

# The Outlook for Cuba and What International Actors Should Avoid

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There has been much speculation about Cuba's future as well as about Fidel Castro's health.

The fact is that many have been wrong, both those who predicted a soon departure of Fidel and those who believed he would soon resume his official duties. In my judgment, Fidel's return to power as President of the island-state and *Comandante en Jefe* of the Cuban revolution is highly unlikely. There is much evidence that his succession has already happened. At the same time, there are few signs that a regime change will take place in the near future.

## **The national actors**

The successor: Raúl Castro is presently First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC), Commander in Chief of the Revolutionary Armed Forces (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias*, FAR) and President of the Council of State and hence of the Cuban government. He uses this position to slowly implement a transition from a charismatic, personalized kind of socialist governance to a bureaucratic, institutionalized one. This new style of governance is based upon Raúl's personality traits as well as his career. Despite lacking the charisma of his brother Fidel, he pulls all the strings within the regime. He does not rule like a *caudillo* but like a *primus inter pares* and has moved the PCC to the center of the governmental system. Unlike Fidel who was sceptical of the party in the beginning, Raúl was already a member of what was then the Communist party before the revolution. Today he labels the PCC as the actual *Comandante de la revolución*, the Commander of the revolution. Under Fidel, Raúl served as Minister of the Armed Forces and highest-ranking general. He ran the military like an administrative cadre and thus let it become a factor of economic impact. According to Raúl, the military is subordinated to the party and actually closely intertwined with it. Moreover, Raúl is the author of the economic reforms of the 1990s and is therefore viewed as a competent technocrat.

The party: Being the most important pillar of the governmental system, the role of the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) was strengthened, while its parallel and ad hoc structures created by Fidel were rolled back. The cadres of the sub-organizations (children, youth, women, schoolchildren, university students, workers, farmers) according to which the PCC is structured display a loyal behaviour towards the party leadership. The different currents within the party elite that many observers have noted are weak. This is why the definitions of actors commonly used in transition research, such as hawks and doves, hardliners and reformers, are not apt to describe the differences within the PCC. Instead one can speak of a relatively high elite cohesiveness.

The military: The Revolutionary Forces are regarded as Cuba's best-functioning institution, and hence are of high reputation. In numerous speeches, Raúl has stressed the military's role as a party vassal. Neither does Raúl present himself as a military leader nor is there a noticeable militarization of Cuba's governmental leadership. The army is not (in any case not yet) the change agent one is hoping for. Nothing points towards the existence of different fractions. The Cuban military is also a central factor of economic power in the country. It runs a huge holding company (*Grupo de Administración Empresarial*, GAESA) and today part of its job is to procure foreign currency, to produce food and to run gas stations, tourist hotels, mines, workshops, repair shops, exchange offices, etc.

The opposition and civil society: Even though a few oppositional groups are identifiable, such as the Verla Project by Osvaldo Payá, these tend to remain small in numbers and weak in terms of their potential to exercise pressure and to mobilize. Furthermore, the opposition is split, sharing a negative agenda rather than a positive project. Since access to mass media is denied, they lack means to generate resonance. Generally, the population is regarded as relatively apolitical and hardly organized in networks. After a few decades of totalitarianism, it should not come as a surprise that there is no structured civil society which would be capable of articulating its interests.

Looking at those national actors who are relevant for the further political development in the country, one can neither discern an impulse for a fundamental reform from the top nor for a mobilization from the bottom. There is to be anticipated not an end of socialist rule, but a slow transformation of the socialist form of governance on the island.

### **The national and regional situation of Cuba**

Cuba is currently in a very comfortable situation both economically and internationally. The island's economy is doing considerably better than in earlier decades, especially compared to the 1990s with the breakdown of the Soviet Union. The gross domestic product is growing, even though not to the extent reported by the Cuban government. Therefore Cuba's population is not experiencing a situation of economic distress; their daily lives have gone through much harder periods. Cuba's relatively positive economic performance is especially due to the petrodollars of Hugo Chávez. As a consequence of their alliance with the Venezuelan government, Cuba receives substantial oil imports, part of which is sold, in exchange for medical products and the deployment of doctors and teachers. With a share of 24% of Cuban exports in the year 2005, Venezuela has become the main exporter to the island, followed by the People's Republic of China (11,8%), Spain (8,7%), the United States (6,2%), Canada (4,4%) and Brazil (4,2%). The main purchasing countries of Cuban exports are the Netherlands (30%), Canada (21,9%), Venezuela (12,1%), Spain (8,1%), the People's Republic of China (5,0%) and Russia (2,9%).<sup>1</sup> For Cuba, the People's Republic of China is not only a voracious importer of food and raw materials, but also a creditor offering favourable terms. Despite the US embargo and the Helms-Burton Act, the island not only displays a relatively diversified trade structure, but it counts the United States among its main trading partners, which ships food and pharmaceuticals.

Politically speaking, Cuba is anything but regionally isolated. Fidel did not donate his revolutionary symbolic power to his brother but sold it to his ally Hugo Chávez. The latter arranges visits and phone calls generating publicity and bringing the leaving *Comandante* back to the political regional stage. Along with Venezuela and Bolivia, Cuba is a member of ALBA (*Alternativa Bolivariana para las Américas*), which Nicaragua will soon join, too. Even though it remains unclear what exactly this anti-neoliberal cooperation is able to achieve, ALBA carves out its profile as a Latin American closing of ranks against the US-American imperialism. The regional integration of Cuba, however, extends beyond ALBA: in September of 2006, Cuba hosted the summit meeting of the Non-Aligned States, which it will preside over during the next three years. A few months earlier, Fidel accepted the invitation extended by the Mercosur member states to participate in their summit meeting in Argentina.

### **What not to do?**

While in the year 1902, in accordance with Socialist thinking, Lenin was dealing with the question "What to do?", today in the year 2007, in total accordance with a democratic,

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<sup>1</sup> Bundesagentur für Außenwirtschaft, Wirtschaftsdaten Kompakt, Kuba, Oktober 2006.

pluralistic and freedom-based future for Cuba, I would like to engage in the question “What not to do?” I would like to point out a few conceptual considerations about what international actors should avoid if they do not want for their good intentions to provoke relapses instead of inducing the democratization process in Cuba.

- Not to expect anything unrealistic: Since Fidel fell ill, surprisingly little has happened in Cuba, on the governmental level as well as on the part of the population. The subtle changes to be observed in the system point to a well-organized succession and a gradual transition from a charismatic personalized form of socialism to a bureaucratic, more institutionalized one.
- Not to adopt a position of intransigence: Just like the US embargo turned out to be less beneficial for exercising economic pressure on the island but rather for serving as an ideological justification for the deplorable state affairs and the repression by the Cuban government, excessive external pressure may boost the closing of ranks of the institutions and actors making up the system. As long as a political opening is associated with a threat, the political and military elite will strive for cohesion.
- Not to put forward maximum demands, but to choose instead confidence-building measures and to turn the current tit-for-tat relationship into a positive reciprocal process. Even though regime change seems far from happening in Cuba and Raúl Castro is looking for continuity, his discourse is more moderate than his brother Fidel's or even Hugo Chávez'. His small steps should be observed very closely and positive gestures should be replied to with positive gestures.
- Not to promote an isolation of Cuba, which would drive it into an even tighter Venezuelan embrace. Instead it is necessary to seek the integration of the island, for example through triangle cooperation or regional arrangements including other reliable Latin American states.
- Not to fall into a paternalistic approach which could hurt the national pride of the island's population. Sovereignty, independence and resistance are values entrenched in the national self-conception – no matter if people support or oppose socialism. It would certainly be counterproductive if the population of Spain's last colony, which for years has been living in regime-contingent isolation, got the impression that the fate of their country is determined from the outside.
- And last but not least – not to forget that the very democracy which today serves as a model of quality and stability in Latin America has gone through one of the slowest and most elite-controlled transition processes of the region. Remembering the Chilean case can help us be patient. For the purpose of a peaceful and sustainable transition to democracy in Cuba, I would like to plead for more ethics of responsibility on the part of the international actors.