and effective program for political action. Regarding the indicators and criteria that can orient us, we have the advantage of being able to consider the broad and varied record of the ways in which the countries of the misnamed "socialist camp" have evolved. This offers a set, albeit not an exhaustive one, of alternatives that are the likely futures for Cuba.

In a second article, I plan to offer a brief analysis of the Cuban economy, looking at changes in the class structure resulting from the economic changes that are in the offing and their political implications, and finally taking up the role of the United States and of Cuban Americans in South Florida.

Let us begin by looking at the experiences of some other countries.

Eastern Europe

The Soviet bloc fell mostly of its own weight, from above. That was due to various reasons, the main one being the exhaustion of the economic model of the USSR and the inability of the one-party state bureaucracies to resolve the problem. One exception to this breakdown "from above" was Poland, where a huge workers movement, significantly called *Solidarnosc* (Solidarity), developed from below, championing, initially, egalitarian proposals such as greater wage increases for the worst paid workers, and debating changes regarding the organization of work that pointed to the possibility of establishing workers' control of workplaces.

Solidarnosc was advised, especially at the beginning, by an important group of progressive intellectuals and academics who formed the organization named KOR (Committee for Workers Defense). One of its leaders was Jan Josef Lipsky, who in 1985, published a book detailing the history of the group and who, as a senator elected after the fall of Polish Communism, tried to reorganize the old Polish Socialist Party (PPS), although his early death in 1991, brought those efforts to an end.

The military coup led by General Jaruzelski in 1981 was a serious setback for *Solidarnosc*, an open and democratic organization unprepared for life in the underground. These difficult circumstances propitiated a considerable increase in the help and assistance provided by the Polish Catholic hierarchy that supported *Solidarnosc*, an ironic if not paradoxical event, because the conservative

Catholic hierarchy, fearful of losing much of the power and influence it had already acquired under Polish Communism, was reluctant to support the union movement when it started in 1980. At the same time, the leadership of the AFL-CIO union federation in the United States, under the bureaucratic and conservative leadership of George Meany—a former plumber who prided himself in never having participated in a strike, and who opposed any measure sanctioning the racially segregated unions in the south of the United States—also increased its help to the Polish union in collusion with Washington.

Meanwhile, the Polish union cadres were hit hard by Jaruzelski and many of them had to leave their workplaces to avoid imprisonment. All these events had a conservative effect over the *Solidarnosc* movement and eventually reinforced, after its peaceful takeover of power at the end of the eighties, the emergence of a liberal democracy without much of a social conscience or any urge to bring about structural changes in Polish society, as well as the resurgence of Polish nationalism. This political tendency has evolved towards a conservative authoritarianism under the rightwing Law and Justice Party (PiS), currently led by Jaroslaw Kaczynski. PiS, on the one hand, favors capitalism, although it is reluctant to adopt neoliberal politics, which could limit the economic assistance that the state provides to rural Poland, the principal social base of the conservatives. On the other hand, as in the case of Hungary, it has been curtailing civil rights and undermining the democratic system in general, and especially attacking the right of abortion, which has been almost completely eliminated in Poland (and curtailed in Hungary).

Other countries of the Soviet Bloc also experienced significant political dissidence during the seventies and eighties, like Hungary, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia (where unlike the great majority of countries of Eastern Europe, there was a mass Communist party, which with the political and military support of the USSR organized a successful coup in 1948 and, twenty year later, an effort widely supported by the people to establish a democratic system that was crushed by Soviet tanks). However, the dissidence in those countries in the seventies and eighties did not extend to the working class, even though there were working-class rebellions in East Germany in 1953, and during the Hungarian Revolution of 1956.

Except for Czechoslovakia, the special case of Yugoslavia, and, of course, Russia, in none of the countries of the Soviet bloc did “socialism” arrive to power based on home-grown movements and revolutions. Likewise, in none of them—except for Poland—was the system overthrown from below, although during the last days of the Soviet regime, there were large popular demonstrations that delivered the final blow to their already collapsing “socialist” governments.

Asia

In China and Vietnam, “socialism” was the product of home-grown social revolutions. Up to a point, it could be said that that is why their respective Communist parties have not been overthrown (despite the violently-repressed, huge, nationwide protest movement in China in 1989). These “socialisms” have evolved towards a model of state capitalism with a strong orientation to the world market, especially through the export of products, which in the Chinese case have increased in their degree of complexity and sophistication. The opening to internal capitalism and to the world market has been accompanied in both countries, particularly in China, by the suppression of the most elementary civil and democratic rights, including the lack of independent unions, the frequent arbitrary dispossession of land from the peasantry in order to use it for other purposes, the despotic and cruel treatment of ethnic minorities that do not belong to the Han ethnic group, and the abuse and mistreatment of the great mass of internal immigrants from rural areas (in China, 293 million in 2021) that do not possess the indispensable residence permit (in China, Hukou) to obtain access to social and economic rights.

In both countries poverty has diminished while inequality has grown (after the United States, China is the country with the largest number of billionaires). However, despite their undisputable economic successes—China occupies second place in the world in terms of GDP—it is clear that the Communist parties in power will use whatever force is necessary to maintain their political monopoly.

Russia

For its part, the Russian model shows certain similarities with the Sino-Vietnamese model (an authoritarian one-party system combined with an economy open to capitalism), but its economy seems to be much less promising given its excessive dependency on the export of hydro-carbon products. Also, the social and economic life of the country has incorporated Mafia-like traits embodied, for example, in the kleptocratic origin of its capitalist class as well as in the frequent recourse to ruthless criminal behavior by its powerful ruling group of "siloviki," composed of people associated with the security and repressive bodies of the state, mostly notably against its critics and oppositionists, who can be the victims of assassinations whether in Moscow or in London. In reality, Russia has become a second rank power.

Recently, Russia established in Havana a "Center for Economic Transformation" through an agreement with the Cuban government, supposedly to assist in the development of the private sector, share digital technologies, and promote foreign trade in cooperation with the Cuban state corporation CIMEX. Although this initiative has received much coverage in the foreign press, it must be viewed skeptically until more is known regarding the strategies of both countries with respect to the new Center, the magnitude of the possible Russian investments and of the commercial exchange between them, or about any other concrete initiative that would have a significant effect on improving the present critical situation of the Cuban economy. It must be noted that, even though the Russian economy has suffered much less than originally forecast for its imperialist invasion of Ukraine, it has nevertheless suffered a setback.

The Mexican Case

Although Mexico never belonged to the "socialist camp," it is pertinent to analyze its evolution in the context of the present discussion of Cuba, as it is a Latin American country where one of the most important revolutions of the twentieth century occurred, and where for many decades many of the most important industries were owned by the state under the aegis of what in reality, albeit not formally, was a single party, known since 1940 as the Partido Revolucionario Institucional, or PRI (Revolutionary Institutional Party).

Before 1930, state property predominated in the railroad and banking sectors. It grew under the presidency of Lázaro Cardenas (1934-1940) extending itself to the rural, oil, and electrical industrial sectors. It continued to grow until 1970, to include steel mills and fertilizer plants, railroad equipment factories, and several banks. This changed during the presidency of Miguel Alemán (1946-1952), when private enterprise began to play an increasingly important role initiating a dynamic of coexistence with what was still a powerful state capitalism at the head of a broad sector of nationalized industries. Thus, while at the beginning of the forties, the public sector represented more than 50 percent of gross capital formation, by 1970, this percentage had gone down to 30. It is no coincidence that it was in the decade of the seventies that groups of technocrats, many of them trained at U.S. universities such as Harvard and Yale, began to emerge calling for a different course from the one headed by the old nationalist leaders of the PRI ruling over a political system that was far from being democratic in practice, to bring it closer to the interests and perspectives of a growing private sector.

The program of the technocrats increasingly imposed itself in the course of the successive PRI presidencies of Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988), Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) and Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000). During that period, Mexican economic policy changed drastically with a massive wave of privatization of state enterprises and the introduction of one of the most drastic neoliberal policies in the hemisphere. This radical change profoundly affected the social realities of the country, with the reduction of working-class salaries, the growing informality of the labor market, and the consequent decrease of legal protections, medical attention, and social security for formal and especially for informal workers and employees. Meanwhile, an important democratic upsurge began with the great student movement of the second half of the sixties and beginning of the seventies. The technocrats, who eventually came to play a critical role in the victory of Mexican neoliberalism, were not connected with the student and democratic movements; in fact, they tried to contain it and repress it, although, when they reached the presidency of Mexico in the eighties and nineties, they were still forced to make political concessions, some of them important, which eventually led, through the difficult process of resistance and concessions, to the elimination of the political monopoly of the PRI.

The Cuban Case

Let us turn now to Cuba. In Cuba, the political leadership seems to be inclined, although to a very limited degree, to adopt aspects of the Sino-Vietnamese model. The old guard of historic leaders—whose highest representatives are already in their nineties—as well as the new guard born after 1959 have been reluctant to adopt the economic reforms that would limit the economic power of the state. That explains the concessions they grudgingly made to the urban self-employed and to the people with usufruct rights to the land in rural areas. Nevertheless, perhaps as a result of the pressures generated by the repeated economic crises since the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, the Cuban government adopted in 2021 measures such as the legalization of small and medium private enterprises (PYMES) that can legally employ up to 100 workers, that potentially opens the island's economy to capitalist enterprise to an unprecedented degree.

Even though the Cuban leaders are the inheritors of a home-grown revolution that to a great extent has allowed them to survive in power for many decades, their reluctance to adopt economic reforms reflect their fear of losing the immense economic and political control that they possess under the markedly repressive one-party state system with well over 500 political prisoners, including the hundreds of people sentenced to prison as a result of the protests of July 11, 2021.

At the same time, the government is right—from its point of view—to fear the economic and political power of the growing number of Cubans in southern Florida. In what constitutes an important contradiction of the regime, the Cuban government has been paradoxically spurring on that emigration, as shown by its evident agreement with Nicaragua to allow Cubans free entry into that country (from which they can undertake a long, expensive, and often dangerous journey to the US border). This is due to the substantial dependence of the Cuban government on emigration as a means of reducing the pressures it faces because of the economic crisis, and also as the source of the benefits it derives from the dollar remittances sent by the Cuban emigres to their families, which are used not only to support a great number of Cubans, but also to renovate dwellings in poor condition, and even to start small enterprises in the island.

In that context it is worth highlighting how differently Cuba and China have related to their respective emigrant populations. Beijing has been able to count on the political and economic support of large sectors of its emigres, especially in southeast Asia (Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaya, and the Philippines, among other countries in that region). In these countries, the Chinese government has acted as protector of the Chinese immigrant minorities living there—merchants and industrialists included—against the aggressions of the ethnic majorities of those countries, who

resent the economic power of the immigrants of Chinese origin and their descendants. It should also be noted that many rich Chinese emigres have invested large sums of money in their country of origin.

Another factor that has affected Cuban economic policies, especially under Raúl Castro, is the fear that the introduction of major economic changes may provoke schisms inside the ruling class, be i**t** for ideological and political reasons or for stepping on the toes of vested interests within the top echelons of the regime. Cuba's leaders take very **s**eriously the lesson they learned regarding the consequences of the divisions that sunk their political friends abroad, like the coup d'etat against the Algerian leader Ben Bella in 1965; the overthrow of the Grenadian government in 1983 (with the murder of its principal leader, Maurice Bishop); and the discord that plagued various guerrilla movements in Latin America, like in Guatemala. Cuba's concern about the dangers of internal divisions was great enough in the case of Angola that in 1977 it violated its commitment not to intervene in the country's internal affairs in order to politically and militarily support the official leadership of the ruling MPLA against a dissident faction headed by Nito Alves.

Be it in the case of Algeria, Angola, Grenada, or Guatemala, the Cuban government has confronted these types of divisions on various occasions and will do everything possible to avoid that danger in Cuba, including resorting to all kinds of repressive measures to reinforce the monolithic character of the ruling system. In fact, the factional disputes that divided movements in countries friendly to the Cuban regime reinforced Fidel Castro's allergy to anything he considered, even before taking power, as divisionism and factionalism, a position that has been a very serious obstacle to democratization. In his classic definition of a revolutionary situation, V. I. Lenin pointed at the divisions within the ruling class as one of its main traits. That i**s** precisely the type of division that the Cuban leadership has been avoiding by every possible means.

Considering all these existing and potential difficulties, it is not surprising that, in general terms, the Cuban government would prefer to open the island to international capitalism through GAESA—the Armed Forces' giant business enterprise—instead of opening the door to private enterprise not directly controlled by the regime. Although, as previously mentioned, the pressures created by repeated crises have forced the government to allow the opening of medium-size capitalist enterprises included in the PYMES category.

Yet, the adoption of policies that favor the non-state sector of the economy does not necessarily imply that the political system is being democratized. This does not mean that the Cuban rulers would not move, under certain circumstances, to simulate the introduction of democratic reforms, like Vladimir Putin has done with his discredited electoral pseudo democratic reforms in the Russian Federation. In the Cuban case, such a pretense could be necessary to try, probably unsuccessfully, to get the U.S. Congress to abolish the Helms-Burton Act, which stipulates the indispensability of "free elections" to bring the U.S. economic blockade to an end.

But whether the government would simulate a non-existing democratization or not, it would in fact follow the example of a country like China. That means that the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) would maintain its political monopoly to preside over and control from above any process of change. This means that we cannot even hope for such a system to introduce the much-desired rule of law in Cuba. The fact that the ruling PCC—the only legal party—continues to dictate its "orientations" to the great majority of Cuban institutions is incompatible with the rule of law. In the absence of a real democratization, it is inconceivable that the judicial system, the police, the armed forces, and even the Interior Ministry would be exempt from obeying the "orientations" of the one political party in power. That does not mean, however, that we should stop demanding that our country be governed by a system of laws democratically adopted and an independent judiciary, rather than follow the dictates of the ruling party.

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