

# **A Peek into the Forbidden Island: The Secret of Castro's Staying Power**

## **A Photo Essay**

**By**

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Cuba is an island nation located 90 nautical miles from the United States. Although it is one of our closest neighbors, most Americans still know little or nothing about the place. The purpose of this photo-essay is to give you insight into everyday life and culture in the forbidden island and to acquire deeper understanding of the reasons why the Castro regime endures.\* In January 1959, Fidel Castro and his band of rebels seized political power from the U.S. backed, Batista regime. Amidst the thunderous cheers of millions of Cubanos, Fidel declared, *"this time the revolution is for real!"* He promised to purify the country and bring prosperity to the people.<sup>1</sup>

Three years later, in 1962, angered by the nationalization of some its companies, the United States launched an economic embargo designed to make life so miserable that Cubans would rebel against their new government. That didn't happen; instead this policy forced Cuba to forge an alliance with the Soviet Union and the Eastern European Communist bloc. Buoyed by subsidies and favorable trade agreements with the Soviets and the Eastern Europeans, socialist Cuba experienced a Golden Age. Then, the bottom fell out. In 1989, the Soviet Union and the Eastern European Communist bloc collapsed. Over night, Cuba's subsidies, trading partners, and favorable trade agreements disappeared, and the nation was plunged into a deep economic depression. In July 1990, a solemn Fidel Castro told the Cuban people that their country was in a

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*Special Period in the Time of Peace* and that they must be prepared for a long, painful epoch characterized by hard times.

The economic crisis deepened: food shortages spawned malnutrition; power outages occurred frequently; the lack of oil and gasoline created transportation woes and made it difficult to keep factories and farms operative. Unemployment rose and despair and hopelessness spread. Believing the end was near; the United States intensified its economic embargo in 1992. Then, on August 5, 1994, rioting broke out in Havana. Frustrated Cubans, mostly black and mulatto, took to the streets breaking windows and looting stores in an angry display of civil disobedience. Three days later, on August 8, 1994, Castro announced that anyone desiring to leave the island was free to go. More than 30,000 Cubans headed for the island's north-shore beaches, assembled makeshift boats and rafts, and started across the Florida Straits.<sup>2</sup> As the situation continued to worsen, reporters from around the world descended on Havana, the capital city, waiting for the socialist government to fall. Andre Oppenheimer, an Argentine reporter, even wrote a book titled, **Castro's Final Hour**.

But these eulogies proved to be premature. The Castro regime did not fall; it endured as if impervious to the profound economic crisis and the despair and hopelessness swirling around it. The masses did not demand the reinstatement of a market economy and the re-establishment of an American-style democracy. Instead, despite frustration, anger, and discontent, Cubans continued to support their government. So, rather than collapsing, the Castro regime remained steadfastly socialist, continued to set its own course on the basis of a socialist worldview, and weathered the storm. What is the secret of Fidel Castro's staying power?

The goal of my presentation is to answer this question. It will be divided into four parts. The first part discusses the conceptual framework I use in exploring the secret of Castro's staying power, while the second part sets the context in which the story unfolds. Part Three examines Castro's strategy of placing people first, and Part Four concludes the photo-essay by discussing the new challenges facing Cuban society.

## The Conceptual Framework

How should we think about and view Cuban society? Situated just 90 miles off the coast of Florida, Cuba is the largest island in the Caribbean. It is a long, narrow island that extends about 777 miles from east to west with a median width of about 62 miles. Cuba has a diverse topography consisting of flat lands, mountains, and hills. This island nation is divided into 15 provinces, and has a population of about 11,300,000, with Afro-Cuban and mulattos comprising about two-thirds of the people. Because of its strategic location, Cuba became the *most important* possession in the Spanish colonial system. It was the Crown Jewel of the Antilles.

The 1959 Revolution ended 60 years of U.S. economic and political dominance in Cuba and triggered the outmigration of thousands of middle-class and elite Cubans. The resulting cultural warfare combined with the politics of Cold War Propaganda to make any discussion of Cuba fiercely passionate regardless of one's ideological perspective. Because people tend to think about the island nation in bipolar terms, it is exceedingly difficult to study and understand the place. At one end of the pole, Cuba is depicted as an *evil empire* and at the other end it is viewed as a *utopian society*. Within this framework, the relationship between the United States and Cuba is conceptualized as an epic battle between good and evil. Such a paradigm, I posit, is incapable of providing insight into the complexities of Cuban society or any other nation for that matter.

To transcend this narrow perspective, I constructed a scheme of conceptualization based on a framework developed based on the thinking Amartya Sen and Kofi Annan, General Secretary of the United Nations. Sen and Annan argued that *freedom* is not a single entity, but a complex hierarchy composed of a *larger* and a *smaller* freedom. In his March 2005 Report to the General Assembly, for example, Annan said that to meet the needs, hopes, and aspirations of ordinary people, leaders must grasp the idea of a larger freedom. People are not really free, he argued, if they are trapped in extreme poverty, hungry, poorly educated, have bodies ravaged by disease, and live in unhealthy homes, situated in the midst of violence. Such people are not truly free, even if they elect their own leaders, freely speak and engage in protest.

I used this notion of a *larger freedom* to guide my exploration of everyday life and culture in Cuba and to serve as my framework to gain insight into the resiliency of the Castro regime. My thesis is that Castro made acquisition of the *larger freedom* a national priority and that he never wavered from this position, even during the darkest days of the Special Period. To measure a nation's progress toward the *larger freedom*, the United Nations constructed the Human Development Index (HDI). The HDI ranks nations according to their citizens' quality of life rather than strictly by traditional economic figures. Based on calculations, which include life expectancy, educational attainment, adjusted income, and participation in community life, nations are placed in one of three categories: high, medium, or low human development.

In 2004, 10 years after the 1994 riots, the United Nations ranked Cuba 52<sup>nd</sup> out of 177 nations, which placed it in the High Human Development category, along with the United States and other first world countries. This ranking also placed Cuba ahead of nations such as Mexico, Brazil, the Russian Federation, China, the Philippines, India, South Africa, and Viet Nam. The secret of Castro's staying power, I believe, can be found by unraveling the approach he used to pursue the larger freedom. The remainder of this essay will focus on this issue. The start point in this analysis will be an exploration of the interplay between race and nationality. The centrality of Afro-Cubans and mulattos in the past, present, and future of Cuban society makes understanding the place the race and race relations in the social construction of Cuban nationalism crucial to finding out the secret to Castro's resiliency.

## **Race and Nationality**

Cuban nationality was born in the 19<sup>th</sup> century independence wars against the Spanish Crown. The battle for freedom started out as simply an anticolonial struggle, but quickly gained an antiracist dimension that gave birth to the novel idea of a *raceless nationality*; an ideal continues to dominate Cuban life and culture. What factors transformed the revolutionary war against Spain into an anti-colonial and anti-racist struggle for Cuban independence?

## **The Haitian Revolution**

To start, the Haitian Revolution of 1791 had a profound impact on the development of Cuban society. This bloody rebellion left Haiti's sugar industry in ruin, and this enabled Cuba to replace Haiti as the world's leading producer of sugar. This created a dilemma for the conservative white planters. On one hand, the labor demands of the sugar industry led to the importation of thousands of African slaves, while growth of the slave population increased the possibility of a Haitian style revolution. The conservatives did not want to risk their new position in the world market by arousing slaves with talk about "freedom" and "independence" from Spain. Content with the prosperity built largely on the forced labor of slaves; they preferred remaining a Spanish colony to freedom and independence.

Not all planters felt that way. Carlos Manuel de Cespedes, a prominent sugar planter and lawyer in the eastern province, preferred freedom and independence to being a colonial subject. On October 10, 1868, Cespedes freed his slaves and called upon them to join him and other anti-colonial planters in a rebellion against the Spanish Crown. Thousands of slaves joined the insurgency to fight for their own freedom as well as Cuba's independence. The inclusion of Afro-Cubans in the rebellion was not a benevolent act of philanthropy. It was done out of necessity. Given the position of conservative whites and their allies, there could be no independence war without the participation of Afro-Cubans. Historians, for example, estimate that at least 60 percent of the rebel army was composed of men of color, including about 40 percent of the officers. Black insurgents were full participants in the war, and those who rose through the ranks to hold positions of captains, colonels, and generals exercised authority over both black and white soldiers.

Among those Afro-Cubans rising to power was the Bronze Titan, Antonio Maceo. Within days after the insurgency started, Maceo joined the rebellion. He distinguished himself as a soldier with extraordinary skills and quickly rose to the rank of general. Maceo went on to become the most feared and the most popular leader of the independence war. Thus, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century age of virulent racism, Cuba built a powerful multiracial anticolonial army, replete with black officers and a charismatic black leader that appealed to Cubanos across the colorline.

To counter this development, Spanish authorities and their allies raised the specter of race. They called the anti-colonial revolution a race war and accused Maceo of attempting to turn Cuba into another Haiti. Among whites, the mere mention of *Haiti* resurrected images of black supremacy, the raping of white women, the murder of their husbands, fathers, and children, the posturing of self-anointed black emperors, and the annihilation of wealth and property. Progressive anticolonial white and black leaders had no choice but to rebut these racist arguments. To achieve this goal, they reconceptualized nationality, blackness, and the place of people of color in the would-be nation; and, in the process, they constructed the powerful ideal of a *raceless nationality*, rooted in an antiracist and egalitarian philosophical worldview.

Jose Marti, the white son of a Spaniard and a Cuban, who in 1892 founded the Cuban Revolutionary Party in New York, said *Cuban means more than white, mulatto or black men. The souls of white men and Negroes have arisen together from the battlefields where they fought and died.* The goal of the progressive anti-colonial leaders was to build a nation where there would be *no blacks or whites, only Cubans.* This ideology of a *raceless nation* created a powerful language that black rebels could also use to condemn the racism of their fellow insurgents, as well as their Spanish enemies. The rhetoric of a *raceless nation* notwithstanding, the *split* between conservative and progressive whites did not go away, and the conservative ultimately won.

After the death of Marti on May 19, 1895, Maceo became the most popular leader of the insurgency. When he was killed on December 7, 1896, a devastating blow was delivered to the independence movement and the ideal of a *raceless nation*. Indeed, some scholars, me included, believe that Maceo death was the result of a conspiracy by conservative whites. At any rate, in 1898, the United States intervened in the war and, after the defeat of the Spaniards, set up a provisional government, and negotiated the peace treaty on behalf of the Cubans.

Although Cuba was given its formal independence in 1901, the United States influenced the political process and dominated its economy throughout the 1901 to 1959 period. For example, most Spanish industries were taken over by the United States companies and the U.S. was the country's most important trading partner and its most important sugar market. On the

eve of the January Revolution, the U.S. accounted for 67 percent of Cuba's exports and 70 percent of its imports. U.S. capital controlled 90 percent of Cuba's mines; 80 percent of its public utilities; 50 percent of its railroads; 40 percent of its sugar production; and 25 percent of its bank deposits. It is believed that American firms were making a profit of \$77 million from their Cuban investments, while employing less than one percent of the country's population.<sup>3</sup> The United States also influenced the Cuban social world. For example, its notion of race helped to shape white attitudes toward blacks, but did not erase the *raceless nation* ideal. However, during the Republican Era, between 1901 and 1959, the conservatives used the concept to thwart efforts of Afro-Cubans to seriously challenge the white-dominated sociopolitical structure and to foster the myth of the existence of racial equality. Simply by declaring that Cuba had built a colorblind society, whites attempted to silence black opposition.

### **Freedom Denied**

Cuban independence did not change the conditions of life among Afro-Cubans and mulattos. They continued to face racial discrimination and economic marginalization, and this led to the formation of *the Independent Party of Color*. By establishing a black independent political party, Afro-Cubans and mulattos planned to fight for their rights within the democratic framework set up by the new government. However, whites, fearful of the dangers of political activism by blacks and mulattos, many of whom were veterans of the revolutionary wars, passed a law prohibiting the establishment of political organizations along racial lines. Blacks refused to obey this anti-democratic measure, and on May 20, 1912 the government crushed Afro-Cuban resistance. The army and militias arrested and massacred people of color across the island, killing from 3000 to 6000 over a two month period.

The massacre of 1912 kept Afro Cubans from organizing along racial lines and made the struggle for equality and racial justice part of the overall struggle of Cubans against various U.S. backed political regimes. In 1959, when Fidel Castro seized political power, he said the Revolution represented the fulfillment and embodiment of the 19<sup>th</sup> century patriotic ideals, which were thwarted by the intervention of the United States, and he vowed to continue its anti-imperial

and anti-racist legacy. Castro understood that Afro-Cubans had been the most consistent and diehard supporters of the 19<sup>th</sup> century independent wars. As long as blacks and mulattos supported the 1959 revolution, he surmised, it would endure. For this reason, Castro made dismantling the structures of racial inequality a top priority. However, during the Soviet Alliance years, the *raceless nation* ideal led to a minimization of racial issues and the continuing legacy of racism. However, after 1989, the de-Sovietization of Cuba led to a redefinition of the place of race in Cuban society. The crisis again reminded Castro of the importance of maintaining support among Afro-Cubans.

Today, while Cuba is far from a racial paradise, Afro-Cubans and mulattos know that they are dependent on state action for economic, social, and racial justice, and they are fearful that they could be the big losers in a political transition from Castro's Cuba to some other entity. As the same time, their support of the regime is not automatic, and its continuation will depend on Castro's successful management of the socioeconomic and racial complexities of the Special Period. Our story now shifts to a case study of Havana, where we will explore this issue in context of the question of how Cuba is pursuing the quest of a larger freedom.

## **Havana**

Havana is the capital of Cuba. It is a city of 2.2 million people that sprawls across 463 square miles. Composed of 15 municipalities, which are political units similar to wards or councilmatic districts, it has a population that is about seventy percent black and mulatto with the remainder being white. More than 500 years old, Havana is a timeless place with rhythms of life that vary greatly from neighborhood to neighborhood. The old city, where the tourist district is located, is clustered about the Bay of Havana. Here, is found the finest collections of colonial architecture in the Americas. As a consequence, in 1980, UNESCO named Old Havana, or Habana Vieja, a world heritage site. On the flipside, many of the neighborhoods and communities that formed after the 1959 Revolution are found in the eastern section of the city; while the western part of the city is the economic/political hub of the contemporary city. This area is characterized by the exotic neighborhoods of the old Cuban elite, big hotels, fancy night clubs,

and embassies. In the South and southwestern parts of the city are the outer lying suburban communities, which are characterized by a small town and rural atmosphere.

### **Making Ends Meet**

In Havana, although the conditions of life vary greatly from neighborhood to neighborhood, because of the highly centralized nature of the governance process, the struggle to make ends meet unfolds in a similar manner, regarding of one's circumstances in life. The first step in understanding how Cuba is pursuing the larger freedom is to gain insight into the battle of Cubanos to cover their basic expenses. Grasping this reality is the start point in our analysis.

### **The Neighborhood as Place**

Cuba is a poor country where the average worker earns about 300 pesos a month, which is equivalent to only about \$12.00 a month USD. However, because of the magnitude of government subsidies, the strength of the social safety net, and the Cuban tradition of neighborliness, understanding the *actual* financial situation of families and households requires more than simply knowing the wage level of workers. The starting point in this process of understanding the financial situation of families and households is to unpack and make comprehensible the neighborhood context.

Cuban neighborhoods are highly stable places where people live together for many years. In this setting, the sustained interaction among neighbors make it possible for them to form social connections and networks based on the principles of trust, reciprocity, and norms of behavior that facilitate collaboration and cooperation for mutual benefit. The combined effect of trust, networks, and reciprocity is the creation of a dense interlocking system of relations between individuals and groups that enable people to act in mutually supportive ways. Thus, the hyper-stability of neighborhood makes it possible for residents to work together on a variety of issues, which reinforces the bonds of trust and reciprocity.

## **Mass Homeownership**

Mass homeownership and a non-market system of residential development are the keys to neighborhood stability in Cuba. After the revolution, Castro eliminated the market-based housing system, but still allowed Cubans to privately own the places where they lived. By taking the profitability out of homeownership and by capping housing costs at 10% of a person's income, the regime made housing affordable and brought homeownership within the reach of every Cuban. As a result, about 85% of Cubans now own the house or apartment in which they live.

The cultural value of *remaining in place*, even after family or household income increases, also reinforces neighborhood stability. The government further strengthens this trend by making it difficult for people to move. The severe housing shortage is the primary reason the government discourages residential mobility. To change locations, a person has to go through a series of bureaucratic steps, including getting a new personal identification card. Even so, people can and do change residential locations. The key to making this happen is to find someone willing to change dwelling units.

## **Family and Household Structure**

Family and household structure is another factor that influences the struggle to *make ends meet*. One unintended consequence of the housing shortage was the formation of numerous multigenerational households. Almost no one lives alone in Cuba. This is important because all working age members of a household usually work, and those household members who are retired or disabled receive a pension. This means that most households have multiple incomes. Moreover, many household incomes are augmented by remittances from family or friends living abroad, moonlighting, and/or working in the informal economy.

Remittances refer to money or goods sent to relatives or friends living in another country. Since the onset of the Special Period, remittances have become an extremely important source of income for many households. This is not only true in Cuba, but throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. For example, in 2003, according to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, the region received 33 billion dollars in remittances. When clothing,

appliances and other non-monetary goods are added to the list, the value of remittances is even higher.

In Cuba, remittances have become an important factor in helping families cover basic expenses since 1989. For instance, in 2003 Cuban received from 915 million to 1.2 billion dollars in remittances, with about 90 percent of the money coming from the United States. Wages and remittances notwithstanding, hard times is a characteristic feature of everyday life and culture. As a result, many Cubans say they have to move like a snake to make ends meet. Thus, a surprisingly large numbers of people engage in a wide range of activities in the *informal economy*, including selling cigars, providing varied services to tourists, paddling food to vendors and households, and illegally renting videos, cars, and rooms.

The government is aware of these illegal activities and even knows the people who are involved in them. But the Castro regime also knows that because people are in economic dire straits, they are likely to engage in illegal activities to ease hard times. So, rather than *crack down*, they maintain a *flexible* and *tolerant* attitude, based on what I call, **the Whitney Houston Rule**, "*It's not right, but its okay.*" As long as illegal activities do not rise above an indeterminant threshold, they are allowed to persist. If, however, they do rise above this *threshold*, they are pushed back to acceptable levels. Cubans intuitively know where the *threshold* is located and rarely cross it. So, Castro's tolerant attitude toward these illegal activities serves as a social safety valve by giving Cubanos the freedom to use their *inventiveness* and *creativity* to bolster their incomes.

Earlier, I mentioned that the average Cuban worker earned about 300 pesos a month or \$12 USD. However, Cubans are engaged in a wide range of occupations. So, there are tremendous variations in earning from person to person and from household to household. Nonetheless, wages refer to the revenue side of the coin; only by discovering the cost of living can we determine the real value of a worker's earnings. So, we pose the question, "*What will the wages of workers buy?*"

To develop insight into these questions, Cuban social workers interviewed forty residents on my behalf, and I visited a number of shops, stores, and markets in the San Isidro

neighborhood to determine how much various commodities cost. For the purposes of this presentation, I will discuss the cost of housing, food, medicine, education, transportation, recreation, and clothing.

## **Housing**

The cost of housing in Cuba is very low. Mortgages and rents are capped at 10% of a person's income, and because many homeowners have paid off their mortgage, they have no housing costs. Of the forty people interviewed for this project, only two persons reported having any type of housing expenses. Additionally, households receive subsidies on all utilities, including water, electricity, gas, and telephone. Thus, most households spend only a small portion of their income on housing related expenses.

## **Food**

Food is the most costly item on most household budgets. A major goal of the revolution was to assure that people had healthy diets with the appropriate nutritional values. To achieve this goal, the government issued a ration book, called the *libreta*, to every household, regardless of income level. Each household member is assigned a quota of foods that can be purchased at low prices. The *libreta*, however, covers only about 50 percent of a household's food costs. The remaining groceries, including household items such as soap, toothpaste, and toilet paper, must be obtained in pesos or dollars from the free market, government markets, or *dollar stores*. Although foods are much cheaper in pesos markets and stores, people prefer shopping in *dollar stores* because the variety is greater.

Some residents also maintain small gardens, raise chickens, and engage to increase their food supply. However, it should be stressed, *no one is starving in Cuba*. People have enough to eat, although they may not be able to purchase the foods they desire. For example, some of my friends say they get tired of eating chicken all the time; they want some beef, preferably a steak.

## **Medicine and Education**

In Cuba, although health care and medicine are free, there are some costs generated by these services. When a person visits a family doctor or needs to enter the hospital, there are no costs. For example, while in the hospital, all food, medication, or other materials used in the patient's care and treatment are free. However, people must pay for the medicines that are consumed outside the hospitals. Based on an analysis of our interviews, for some families, the cost of medicines can be high, even though they are subsidized by the government.

Likewise, education is free in Cuba, and families are given vouchers for uniforms and other school supplies. However, if students use up their quota of writing supplies, they must purchase them. Moreover, schools will often have activities that require the purchase of items in order to participate. Although these expenses vary, they can still have a significant impact on the affected families.

## **Transportation, other Costs, and Clothing**

Transportation, social, recreational, and cultural activities are very cheap in Cuba. For example, the cost of a bus is .20 to .40 pesos, depending on the bus type. Cuban taxis are also very cheap. For less than a dollar, a person can go almost anywhere in the city. Also, because Cuba is very safe, hitch hiking is commonplace. Cultural activities are very inexpensive. For example, it only cost about five cents USD to go to the movies. Night clubs, sporting events, musical concerts and the live are inexpensive.

Surprisingly, most people interviewed for this project spent very little money on clothes. This was unexpected. Cubans are well-dressed, and I assumed that clothing costs represented a larger share of the household budget, but it did not. Friends that I questioned indicated that they received most of their clothes from friends living abroad. This suggests that remittances may be an important source of clothing for many Cubans. In summary, the cost of living in Cuba is mitigated by substantial government subsidies and by multiple sources of household revenues and income. This combined with the relatively cheap cost of living suggest that most Cubans do not have trouble *making ends meet*.

Life is nonetheless difficult, and people must muster considerable ingenuity to cover their basic expenses, but Cubanos do not live on the brink of desperation, like the residents of many third world. For example, Cubans are not compelled to sell body parts, work in sweat shops, or force their children to get jobs, just so they can make ends meet. Indeed, a growing number of young Cubans are refusing to take jobs, which they consider too low-paying or boring.

At the same time, many Cubans want to raise their living standard and make their lives easier. In this sense, *the Castro regime may be the victim of its own success. As people move beyond the making ends meet threshold, their expectations rise, and they place new and greater demands on the government.* Even so, some Cubans are still upbeat about their lives and the economic situation in Cuba. For example, Ramon Ortiz, who sells fish and chicken at a neighborhood shop, says, "We live in tranquility. We're not rich, but we're happy. I have no desire to leave my country. I have everything I need right here."

### **The Cornerstones of Development: Health and Education**

Amartya Sen, who won the 1998 Nobel Prize for economics for his work in welfare and development economics, argues that health care and education are the cornerstones of development. Without success in these two areas, he says, individuals will not be able to partake in creating their own livelihood, governing their own affairs, or participating in self-government.

#### **Health Care**

Sen's notion of the relationship between health and development for freedom crystallizes the reasons why Castro made health care one of the defining elements of the Revolution. When the rebels seized power in 1959, health care was concentrated in the cities and offered primarily through a network of private clinics. The delivery of health care services in the countryside was almost non-existent. Then, during the first years of the revolution more than half the doctors in the country fled. The collapse of the pre-revolutionary health care system, gave the rebels a unique opportunity to reconstruct that system from the bottom up.

The ideology that guided this rebuilding process was based on the principle that health care is a right and a responsibility of the state. Castro believed that good health was central to achieving high levels of education and culture, intellectual and physical development, and of reaching the optimal levels of work capacity. So, he based Cuba's health system on primary care and rooted it in wellness, which the World Health Organization defined as the absence of disease combined with a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being. The Cubans took this definition one step farther by arguing that health and well-being must be directly linked to a person's material environment. Because Castro believed that good health was the single most important quality of life indicator in any society, he thought that government should assume full responsibility for its delivery.

Decentralization was the key to making this system of health care delivery work. To operationalize this concept, Cuba launched the family doctor and nurse program in 1984. The idea was to place a family doctor and nurse team in every neighborhood. To immerse them in the neighborhood environment in which they work, the doctor and nurse were required to live in the communities where they worked. Each family doctor and nurse team has a patient load of about 120 to 130 families, and their work is supported by a higher level network of polyclinics and hospitals where more advanced care is given. Cuba's ability to deliver extensive neighborhood health services is based on a medical school system that has produced about one doctor for every 183 people, which is the highest doctor-to-population ratio in the world.

The Cuban medical system has an international component. Through its medical diplomacy program, Castro has sent hundreds of doctors to countries throughout Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa. In 1999, to increase the number of physicians in third world countries, Cuba founded the Latin American School of Medical in Havana. Students attending the school are given free tuition, board, and textbooks, along with a stipend to help defray expenses. Ironically, in 2002, at the request of the U.S. Black Congressional Caucus, U.S. students started attending the medical school, also free of charge. Today, there are about sixty U.S. citizens enrolled in the Latin American school of medicine. When researchers focus on the quality of

health care in Cuban, they rarely examine the interplay among active living, nutrition, health care delivery, and the positive health outcomes observed in this country.

The argument here is that one of the unintended consequences of the Special Period was the creation of a healthy neighborhood environment that spawned a culture of active living and healthy eating. For example, in terms of active living, the transportation crisis transformed urban places into walking cities where people walked for pleasure and transportation and where they rode bicycles for commuting and transporting goods. Meanwhile, the lack of elevators in many buildings made *stair climbing* a daily ritual, while dancing and outdoor sports were promoted as integral parts of cultural life. Collectively, these activities ensured that most Cubans obtained sufficient cardiovascular workouts.

On another level, the food crisis and the lack of pesticides caused Cuba to become a world leader in urban agriculture, organic food production, and the use of traditional medicines. The availability of fresh foods, including meats, vegetables, and fruits combined with the absence of U.S. style fast foods meant that many Cubans had a healthy diet. When a decentralized health care system is added to this equation, it is easier to understand why the Cuban health outcomes are so impressive. The bottom line is that Castro has developed a health care system, which has made Cubans, no matter what their life circumstances, among the healthiest people in the world. After the 1959 Revolution, health care was one defining element of the revolution, and universal education the other.

## **Education**

Since the beginning of the revolution, Cuba has maintained one of the most highly educated populations in the world, despite severe shortages of basic educational equipment. These issues notwithstanding, Cuba's educational system is still considered by many to be the best in Latin America and the Caribbean. For example, a 1998 study by UNESCO found that Cuban primary school students significantly outperformed their counterparts in other Latin American countries in mathematics and language.

One reason for the high performance of the Cuban primary schools is due the linkages between teachers and students and between schools and community. Many primary school teachers live in the communities where they work, and this make possible regular interaction among parents, teachers, and community members. In this setting, parents and teachers know each other and feel comfortable communicating. For example, parents will contact the teachers when they have problems, and if the child have issues at school, the teacher will contact the parents. On the flip side, many teachers establish positive, interactive relations with their students.

Education is also viewed as a shared responsibility, and many parents are intimately involved with their children's education. They regularly attend monthly parent council meetings and help their children with homework. This sense of connectivity is reflected in parental visits to the school and ongoing communication between parents and teachers. It is also reflected in the parental concern about the expertise of the young teachers, who have been recruited through the teacher-emergency program. Students are also encouraged to take an active part in their education. For example, students take a leading role in morning assembly and are encouraged to voice their opinions about the schooling process.

*School management* is guided by the notion that *education is everybody's responsibility*. In this context, children are expected to participate in activities such as cleaning the school, fixing broken facilities, and the like. Parents also expected to help the school get needed equipment and school materials. For example, in the San Isidro neighborhood, concerned parents helped a nearby school obtain a new table. Schooling is also connected with other community-based activities, such as participating in recycling drives, nutritional campaign, working in community gardens, and going to various after school programs and recreational activities. While Cuban schools remain the envy of Latin American, they nevertheless face many challenges, which are related to the Special Period and the quest of Cuba to reinventing itself.

## **The Challenges Ahead: The Quest to Reinvent Cuba**

When the economic crisis hit Cuba in 1989, the country had three options: Bad, Very Bad, and Terrible. Within this framework, the Castro regime chose to reinvent Cuba by introducing market elements into the political economy, legalizing the dollar, allowing limited small business development, and transforming international tourism into the most important sector of the new economy. In less than a decade, these reforms caused tourism to move from an incidental source of income to the country's most important industry. Historically, Cubans said, "Without sugar, there is no country." Now, they say, "Without tourism, there is no country."

The problem is that international tourism and the economic reforms accompanying it opened up a Pandora's Box that spawned the emergence of a new form of structural inequality, the revival of racism, the erosion of socialist culture, and the creation of restlessness among young people. Within this context, the greatest challenge facing Cuba in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be management of the retrogressive forces unleashed by the rise of international tourism and market reforms.

The problem is this: International tourism is a unique phenomenon that transforms the physical environment into a commodity that must be experienced in order to be consumed. The tourism infrastructure must not only provide the consumer with a comfortable environment, but also offer them a unique, authentic, enjoyable, and exciting experience. The building of such a tourist infrastructure in socialist Cuba was bound to create problems. The goal of the 1959 Revolution was to build a society that shuns individualism, the iconization of private property, and brazen materialism. International tourism is antithetical to this ideological perspective. No matter how packaged, international tourism will undermine socialist values and generate discontent among Cubans. The primary goal of the tourist industry was to generate the hard currency Cuba needed to operate in the world economy. To achieve this objective, Castro also legitimized the dollar in 1993, allowed Cuban families to receive remittances from the United States, and allowed some forms of small business development to take place. These economic reforms combined with international tourism to create a new set of challenges for the country to confront.

The legalization of the dollar made an unintended frontal assault on the Cuban egalitarian principles. To capture the American dollar, Castro established government run mercados and other stores where only the dollar could be used to purchase goods and services. To attract customers, the *dollar stores* carried a greater diversity of goods and sold higher quality products than those available in peso stores. Consequently, those with access to dollars could obtain a higher standard of living. In Cuba's refashioned economy, a person could obtain dollars only through remittances, wages in the tourist industry, and from the informal economy.

The problem is that whites dominate the U.S. Cuban exile community and they hold the best paying jobs in the tourist industry. This differential access to the dollar enabled a growing number of whites to obtain a higher standard of living than blacks. Within this context, access to tourists and/or employment in the tourist industry was another important source of dollars. Toward this end, the high wages available in various branches of the tourist industry led to the dislocation of workers. For example, an engineer or doctor could make more waiting tables in a fancy hotel or driving a taxi than in their chosen profession. So, increasing numbers of professionals have started moonlighting in tourist occupations. Moreover, because of wage differentials between tourism and socially more important sectors, such as teaching, a growing number of young people are leaving these traditional jobs for more lucrative professions.

Small businesses that cater to tourist have also become an important sector in the economy. A growing number of Cubans are opening up small restaurants called Paradaros, renting rooms out in their homes, driving taxis, and engaging in a wide range of informal tourist based operations. The money Cubans can make in these occupations is much greater than in others of employment, and this is creating serious challenges for the government. The problem is that the tensions unleashed by the tourism, the dollar economy, and the introduction of market reforms are undermining the socialist values, threatening the social development strategy, increasing the growth of western materialism, and generating unrest among young people. Managing these complexities is the great challenge that Cuba will face in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Response to the Challenge

The government has responded to the challenges spawned by the reinventing Cuban Society by adopting an aggressive policy of ongoing social intervention. The goal of this process is threefold. First, to provide people with varied outlets or *safety values* for their frustrations so that dissatisfaction never becomes explosive. Second, to formulate and implement social and economic policies designed to mitigate hard times and to generate symbolic capital, which lets the masses know their government cares. Lastly, to formulate and implement policies designed to give young people hope by making them part of the nation building process and by providing them with opportunities for economic advance.

Time will not permit me to discuss these issues in detail, but I do want to highlight a few points that will illustrate this policy. First, during the Special Period, the government has continually expanded democracy by allowing religious groups to participate in the governance process, protecting the rights of gays and Lesbians, promoting religious freedom, and bolstering participatory democracy in the neighborhoods. Moreover, as complaints against their policy of separating tourist from Cubanos intensified, it was relaxed.

Second, the government demonstrates their sensitivity to hard times by giving Cubanos greater freedom to pursue economic activities in the informal economy. The doctrine, "it's not right, but it's okay," remains their guide to action. Moreover, Castro recently announced that all Cuban workers were receiving a 50 percent increase in their wages. This accomplishes two goals. On the one hand, it deflected the criticism of many for placing a 20% tax on US dollars, which especially hit those hard those families receiving remittances. Secondly, it really helped those Cubanos who do not receive remittances from abroad. At the same time, the recent increase in all social welfare payments furthered eased the burden of some families, while simultaneously providing the government with symbolic capital.

Third, over the past few years, the government initiated several programs designed to lessen the unrest among young people. In the late 1990s, it made *Cuban Rap* a national music, which sent young people the message that the government understands their frustrations. Second, they initiated a social work program among young people. An army of young people

between 18 and 24 were recruited to become social workers, who worked in their neighborhoods. Their job is to identify and work with families that are having the most difficult time during the Special Period and to work with other neighborhood groups to solve their problems. Also, young people are being recruited as paraprofessional in the schools, so that the student to teacher ratios in primary schools can be reduced. And finally, Castro has recently initiated work-study programs targeted for young folks between 18 and 24 that have not completed high school. By providing them with education and training, it is hoped that they will be given an alternative to life in petty crime and hustling. These activities have been combined with a continued effort to integrate youthful leaders into the national leadership.

### **What is the Secret of Castro's Staying Power?**

The Miami exile community is the missing piece, which is needed to solve the puzzle of Castro's Staying Power. Because of the role this community plays in the life and culture of Cuban society, it must be accounted for. The Cuban Revolution hurt the middle-class and elites and helped the working class, especially those very low-income workers, many of whom were Afro-Cubans and mulattos, and peasants. For those groups at the bottom of society, Fidel Castro became the symbol of freedom and liberation; for the Cuban middle-class and elites, and subsequently for the Cuban American community, he was the embodiment of oppression, "the man who had robbed them of their birthright and their country."<sup>4</sup>

The exile community, however, are more than angry expatriates, simply desirous of regaining their birthright and nation.<sup>5</sup> Also, they are diehard Republicans with conservative views on foreign policy, economics, and social issues. It is an overwhelmingly white community that is about 85 percent white, 10 percent mulatto, and only 5 percent Afro-Cuban. These whites are avid capitalists, who are the most successful recent immigrants to the United States. For example, Miami's Little Havana, is an unprecedented beehive of entrepreneurial activity. There are more than 20,000 Cuban American businesses in the area; Cuban Americans controlled 35 percent of the construction industry in 1995, and were particularly influential in banking. In this

wealthy community, conservatism and radical Anti-Castroism is the social glue that holds residents together.<sup>6</sup>

Accounting for the Miami exile community is important, because if the Castro regime collapses, the Miami exile community will seize power and reshape Cuba in its own image. Afro-Cubans, mulattos, and low-income working class whites, along with the Castro regime, surely must know this. The conservatism of this group and their attitudes towards blacks is an issue that must be reckoned with at some point in time. The conservatism of the Miami exile community is also backdrop against which socialist Cuba was built.

Against this backdrop of a conservative *municipio en el exilio* 90 miles away, Fidel Castro made pursuit of the *larger freedom* the most distinctive feature of the Cuban Revolution. The mistakes and shortcomings of the regime notwithstanding, Castro placed the masses first in his effort to purify the country and make the people prosperous. By making health care and education the cornerstones of development, by constructing a strong social safety net, by taking an uncompromising antiracist stand, and by aggressively attacking barriers that stand between people and the larger freedom, Castro has been able to mitigate hard times, spawn confidence, and make the economic crisis appear less severe. This process has legitimized the government and wedded it to the masses, especially Afro-Cubans. Black support for Castro, however, is not automatic. The regime will have to aggressively fight to maintain their loyalty and support.

Yet, at the same time, the history of Afro-Cubans indicated they will act in their own interests. This means that the masses of Afro Cubans will not be willing to place their future in the hands of white conservatives in the Miami exile community and in the U.S. government, along with equally conservative blacks. Moreover, what is often overlooked in these debates is the fact that Afro Cubans and mulattos have a different vision of society from that of white Cuban conservative elites.

As an Afro Cuban friend said to me, "I want cheap clothes; good night clubs, where I don't have pay much to get in. And I want a good job and I want to be able to buy as much food as I want. A conservative government with a U.S. style market economy and U.S. style democracy will not create this world for my friend. Consequently, although Cubans constantly

complain and criticize Castro, at the end of the day, anger and frustrations notwithstanding, they will support their government. They will support the Castro regime because they believe it offers them the best hope for the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Marifeli Perez-Stable, **The Cuban Revolution: Origins, Course, and Legacy** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999):3; *Liberator's Triumphal March Through an Ecstatic Island*, *Life Magazine*, January 1959, pp. 28-29.

<sup>2</sup> James S. Olson and Judith E. Olson, **Cuban Americans: From Trauma to Triumph** (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995):111

<sup>3</sup> Alice Coulter, *Cuban Economic Development*, December 10, 2003, **Weltpolitik.net**.

<sup>4</sup> Olson and Olson, **Cuban Americans**, p. 50.

<sup>5</sup> Olson and Olson, **Cuban Americans**, p. 96-97.

<sup>6</sup> Olson and Olson, **Cuban Americans**, p. 96-97.