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Resilient Communists: How Fidel Castro Survived the Soviet Collapse and Cuba's Uncertain Road to Democracy¹

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It is easy to conclude that Fidel Castro was nothing more than a pawn of the Soviet Union, and Cuba, a communist satellite throughout the Cold War. The island received an annual subsidy of four billion dollars from the U.S.S.R. and hosted Soviet troops; its economic dependence was so extensive that when the Soviet Union collapsed more than 25 years ago, Cuba experienced a GDP contraction of between 30 and 40 percent. Despite this, Cuba's communist regime survived, even as many formerly communist countries in Eastern Europe embraced new democratic constitutions. This project seeks to explain how—in spite of the development of a robust nationalism, and significant economic and political liberalization—Cuba's ruling class managed to resist enacting significant democratizing reforms. Elsewhere, these factors ushered in a "third wave" of democracy.

This paper takes up the question in the context of new opportunities for (and pressures to) change. Raul Castro is set to step down from the presidency in 2018 amidst an ongoing economic crisis. Unfortunately, democratization remains unlikely for three main reasons. The two notable political forces in Cuba at present are the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) and the military or Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR)—neither of which advocates democratizing reforms. Cuba's dissident community remains disorganized, and its civil society, woefully underdeveloped. Finally, the economic liberalization policies enacted as a response to the Soviet collapse have failed to foster the development of a strong and engaged middle class.

Key Words: Cuba, democracy, third wave

In his influential piece, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, Samuel P. Huntington explains how, between 1971 and 1990, thirty countries made the transition from authoritarianism to democracy. The wave encompassed the Soviet bloc of Eastern Europe, the dictatorships of the Iberian Peninsula, the Philippines, South Korea, and the military regimes of

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much of Latin America. With the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union, eager eyes turned to Cuba, awaiting the fall of Fidel Castro who, for three decades, had ruled with an iron fist. This paper examines the resilience of the Castro autocracy following the closing of the Cold War and current prospects for democratization on the island.

Huntington contends that countries democratize in “waves.” The third such wave was the happy consequence of five principle factors: the growing illegitimacy of authoritarian regimes; rapid economic development in the 1960s which led to an international rise in education and a global expansion of the middle class; doctrinal changes in the Catholic Church; external factors such as an emphasis upon Human Rights violations; and the “Snowballing” effect. (Huntington, 43). Of the thirty countries that transitioned, those that consolidated their democratic regimes continue to prosper economically through free trade and socially through free elections.

The small Communist island off the coast of Florida seemed destined follow. Cuba suffered a GDP loss of 32% between 1991 and 1993 due to the loss of an annual 4.3 billion dollars in Soviet subsidies and aid (Gonzalez and McCarthy, 10). Despite an economic depression that would have proven the illegitimacy of most regimes, Castro was able to prevent Cuba from succumbing to the global pressures of democratization. The question remains: how? The Cuban people gained free education and free health care from the regime, but little more. Dissenters are severely punished, thousands of disenfranchised youth attempt to cross the Florida Strait in makeshift crafts each year, and malnourishment can be seen on any Havana street. At the height of the economic downturn, blackouts lasted as long as sixteen hours per day and rations were reduced to little more than bread (Sweig, 128). Under Castro’s leadership, the Communist paradise he promised never materialized and Cuba has limped along ever since.

There was, nonetheless, no major movement towards democracy or even to overthrow the regime. This paper argues that Castro’s ability to prevent what Cuban expatriates proudly predicted was rooted in an accommodation of seemingly minute factors. The stark nationalism engrained in the minds of the Cuban people since Castro’s ascent to power was a safety net from the initial fall of the Cuban economy. Measures of economic liberalization and the Communist party’s re-orientation towards the Catholic Church perpetuated the regime through the “Special Period” that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. The regime’s actions also helped to prevent the establishment of a civil society, the absence of which is arguably the greatest contributing factor to the resilience of the Communist establishment (Mujal-Leon, 21).

While these measures, with no civic opposition to oppose them, were enough to perpetuate the regime, their effects are beginning to wane. At present, Raul Castro holds sway over the National Assembly, but even he, a relic of the revolution, cannot maintain his place for long. When the Castro era

comes to a close, the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR) and the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) are likely to struggle for control of the country (Mujal-Leon, 25). This paper argues that for democratic activists to have a stake, the economic liberalizations of the early 1990s must be executed more effectively and the dissidents must become organized in such a manner that offers a credible alternative to the Communist regime.

NATIONALISM AS A MEANS FOR SURVIVAL

Fidel Castro ascended to power via a guerilla revolution in 1959. The bearded freedom fighter was introduced to the Cuban populace from his historic defense speech, "History Will Absolve Me." At the time, Castro was a herald of hope for the masses who suffered from the inequalities of Fulgencio Batista's dictatorial rule. To the people, he was the leader who "hates vanity of all kind." He was the man who stressed that "to be Cuban implies a duty; not to fulfill that duty is a crime, is treason," (Castro, 1954). Throughout his reign, Castro never forgot to remind the audiences of his countless speeches that the revolution was an act of all Cubans standing together against capitalism and the exploitations that it incontrovertibly brought. Thus, the Communist regime's obstacles were the people's and every "New Man" Cuban was obliged to unite against them. As Julia E. Sweig contends, Castro's revolution "was not imposed by outside forces, it was homegrown." Furthermore, "its political and ideological roots were nationalistic, and deeply felt," (Sweig, 130). Due to this deep-seeded Cuban pride, and share-the-load mentality, many Cubans remained loyal to their revolution throughout the "Special Period in a Time of Peace," a period of austerity and hardship, brought about by the Soviet collapse.

The country entered the "Special Period" a mere three decades after the triumph of the revolution. Any euphoria or gratitude felt from the arrival of Castro was still felt, to a weaker degree, during this time of economic crisis. Children born during the thirty-year period were subject to the stories of a generation that had personally witnessed the "sultanism" of Batista (Dominguez, 114). It was these children who would have made up the contemporary dissidents during the economic crisis of the early 1990s. This generation, however, was raised in an era of respect for the Communist authorities and an age unknown to food shortage and other ills introduced during the "Special Period." Only recently, with the maturing of a new generation, has popular discontent become more palpable. Thus, while the period was certainly a shock and a time for liberalization, the revolution's ideology was strong enough to overcome popular discontent. The period was the first major test of Cuban Communist nationalism and the results were that the bulk of Cubans were complacent with the failed ideology, at least temporarily.

National pride was joined to the ideology by the decision to continue with Cuba's hosting of the 1991 Pan American Games. Though the country agreed to host the games in 1986, before the Cuban economy collapsed, it honored its decision to do so at high cost of the country's financial integrity. Using primarily materials produced domestically, the impoverished nation constructed costly athletic complexes and stadiums for tens of thousands of foreign observers. This was an opportune time for dissenters to express their discontent with the regime. What onlookers met, however, was massive crowds shouting "*Fidel!*" (Coltman, 273). Cuban athletes won one hundred and forty gold medals, more than any participating country including the United States. The ability to host such an elaborate Olympic-style event coupled with athletic success demonstrated to the populace that Cuban perseverance was enough to push through the bitterness of the times. It demonstrated to the international community (specifically the United States) that the Castro regime was capable of overcoming economic setbacks. From both views, Communism would remain.

PERCEIVED LEGITIMACY THROUGH POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC LIBERALIZATION

Nationalism, though a potent instrument in the immediate downfall of the Soviet collapse, would not be sufficient to protect the regime from what very much was a dire fiscal crisis. As Leicester Coltman explains, "In any country a fall of 5 per cent gross national product would be viewed as a major recession. The Cuban economy had declined more than 40 per cent..." (Coltman, 282). A regime is only durable if it is perceived to be legitimate and it effectively administers the promises of its leaders (Lipset, 86). If the leadership is unsuccessful in doing so, its perceived right to govern begins to diminish. Cuba's ongoing economic depression revealed the ineffectiveness of the Communist regime. The administration needed to go beyond acknowledging the severity of the economic crisis and did so by making overt changes to policies.

The country commenced a series of capitalist practices in 1994, which required compromising its ideological aversion to free international trade. The country slowly navigated away from the economic quagmire of restricting trade to fellow socialist nations. Reluctantly, Castro opened Cuba to tourism. Much of the agriculture sector was privatized to Cuban farmers. Farmer's markets became legal as did the operation of micro-businesses such as *paladres* and *casas particulares*, small restaurants and bed and breakfasts respectively. During the reforms, the U.S. dollar was officially recognized as a legitimate form of currency, allowing for remittances from abroad to be spent outside of the now thriving black-market (Sweig, 132). Additionally, the country began to move away from dependence on agricultural production, particularly sugar. Cuba began trading with countries outside of Eastern Europe, notably through joint-

ventures with Canada and Spain. In an odd paradox, the fall of the communist bloc of Eastern Europe aided Cuba in this respect. Had the Soviets not fallen and the Cold War not ended, it would have been politically difficult (if not impossible) for the North Atlantic World to conduct business with Cuba, insofar as the United States in particular would have viewed it as aiding a Soviet satellite nation. Such economic measures proved to be beneficial as the country's GDP steadily climbed beginning in 1995 by .4% and by 2.5% in 1996 (CIA World Fact Book, 1995, 1996). Furthermore, the privatized farms yielded greater productions than did the bureaucratically controlled farms which buoyed the economy but not the Communist regime's ideology.

Liberalization was not confined to economic sectors during the Special Period. Recognizing the need to reinvigorate his legitimacy, Castro allowed for direct elections to the National Assembly. These elections were far from free as only members of the Communist party were eligible to appear on the ballots. Nonetheless, compared to the original method in which large crowds would chant their support of Castro and the revolution, this modern manner permitted Cubans to exercise a right granted to a growing number of peoples at the time. Even if the Cuban electoral process was illegitimate, the progressive nature of the move demonstrated that the regime was willing to enact small changes in order to manage reform and stave off calls for more radical democratization movements.

Additionally, the Communist party itself adapted. Much as Vladimir Putin is attempting to reinstate Eastern Orthodoxy throughout Russia, Castro began reviving the Catholic Church throughout the Special Period. Subject to the rule of a devout Marxist-Leninist, the Church was oppressed during the first thirty years of Castro's reign. While it was never explicitly illegal to be a Catholic, or a practitioner of any religion for that matter, Catholics endured frequent harassment at the hands of Castro's security forces. After the 1992 Constitution was ratified, which ensured religious tolerance, religious practice surged in Cuba (Sweig, 154). Furthermore, for the first time, openly religious individuals could be active members in the Communist party. This strategy of recognizing the Church was a ploy whose benefits continue to be reaped today. The more independent the Church, the greater its potential as political opposition; such was the case in Poland. The more integrated the Church is with the political apparatus, however, the more likely it is to inhibit democratization; such was the case in Argentina (Philpott, 43). This may have contributed to the regime's survival in a time of severe economic hardship insofar as the push for religion allowed Cubans, specifically the disenfranchised youth, to direct their energies to faith-based institutions instead of against the regime (Gonzalez and McCarthy 37).

The measures taken by Castro certainly acted as an influential force in ensuring his regime's survival. Whether because the regime efficiently coopted political opposition, or because Cubans failed to organize themselves, the

regime never faced high levels of civil strife. A well-organized civil society is oftentimes instrumental to forming a formidable opposition to a totalitarian regime. Much as Poland's Solidarity movement is credited with the swift downfall of the Communist Party after 1989 roundtable talks, so Chile's Concertación (Concerts of Parties for Democracy) proved instrumental in organizing opposition to General Pinochet (Londregan, 241). Opposition allows for a diverse citizenry to unite and publically exploit the weaknesses and failures of an authoritarian state. The prolonged economic downturn in Cuba presented Cubans with an opportunity to overthrow the regime or, at least, demonstrate to Cubans who chose emigration rather than confrontation that frustration was ubiquitous. Alas, no such opposition existed.

Two further factors aid in explaining the lack of an organized opposition in Cuba. Formed directly after the revolution, the *Comités de Defensa de la Revolución* (CDR) proved effective as a collaboration of neighborhood watches. These community networks act as police forces and have unlimited resources when seeking out those who prove disloyal to the revolution. It is impossible to deduce exactly how many dissenters were silenced as a result of the CDRs, but their importance to the regime should not be underestimated. An additional factor is the lack of communication on the island. Vertically controlled, all information entering the country was, and continues to be, inspected and censored by the state. Thus, news of global democratization efforts reached Cuba slowly. The Cuban government dictates who may leave the island by approving travel visas. It was, furthermore, difficult for individuals to enter the island as the regime did not allow tourism until the early 1990s. Thus, international news of civic opposition groups toppling Communist regimes slowly reached Cubans.

CASTRO'S CUBA AS A POST-TOTALITARIAN STATE

The current regime is not what it was thirty years ago. Though there is a ruling autocracy, its guiding ideology has wasted away leaving an un-motivated and frustrated populace. The Cuban state has incontrovertibly evolved into what Juan Linz describes as a post-totalitarian state. Post-totalitarians, though still oppressive, have lost their vice-like grip they once held over their people. The mass mobilizations of the citizens have grown stagnant as citizens recognize, either through education or blatant failures of the totalitarian, the regime's rhetoric. Furthermore, the totalitarian ideologies, once strong and vital, have faded into institutional memory. Most importantly, political plurality is greater in post-totalitarian states, effectively rendering the regime more susceptible to change (Linz, 43).

Requisites for totalitarianism were no longer met in Cuba. The *Hombre Nuevo*, or New Man, ideology which was relentlessly pursued by Ernesto "Che" Guevara, a military leader of the revolution, in the early years following the triumph of the revolution ultimately failed. The ideology stressed the

importance of the individual and the collective importance of every individual to the success of the revolution. Individuals, however, struggled to understand this when they worked extended hours and received only meager rations for bread. Even Marxist ideology, which extols egalitarianism, is becoming more and more overtly obsolete as the dollarization allowed for those receiving remittances from abroad to experience a far more cushioned experience than those whose relatives chose to remain on the island (Sweig, 132). Reliance on external support blatantly undermines the revolution's claims of equality. Rather than create a strong middle class that is more similar to the egalitarian society desired by Castro, the economic measures were conducive to a socioeconomic divide. In addition to failed ideologies, the mobilization efforts are seldom and sporadic. The once fiery charisma of Fidel Castro has been extinguished by the reserved Raul, whose public appearances are flat compared to his elder brother's. Mobilization efforts are further entrenched from an "alienated youth" who have been maturing in an ever-revolving economic slough (Gonzalez and McCarthy). Totalitarianism was further weakened through the eased restrictions of religion. The action was a blatant display of desperation on part of the Communist authorities. Some reports even indicate that the visit of Pope John Paul II in 1998 drew larger crowds than Fidel Castro ever could in Revolutionary Square. Lastly, the open display of dissidents has become far more common. Though the regime is still highly oppressive, demonstrated through the Cuban Spring of 2003 in which 73 dissident leaders were arrested, opposition is, nonetheless, extensive (Gershman and Gutierrez, 39). Thus totalitarianism has become stagnant if not obsolete in Cuba.

With Raul Castro set to relinquish his presidency in 2018, the times are conducive to an absolute military rule, bereft of communism. For nearly half a century, Fidel Castro was simultaneously the legitimate and unifying actor of both the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR) and the Cuban Communist Party (PCC). Raul Castro has been able to retain the unity of the FAR and the PCC. A devout communist since his student years, he was the longtime Minister of Defense under Fidel and therefore continues his brother's role as a qualified mediator between the two bodies. Despite the one-party system in Cuba, PCC, "is the weaker link in the political-military chain that rules Cuba." The stronger has consolidated its place recently through the tourism industry. FAR currently controls sixty per cent of Cuba's largest industry (Mujal-León, 25).

THE NEED OF FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENT FOR DEMOCRATIZATION

At an uncertain time in which power will likely be contested between two factions, democracy seems like a far-fetched hope. Lessons from the Third Wave suggest that two major factors, however, can help deliver its reality: foreign direct investment ventures and the unification of dissidents via the Catholic Church.

The economic state has failed to regain, or at least maintain, Soviet-style trade with Communist countries. In the early years of the new millennium, Cuba was beginning to benefit substantially from a trade venture struck with the late Venezuelan president, Hugo Chavez. The agreement guaranteed the sale of heavily subsidized oil in exchange for Cuban doctors. The venture was a success; Cuba's GDP grew slightly over twelve per cent in 2006. After the global recession of 2008, however, Venezuela could no longer uphold its end of the bargain. As a result, the growth rate of Cuba's GDP dropped from an average of 9.3% between 2004 and 2006 to less than 2% in 2009. The country has continued to experience stagnant growth. Between 2012 and 2014, the average growth rate was a meager 2.3% (Villanueva, 22).

Cuba's half-hearted commitment to capitalism has prevented the country from progressing. Though ideological concessions were made in response to the close of the Cold War, the private sector accounts for only twenty-five per cent of the total GDP. The reluctance is no doubt attributed to the Marxist tradition of the regime. Soon after Fidel's revolution, he instituted agrarian reform and land expropriations (this continues to play a factor in U.S. foreign policy with Cuba). To place an emphasis on private ownership, no matter how many decades after the expropriations, would be an explicit demonstration of the failure of communism to both the exile community abroad and mainland Cubans. Thus, even under Raul, the private sector has not grown substantially. It is within the best interests of party hardliners, advocates of democracy, and anyone wishing to prevent an explicit military state to encourage the growth of the private sector.

Scholars have long argued that economic development can help prepare a country for democratizing reforms. Economic growth often leads to a middle class capable of contributing diversity and legitimacy to a potentially well-organized political opposition. As Seymour Lipset notes, "from Aristotle down to the present, men have argued that only in a wealthy society in which relatively few citizens lived in real poverty could a situation exist in which the mass of the population could intelligently participate in politics," (Lipset, 75). Policy makers ought to focus on maximizing the per capita income of Cubans rather than focus on income inequality. If per capita GDP is sufficient to render the average standard of living in Cuba to be comfortable, the masses will be able to focus more thoroughly on the nation's politics and their role in them. It is, after all, difficult for democratic activists to organize universal support when the primary concern many Cubans face is a lack of food.

Cuban authorities could learn important lessons from the economic models of China and Vietnam. Both countries have leveraged foreign direct investment (FDI) to increase per capita incomes (Villanueva, 197). Cuba should embrace economic liberalizations fully and pursue FDI ventures. Though it is argued that FDI is a blatant exploitation of the working classes of foreign countries, its benefits are promising. In addition to spurring economic

growth, FDI allows for an entrance into the global market (Villanueva, 193). Cuba would be brought forth from the isolation Castro forced the country into. Furthermore, by incentivizing investors, the country would be subject to the sort of rapid modernization and industrialization seen in both China and Vietnam. In both countries, a middle class is slowly developing as a result of the reforms that they enacted decades ago. The ventures with Canada, Mexico and Spain that were stalled after the Venezuelan agreement should be revisited and prioritized now that Cuba is no longer receiving such extensive aid.

THE ROLE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN UNIFYING DISSIDENTS

The apprehension towards an expanding economy many feel is justifiable if civic opposition does not mature. The dissident movement in Cuba has become progressively more noticeable. The Varela Project, which sought to produce a national referendum garnered 11,000 signatures before being presented and continues to be circulated (the current number of signatories is over 40,000). The petition, headed by Oswaldo Payá, intended to bring about democratic change through a provision in the Cuban constitution which permitted the proposal of legislation by individuals if they have the support of over 10,000 citizens. Naturally, the regime ignored the petition and arrested many of the leaders in the Spring of 2003. The massive lock-up of seventy-three dissidents became known as the "Black Spring". The Varela Project was perhaps the most effective, organized act of opposition faced by the regime. It was also fourteen years ago. As Gershman and Gutierrez argued, Cuban civil society, "is nowhere near as organized and effective as was Poland's Solidarity movement during its underground phase in the mid-1980s." (Gershman and Gutierrez, 38-39). So unorganized and ineffective is the opposition that some have argued there are very few legitimate civil societies and an array of cluttered dissidents (Mujal-Leon, 30).

When Samuel Huntington notes that the third wave of democratization was "a Catholic wave," he contends that Catholic leaders played important roles unifying dissidents (Huntington, 76). Since the closing of the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church has taken a firm and global stance against authoritarianism and its oppression of basic human rights. The battle on behalf of human rights is largely what contributes to the harmonious relationship between the Church and democracy. This hasn't always been the case. Before the "third wave," it was long argued that Protestantism was a prerequisite of democracy and that Catholicism was an inhibitor of democratization. After Vatican II, the Church, "stressed the legitimacy and need for social change, [and] the importance of collegial action by bishops, priests, and laity." (Huntington, 78). The church, however, is as susceptible to factions as any political institution. While some bishops became martyrs for their defiance of authority, such as Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, many clerics chose a path of complacency with their respective authoritarian.

The most effective Churches were those which were autonomous of their regimes, whereas those which held positions within proved the most tolerant. While the Cuban Catholic Church certainly does not follow an Argentinian precedent of integration with the Castro regime, it was sufficiently coopted to the extent that there were no public demonstrations against the regime. With between sixty and seventy per cent of its population being recognized as Catholic, Cuba contains a unifier of its dissidents: The Catholic Church.

The chief religious leader in Cuba is Jaime Cardinal Ortega. While the Cardinal is a clear supporter of dissidents and a voice for political prisoners through his negotiations with Castro which led to the release of fifty-two political prisoners in 2010, to this point he has not exhibited the charisma that enabled Catholic leaders to foster democratization in the third wave countries. The reluctance of action is best explained through the belief that a gradual confrontation of the regime is more likely to bring about lasting change. While gradualism is widely accepted as a practice that fosters consolidated change more successfully than does revolutionary action, it is the action of civil society which aligns the various sects of a citizenry to demonstrate popular disapproval. This demonstration often causes the tension that allows for a peaceful transition as was performed in Poland. It is feared that political action may provoke the regime to retract its ambivalent approach to the Church. This apprehension is folly. The Church will not perish as a result of communist repression, as was demonstrated through the resurgence of the Church in the 1990s and its continued growth today.

Cardinal Ortega delivered his intent for retirement to Pope Benedict XVI in 2008, but has yet to be relieved under Pope Francis. Whoever the Pope appoints to fill the position should take advantage of the large community his successor nurtured. The Church has not only grown, it has been viewed as a network of charity throughout the island, known for supplying food to the impoverished Cubans. With the charitable reputation inland, independence of the regime and an international network of support, the Cuban Catholic Church is poised to ignite a robust opposition to a faltering government. The new Cardinal should unify the leading bishops and publically condemn the continued human rights abuses, and lack of freedom of expression, speech, and assembly. The institution has the potential to organize the million-man marches seen in the Philippines, and cultivate a civil society as was seen in Brazil and Poland. To do so, Church leaders must recognize their independence of the regime and the Church's capability to endure.

CONCLUSION

The time for change in Cuba is looming ever closer. When Raul Castro leaves the office of president, the Revolutionary Armed Forces will consolidate their control and it is impossible to predict the level of oppression that their regime will bring about. Popular discontent is not absent in Cuba, organization among

the dissenters is. Democratic activists outside of the regime must make it their initiative to unite the abundance of dissidents as moderates within the regime must use what little voice they have to direct attention to ventures that will cultivate a middle class. With a unified civic opposition and a robust middle-class, there can be little more to hinder Cuba from joining the ranks of the countries of the Third Wave.

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