



Cuba Protests Could Presage Brighter Regional Future

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As video of protests in Havana circulates on social media, many are wondering about Cuba's future. Why now? What's changed for everyday Cubans? And, most importantly, what do the protests mean for the island nation's communist government and its grip on power?

"The basic economic situation is what's pushing people to go out and raise their voices," Katrin Hansing, a Baruch College anthropologist who recently conducted research in Havana, said. "But there's also a loss of fear, and once that barrier is broken and more and more people see a significant number of people have lost their fear, more and more start getting encouraged."

Ah, "fear"—the tool that police states use to suppress dissent and maintain power. That the Cuban people are increasingly setting aside their fear and gathering by the thousands, launching the largest protests in decades (if not ever) against the 62-year-old communist regime, could prove hugely important.

Indeed, were a populist uprising able to topple President Miguel Díaz-Canel, Cuba's people would get a chance to chart their own future by creating a more accountable government and a freer economy. Havana would no longer serve to inspire, or instigate, leftist revolutions that impoverish nations in the region and destabilize others in Africa.

"A regime based on fear," Soviet dissident Natan Sharansky once wrote, "must maintain increasingly tight control over its population to remain in power, and such control inevitably triggers a process of decay."

No one can predict, of course, when such "decay" will trigger a regime's demise—when, for instance, the Filipino people would overthrow an aging dictator in Ferdinand Marcos or the Rumanian people would topple an iron-fisted strongman in Nicolae Ceausescu, as both did in the late 1980s.

Nor can anyone predict what the coming days will bring to what President John F. Kennedy called the "imprisoned island" of Cuba—not with Díaz-Canel denouncing protestors in nation-wide speeches, unleashing police to disperse or arrest them and encouraging plain-clothes supporters to beat them up.

Nevertheless, signs of potential change abound.

For one thing, Cubans are less fearful, because they're more desperate. Amid Cuba's biggest economic crisis since the Soviet Union's demise—which cost Havana its largest benefactor—the economy is shrinking while inflation is soaring. The country is desperately short of water, food, fuel and medicine; long lines to buy basic items and frequent power outages are constants of daily life; and the health care system is collapsing while a second coronavirus wave ravages the country.

In addition, the protests are fueled in large measure by a regime-induced expansion of internet service that Havana will find hard to roll back. The regime brought 3G mobile phone service to the island in 2019, and activists, artists and young people are now using it to encourage one another.

Moreover, protest is proving contagious, with more people discarding their fears and, by way of example, emboldening others to do so. "It's very hard to be the first person to go out and protest," a 31-year-old restaurant worker told the *Washington Post*. "But if someone else does, all of Cuba will join."

Were the protests to topple the regime, the benefits could prove transformative within and beyond Cuba.

In the 2021 edition of *Freedom in the World*, pro-democracy NGO Freedom House labeled Cuba "not free" in terms of political rights and civil liberties. It reported that "Cuba's one-party communist state outlaws political pluralism, bans independent media, suppresses dissent, and severely restricts basic civil liberties." Over the last year, the regime expanded "interrogations, threats, detentions, raids, and exorbitant fines" against journalists and activists, and prevented more of them from traveling abroad.

For decades under Fidel Castro, Havana worked closely with Moscow to foment communist revolution far from home. In the 1970s, for instance, the Cubans sent troops and weapons to influence civil wars in Africa including, among other places, Angola, Ethiopia, Namibia and Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe).

Castro extended his influence across Latin America as well. In the 1980s, the Soviets and Cubans invested heavily in Nicaragua, where the leftist Sandinistas had ousted the U.S.-backed Anastasio Somoza, and El Salvador, where leftist insurgents sought to unseat a U.S.-backed right-wing government.

In 2004, Castro and Venezuelan strongman Hugo Chavez created the Bolivarian Alternative of the Americas to nourish socialist revolution. When, in 2007, Venezuelan voters rejected Chavez's effort to run for reelection repeatedly, Chavez turned to Castro, leading to bilateral agreements that empowered Cuba to reshape Venezuela's military and train its soldiers and intelligence agents. Cuba's assistance helped ensure the survival of Venezuela's beleaguered president Nicolas Maduro.

What will the coming days bring? We don't know, but the protests on the streets of Havana and other cities make clear that Cubans want a break from their rigid, authoritarian past. Here's hoping they achieve it.

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