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Cuba Emerging from COVID

Cuba sale del COVID

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ABSTRACT

Cuba experienced continuing economic and political crises throughout 2022, prolonging a slump that resulted from COVID's impact, the effects of US sanctions, and muddled economic policies. The popular anger and frustration that erupted in nationwide protests on July 11, 2021, deepened into a crisis of legitimacy for the government: the foundational social compact of the Revolution—to provide social equity and economic security for all—was not being kept. While ever greater access to communication technologies enabled the citizenry to impact some public policies, questioning of the political system remained off limits. Despite facing political and economic challenges that are frequently the prelude to instability, the Cuban system continued to enjoy sources of resilience characteristic of authoritarian durability. The prospect of a fundamental challenge to regime persistence was therefore unlikely in the near-term, but the corrosive effects of its problems posed significant risks for the future.

Keywords: Cuban politics; Cuban economy; COVID in Cuba; Cuban civil society; migration; July 11 protests; authoritarian resilience; US Cuba sanctions;

RESUMEN

Cuba experimentó continuas crisis económicas y políticas a lo largo de 2022, prolongando una recesión que resultó del impacto de COVID, los efectos de las sanciones de EE. UU. y políticas económicas confusas. La rabia popular que irrumpió en las protestas sociales del 11 de julio, 2021, se convirtió en crisis de legitimidad para el gobierno: el pacto social fundacional de la Revolución —dar equidad social y seguridad económica para todos— no se cumplía. Si bien el acceso cada vez mayor a las tecnologías de la comunicación permitió a la ciudadanía incidir en algunas políticas públicas, el cuestionamiento del sistema político permaneció fuera de los límites. A pesar de enfrentar desafíos políticos y económicos que con frecuencia son el preludio de la inestabilidad, el sistema cubano continuó gozando de fuentes de resiliencia propias de la perdurabilidad autoritaria. Por lo tanto, la perspectiva de un desafío fundamental a la persistencia del régimen era poco probable en el corto plazo, pero los efectos corrosivos de sus problemas planteaban riesgos significativos para el futuro.

Palabras clave: *Política Cubana; Economía Cubana; COVID en Cuba; Sociedad civil Cubana; migración; protestas del 11 de Julio; resiliencia autoritaria; sanciones EEUU-Cuba.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Twenty-twenty-two was supposed to be a year of recovery for Cuba. Almost everyone on the island was vaccinated against COVID-19 with Cuba's own vaccines, and the reopening of international travel was expected to revive the tourism industry and boost remittances. The resulting increase in foreign exchange earnings would enable Cuba to import more food, fuel, and medicine, easing the shortages that had badly eroded public confidence in the government.

Instead, 2022 proved to be a year of continuing economic and political crises marked by a parade of disasters. A natural gas explosion demolished the newly renovated Hotel Saratoga, one of the finest in Havana and a symbol of Cuban tourism. A fire touched off by lightning destroyed half of the Matanzas oil port and storage facility, the nation's largest. Hurricane Ian, a Category Four storm, leveled large parts of the western province of Pinar del Rio, knocking out power to the entire island and leaving thousands homeless. An antiquated electrical grid finally gave way, plunging people into darkness almost daily as the demand for power routinely exceeded supply. The war in Ukraine drove up international prices of food and fuel, the very things Cuba most needed to import.

Then there was the burden of things that did not change. Most of the U.S. economic sanctions imposed by President Donald Trump remained in place. The tourism industry did not recover at the pace predicted, a recovery that Minister of Economy and Planning Alejandro Gil called essential for the economy. Inflation unleashed in 2021 by the *Tarea Ordenamiento*, the currency and exchange rate unification, did not subside. The productivity of state enterprises remained poor, and agricultural production continued to decline.

As a result, there was no relief in 2022 from the economic hardships that began with the intensification of U.S. sanctions in 2019 and the onset of the pandemic. The popular anger and frustration that erupted in nationwide protests on July 11, 2021, deepened into a crisis of legitimacy for the government. Then-president Raúl Castro promised that no one would be left behind when he launched his economic reform project in 2011, but with the reforms unfinished and economy stalled, much of the population felt left behind, unable to meet their basic needs. The foundational social compact of the Revolution—to provide social equity and economic security for all—was not being kept.

Despite facing political and economic challenges that are frequently the prelude to instability, especially in authoritarian regimes (Haggard and Kaufman 1996), the Cuban system continued to enjoy sources of resilience characteristic of authoritarian durability (Levitsky and Way 2022). The prospect of a fundamental challenge to regime persistence was therefore unlikely in the near-term, but the corrosive effects of its problems, if not addressed, posed significant risks for the future.

This article analyzes the pivotal developments of 2022, drawing on an extensive review of primary sources and interviews as well as the scholarly literature

on Cuban politics, economy, and society. It is also informed by both co-authors' first-hand observations and conversations with journalists, scholars, entrepreneurs, and diplomats in Havana during December of that year. Our aim is not only to illuminate the current state of affairs on the island but also to connect our interpretations of evolving political dynamics in Cuba with political science scholarship on the resilience of authoritarian regimes.

II. THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

In late December 2021, Minister Gil outlined the 2022 economic plan to the National Assembly. GDP was projected to grow by four percent. Inflation-- running at 69.5% percent in 2021 in official prices, but in triple digits in the informal market-- would be brought down. Tourism would rebound to 2.5 million visitors, 58 percent of the pre-COVID level, but seven times the number of 2021 arrivals. Some 500 state enterprises operating at a deficit would finally be rationalized, and the aging electrical system would be stabilized to avoid periodic blackouts (González 2021). A year later, Gil reported the disappointing results. GDP grew just two percent. Inflation in the state sector was down to 40 percent, but prices in the informal market increased far more because of the continuing depreciation of the peso against the U.S. dollar. The tourism industry hosted only 1.7 million visitors. More than 400 state enterprises were still losing money, and power outages had become a routine occurrence as the electrical grid deteriorated further (González 2022).

The weak state of the Cuban economy was due to a series of external shocks hitting an economy made vulnerable by its own internal problems (Torres Pérez 2021). The first shock hit in 2019, when President Donald Trump's administration adopted a policy of "maximum pressure" to cut off all sources of foreign exchange. Trump prohibited most travel to Cuba by non-Cuban Americans by eliminating people-to-people educational travel and drastically curtailing air service. His administration tried to interdict Venezuelan oil shipments and pressured Latin American countries to end their medical service contracts with Cuba. It activated Title III of the 1996 Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act to deter foreign investors by threatening them with litigation in U.S. courts for profiting from nationalized property. In its final months, the administration put Cuba back on the list of state sponsors of international terrorism, crippling Cuba's ability to engage in international financial activity. It also limited family remittances sent by Cuban Americans and then forced Western Union to stop wiring remittances to the island. Cash remittances fell from an estimated $3.7 billion in 2019 to $2.4 billion in 2020 and $1.9 billion in 2021 (Havana Consulting Group 2020). (In early 2023, the Biden administration allowed Western Union to resume operations as a remittance service provider.)

The COVID-19 pandemic's impact was devastating for an economy dependent on international tourism. On March 24, 2020, the government closed the island to all non-residents, shuttering the tourist sector, which had been generating

more than $3 billion annually. The number of foreign visitors fell by 75 percent in 2020, and 92 percent in 2021 (ONEI 2022a). Tourism began to gradually recover in 2022 but was still only a third of pre-pandemic levels. In Havana, major hotels were either closed or nearly empty.

In 2022, the war in Ukraine caused a jump in the prices of food and oil on the international market, two of Cuba's main imports. Food prices rose 14 percent and the United Nations' Food Price Index hit an all-time high. Russia's invasion caused crude oil prices to jump from $80 per barrel to over $120, though by the end of 2022 prices had fallen back as global economic activity slowed. Together, these shocks produced a drastic shortfall in Cuba's foreign exchange receipts, which dropped 45 percent, necessitating a 27 percent cut in imports in 2020 and a 40 percent cut in 2021 (Frank 2021). The result has been pervasive shortages of goods of every description, but most especially of food. medicine, and fuel.

External shocks of this magnitude would present a major challenge even to a healthy economy, but they struck a Cuban economy made vulnerable by persistent structural weaknesses (Sánchez Egozcue 2020). Many of the problems laid out by Raúl Castro in 2011 as the rationale for launching his economic reform program remained unsolved when the external shocks hit. Domestic productivity, especially in agriculture, was low and showing few signs of improving. A dual currency and exchange rate system distorted prices, incentivizing imports and discouraging exports. The domestic rate of investment was half the Latin American average, not enough to maintain the existing capital stock. Despite government efforts to attract foreign investment, investors remained skeptical of Cuba's business climate and fearful of liability in U.S. courts under Title III of the 1996 Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act. The income of most Cubans was not enough to meet basic needs, forcing them into the informal sector to make ends meet.

The government's attempt to solve the dual exchange rate problem backfired, triggering runaway inflation. On January 1, 2021, it implemented the long-awaited unification of the currency and exchange rates, creating a single Cuban peso and exchange rate of 24:1 to the U.S. dollar. Economists like Pavel Vidal (2020) predicted that the reform would touch off inflation, so the government raised state salaries to match the anticipated increase in prices. But inflation in both the state and informal sectors far exceeded government predictions, erasing the wage increases. The basic basket of goods on which the government pegged the minimum wage in January 2021 had doubled in price by 2022 (Figueredo Reinaldo et al. 2021). In August 2022, the government was forced to devalue the peso to 120 to the dollar to compete with the black market, but by December, the black-market rate was 175:1. Inflationary pressures were magnified by the availability of many goods only in foreign exchange currency stores. As in the 1990s, access to hard currency became a key determinant of standards of living and a driver of growing inequality. State sector

employees with no access to hard currency had to turn to black market resellers to buy, at steep mark-ups, goods originally purchased from the hard currency stores. The erosion in real wages was so severe that economist Pedro Monreal (Diario de Cuba 2022a) estimated that the average Cuban wage was close to the poverty line.

III. THE PACE OF REFORM

At the July 2022 meeting of the National Assembly, Minister of Economy and Planning Gil announced 75 measures to hasten economic recovery, although a number of them were framed as goals rather than operational measures (Figueredo Reinaldo et al. 2022). Among the most consequential was opening a foreign exchange market in which the government began buying and selling foreign currency at rates close to the informal rate. The government's principal motive was to capture the foreign exchange entering the country but remaining inaccessible in the informal economy. While the government formally recognized a retail exchange rate of 120:1, it continued to conduct business among state institutions at the rate of 24:1, a move that reproduced the dual exchange rates and their associated economic distortions that the painful "reordering" of exchange rates in 2021 was intended to eliminate.

On August 15, the government announced that it would open retail and wholesale marketing to foreign investors in hopes of increasing available supplies and improving the efficiency of product distribution. It remained to be seen how attractive this new opportunity would be to foreign investors. The number of micro, small, and medium enterprises (micro, pequeñas y medianas empresas, MIPYMES) continued to grow after the approval of the 2021 law defining their juridical status. In March 2022, the number MIPYMES surpassed the number of state enterprises (although the state sector still produces the bulk of GDP). At the end of 2022, there were over 7,718 MIPYMES licensed, and roughly 100 new ones being approved weekly. Fifty-two percent were conversions from previous operating "self-employed" businesses and 48 percent new businesses, suggesting that by putting the non-state sector on firmer legal ground, the government succeeded in stimulating new ventures (EFE 2023). Nevertheless, the economic reforms introduced in 2011 remained incomplete. The government seemed unwilling to make the radical changes necessary to stimulate agricultural production, open professions to private employment, or close unprofitable state enterprises. Investment continued to flow disproportionately into tourism, despite the evidence that capacity had begun to exceed demand even before the pandemic (Monreal 2019). Above all, the lack of foreign exchange currency limited the government's ability to make meaningful strides in resolving the problems of consumer goods shortages, infrastructure decay, and low productivity for lack of imported inputs.

IV. THE DEMOGRAPHIC CHALLENGE

Cuba faced a looming demographic crisis that grew dramatically worse over the course of 2022. For a number of years, the population has been aging due to a decline in fertility, an increase in life expectancy, the high level of educational and professional achievement by women, easy access to contraception and abortion, economic insecurity, and the emigration of young adults (Díaz-Briquet 2016). Since the labor force is not currently productive enough to support the population, the future outlook is dire.

Cuba's fertility rate of 1.7 is well below the levels needed to sustain its population. This is due in part to the same factors that tend to drive fertility lower in more developed countries. As women become highly educated and more active in the labor force, they tend to have fewer children (Hoorens, et al. 2011). In 2020, Cuban women comprised 39.4 percent of the employed labor force and 60.0 percent of professionals (ONEI 2022b). Contraception and abortion are free and universally available, with the result that Cuba has one of highest rates of abortion in the world. At the same time, life expectancy has risen from 64 years in 1960 to 78 in 2020 (before dropping to 74 in 2021), exceeding the regional norm (World Bank 2021). Taken together, fewer births and fewer deaths have produced the most elderly population in the Western Hemisphere.

In Cuba's case, the sources of the adverse demographic situation include two negative factors that contribute to the country's low fertility rate: economic insecurity and emigration. A persistent housing shortage forces young couples to live with their parents. That, together with low salaries and the unavailability of basic goods convinces many people to postpone childbearing. In addition, significant numbers of young adults have chosen to emigrate. This brain drain is especially serious among young professionals who are prohibited from opening private businesses in their professions. Consequently, a skilled Cuban professional has better career opportunities abroad than on the island.

The surge in emigration in 2022 aggravated an already challenging demographic picture. Economic downturns have traditionally triggered migration surges: Camarioca in 1965; Mariel in 1980; and the *balsero* crisis in 1994. Of the more than 300,000 Cubans who left the island in 2022 -- the most to have left Cuba in any single year since 1959 -- a disproportionate share were of working age. Indeed, if an estimated two percent of the population exited the island during 2022, that translates into more than four percent of the labor force (Vicent 2022).

This migratory surge represents an enormous loss of human capital for a country that invests 15 percent of its state budget on education (Marín Álvarez 2021). The loss bodes ill for prospects of strengthening high value-added sectors of the Cuban economy such as biotechnology, information technology, health care, education and even tourism services. As a decreasing share of the population is engaged in productive activity of any kind, and a high portion of those who are economically active are employed in low value-added sectors,

the economy will have ever greater difficulties generating the resources needed to support the elderly and the very young. If current demographic trends continue, by 2050, 40 percent of the population will be over 60 years old, requiring a vast expansion of the healthcare system, which is already straining to meet current demand.

The government is trying to prepare for the deluge of the elderly by opening more elder-care centers and training more doctors in geriatric specialties, but these remedies will not solve the economic dilemma of a work force too small to support the vulnerable population. The only long-term solution is increased economic productivity and opportunity that will provide the resources needed to support an aging population, provide greater economic security to prospective parents, and make emigration by young adults less likely.

The demographic challenge also has a significant political dimension. Regime legitimacy has long been constructed in part on the basis of the state's capacity to supply the population with universal education, health care, and social insurance against the ravages of old age and infirmity. The impending demographic disaster will take a toll on legitimacy and require the country's leadership to find alternative grounds for justifying their authority. Even the most dynamic economies in the world would have trouble coping with Cuba's dependency ratio, but Cuba by no means boasts a dynamic economy.

One way to conceive of the emigration spike is the classic formulation of Albert Hirschman (1970), who posited "exit" as an alternative to "voice" or "loyalty" in organizations, both public and private. The years following tentative steps toward normalizing relations with the United States occasioned some degree of optimism among Cubans seeking to build a prosperous future for themselves and their families. Once those hopes were dashed due to the reversal of U.S. policy by President Trump, followed by the economic crisis of the pandemic, there was a tendency to give up hope. The state's aggressive suppression of 2021 protests, followed by a contraction of the political space open to critical expression, contributed to people's decision to leave. Rather than confront the government, disaffected Cubans are following the path taken by so many before them—emigration.

V. THE POLITICAL CRISIS

Changes in the structure of the Cuban economy since the 1990s brought about changes in society that have important political implications. One of the founding promises of the 1959 revolution was to foster social equality, which became an important pillar of regime legitimacy (Pérez 2013). The socialization of the economy eliminated the upper class, most of which fled to the United States, and the creation of free social programs lifted the lower class out of poverty. With an estimated Gini coefficient of inequality of 0.25 in

the early decades of the revolution, Cuba was among the most equal societies in the world (Everleny 2019).

Stratification reappeared during the "Special Period" economic crisis in the 1990s, with the expansion of private sector employment and a surge in family remittances giving some Cubans access to foreign exchange currency and, consequently, a far higher standard of living than their compatriots (Espina Prieto 2008). Since 2011, when Raúl Castro launched his program of economic reforms pointing toward market socialism, Cuban society has become even more stratified. The state's inability to provide salaries covering basic necessities has pushed a large sector of the population back into poverty. Meanwhile, private businesses, small private farms, and private sector employees have done comparatively well. Other people with access to foreign exchange currency—artists, writers, elite athletes, and remittance recipients—have once again become a privileged class. Moreover, inequality has become more visible, eroding the social solidarity—the sense that "we're all in this together"-- that helped maintain social peace in the 1990s (Hansing and Optenhögel 2015).

The political consequences of this social stratification were not unforeseen. "A different scenario for the party organization will take shape, characterized by the increasing heterogeneity of sectors and groups in our society, originating from differences in their income," Raúl Castro (2016) warned the Communist Party Congress in 2016. "All this poses the challenge of preserving and strengthening national unity." Over the next several years, social sectors with divergent interests began making demands from below—a surge in political activism both within and outside of state-sponsored vehicles for participation. Prior to the development of the internet, virtually all political discourse in Cuba was initiated from above and channeled through officially authorized institutions. Vigorous at times, it was nevertheless controlled. Small dissident groups that tried to mobilize opposition outside established channels faced persecution and imprisonment, rendering them ineffectual.

The expansion of internet access enabled Cubans with common interests to connect with each other, spurring the growth of social networks constituting an independent civil society beyond state control (Henken, 2017). The internet has given rise to a free-wheeling digital public sphere in which Cuban bloggers and independent journalists offer reporting, commentary, and debate. Social media apps like Facebook have generated virtual communities of every description. People who are not explicitly dissidents but are interested in promoting specific interests and issues have found one another on social media and then convened in person to pursue common projects-- social, economic, artistic, and even political. A number of groups organized initially online came together in person to pressure the government to be more responsive to their particular special interests. They differed widely in aims, ideology, and tactics, preventing them from making common cause, but they nevertheless represented a new phenomenon in Cuban politics of grassroots activism and independent mobilization. Their diversity was illustrated by one of the first major campaigns in

which two opposing civil society groups, the churches and the LGBTQ community, battled one another.

During the 2018 national debate over the draft constitution, evangelical churches launched an unprecedented campaign, joined by the Catholic Church, against a provision legalizing same sex marriage. When the government realized how controversial the provision was, the National Assembly dropped it. A few months later, the government cancelled the 12th annual March Against Homophobia, Cuba's version of a gay pride march. Undeterred, LGBTQ activists organized their own march via social media, drawing over 100 participants. In 2022, when the same-sex marriage proposal re-emerged as part of a draft law on families, the churches renewed their active opposition and the government fought back not with repression but with its own public relations campaign, finally prevailing in a referendum on the new law (Siegelbaum 2022).

In the summer of 2018, the government proposed a series of new regulations on the rapidly growing small business private sector. Rather than just accept what they saw as crippling constraints, a coalition of the most successful entrepreneurs wrote to the Minister of Labor and Social Security explaining their objections. The ministry met with them over several months, and then rolled back some of the most onerous regulations (Rodriguez 2018). Later that year, private taxi drivers protested new government regulations that increased their costs. Many of the estimated 6,000 drivers organized a de facto work stoppage that they referred to as *El Trancón* (The Big Traffic Jam). The strike gradually subsided, but the government eventually backtracked on some of the regulations (Echarry 2018).

In April 2019, some 500 people organized via social media marched in defense of animal rights, demanding an animal protection law. In November, they organized another protest at government animal control offices in response to a rumor that officers had rounded up and killed hundreds of stray cats and dogs. Officials met with the group and the government promised to draft an animal protection law, which passed in 2021 (Acosta 2021).

The most sustained and politically challenging protests came from the arts community, sparked by Decree Law 349 requiring artists, musicians, and performers to register with the state and pay a 24 percent commission on their earnings from private engagements. It also prohibited certain content and created a corps of inspectors authorized to halt noncompliant exhibits and performances. The arts community mobilized via social media, using hashtags #NoAlDecreto349 and #artelibre, among others. Over 100 artists signed a letter to President Miguel Díaz-Canel calling for the repeal of Decree 349, and dissident artists mounted a series of symbolic protests including performance art on the steps of the Capitol. At first, the government was conciliatory, suspending implementation of the law and promising to modify it to address the artists' concerns (Marsh and Acosta 2018).

The controversy prompted the creation of the San Isidro Movement (MSI), a small group of dissident performance and hip-hop artists who bedeviled the government for the next two years with various creative protests. On November 27, 2020, the arrest of MSI hunger strikers touched off a spontaneous demonstration at the Ministry of Culture by some 300 artists of diverse ideological viewpoints, including several well-known figures. They formed an ongoing community calling themselves the 27N movement.

These and other examples revealed a two-pronged approach by the government to this evolving political milieu. When emerging interest groups made issue-specific demands that did not challenge the basic tenets of Cuba's socialist one-party system, the government tried to be responsive, conciliating rather than repressing the protestors, although protest leaders often reported subsequent harassment by the police. This relative tolerance for newly mobilized special interest groups stood in sharp contrast to the harsh, pre-emptive repression the government continued to deploy against traditional dissidents seeking fundamental changes in the political and economic system.

In addition to the expansion of grassroots politics outside traditional regime channels, elite politics was changing as well. By the close of 2022, the Cuban government faced a crisis of legitimacy. The new generation of leaders, led by President Díaz-Canel, that replaced the "historic generation" of regime founders (*los históricos*) had yet to demonstrate their capacity for effective governance. Official predictions of economic recovery and growth consistently fell short, eroding the government's credibility. Placing the blame on the U.S. embargo became less persuasive over time, even as U.S. sanctions intensified under President Trump. Among many Cubans there was a sense of exhaustion—from COVID, from blackouts, from inflation, shortages, and "*colas*" (lines). Even among loyalists, there was creeping doubt that the authorities had a workable plan to move the country forward.

Cuba's leaders intended 2022 to be a year of political as well as economic recovery. In 2021, their sense of control was shaken on July 11, when the hardships of daily life caused a small demonstration in San Antonio de los Baños, a poor suburb of Havana, to grow to thousands as protestors paraded through the streets chanting anti-government slogans. Chants of "Libertad!" (Liberty), "Abajo la dictadura" (Down with the dictatorship), "Abajo Comunismo" (Down with Communism), and "Abajo Díaz-Canel" (Down with Díaz-Canel), erupted periodically from the marchers, along with a variety of more profane references to the president. Marchers streamed the spectacle live on social media, touching off demonstrations in dozens of towns and cities across the island. This spontaneous outburst of defiance was unprecedented; nothing like it had happened since the triumph of the revolution in 1959 (LeoGrande, Kirk and Brenner 2021).

Authorities were taken by surprise at the breadth of the discontent. Díaz-Canel went on national television to denounce the demonstrators as counterrevolu-

tionaries and accuse the United States of launching a "soft coup." He issued a call for "combat," urging loyalists into the streets to defend the revolution, leading to violent clashes between government supporters and protestors in some places (Ramos López 2022). In others, demonstrators battled with police and looted hard currency stores, which were the visible manifestation of growing inequality. Over the next week, a few more protests erupted, but the police quickly regained control of the streets. Some 1,500 people were arrested, about half of whom remained in detention in early 2023.

Over the next few days, Díaz-Canel adopted a more conciliatory tone, acknowledging that many of the demonstrators had legitimate grievances and that the state had failed to meet people's needs, especially in marginal communities. He appealed to national unity in the face of economic difficulties and U.S. hostility, and announced new programs to improve conditions in poor neighborhoods (Associated Press 2021). Shortly thereafter, the government launched a nationwide program to improve infrastructure and services in 302 "vulnerable communities," 65 of them in Havana, including a number that spawned large protests on July 11-12.

The spontaneous outburst on July 11 did not express a coherent political program, nor did it imply a common set of concerns or demands, notwithstanding anti-government chants by some. Interviews with participants reflected frustration and anger over food shortages, electricity blackouts, the COVID surge, and the government's apparent inability to solve these problems. Hoping to enlist the anger and frustration expressed in July behind a program of political reform, in September 2021, a group of artists and intellectuals launched a Facebook group called Archipiélago, and partnered with the Council for Democratic Transition in Cuba, a coalition of dissident groups led by Daniel Ferrer's Patriotic Union of Cuba (UNPACU).They petitioned authorities in several cities for permission to hold marches "to demand that all the rights of all Cubans be respected, for the release of political prisoners, and for the solution of our differences through peaceful and democratic means" (Periódico Cubano 2021). The government denied permission on the grounds that the marches were aimed at regime change and therefore illegal. The organizers vowed to march anyway. As November 15, the day of the march, approached, the government launched a series of ad hominem attacks against the organizers, harassed them, cut off their internet and phone service, and staged *actos de repudio* against them. Sensing that turnout might be small, the march organizers urged people, as an alternative to marching, to wear white and bang empty pots or applaud at the scheduled march time.

On November 15, the police presence was heavy and visible in the streets. Organizers were either detained or held under house arrest to prevent them from participating. More importantly, almost no one appeared at the appointed hour to march, no one banged pots or applauded, and no more people than usual were in the streets wearing white. The complete failure of the planned demonstrations underscored the continuing weakness of the organized oppo-

sition, despite the growth of latent discontent among the public at large. In the wake of that failure, regime opponents had to rethink expectations that the July demonstrations represented the beginning of a process of popular insurgency that they could harness to bring down the regime or force it to make major political concessions. In 2022, none of the opposition groups appeared to have viable strategies for moving forward. Prominent leaders of both the traditional dissidents and the more recent cultural opposition like the San Isidro Movement and Archipiélago were either in jail or in exile. The opposition's disarray fed the sense that the dynamics of political change on the island were frozen.

To prevent opponents from mobilizing a mass following, the government toughened its stance toward all manifestations of opposition, imposing severe prison sentences on July 11 protestors who engaged in violence, stepping up harassment of independent media outlets, and introducing new laws with broad scope to criminalize expression. Decree Law 370, adopted in 2018, specifies a number of civil offenses for the dissemination online of "information contrary to social interest, morality, good customs and the integrity of people." Independent media organizations have been warned that, under this law, they could be fined, kicked off-line, and have their equipment confiscated. After the July 11 demonstrations, the government issued a new law on cybersecurity (Decree Law 35) imposing criminal penalties for the dissemination of disinformation and online commentary "inciting mobilizations or other acts that alter public order," "subverting the constitutional order," or "defamation with an impact on the country's prestige."

The new Penal Code approved in 2022 included several provisions so broad they could be invoked to charge people for non-violent criticism or protest. Article 120 ("Crimes Against the Constitutional Order") criminalizes the "arbitrary exercise" of any constitutional rights that "endangers the constitutional order and the normal operation of the state." Article 143 ("Other Acts Against the Security of the State") criminalizes material support for "activities against the state and its constitutional order." Specifically mentioned are those acting "on behalf of non-governmental organizations, international institutions, associations, or any natural or juridical person of the country or of a foreign state."

VI. POPULAR DISCONTENT AND THE STATE'S RESPONSE

The weakness of the organized opposition prevented it from capitalizing on the population's latent discontent with the country's economic problems, but that was little solace for the government. In 2022, one of the most aggravating and politically dangerous problems was rolling electricity blackouts. Outages were sporadic in 2021 but became widespread and persistent during 2022. Cuba's aging electrical grid, plagued by constant breakdowns, was unable to meet demand. In July 2022, the system was operating at less than half of installed capacity (Falcón 2022). In August, lightning struck the country's largest oil stor-

age facility in Matanzas, igniting a fire that burned for five days, destroying half the facility's capacity and upwards of a million barrels of oil, aggravating the shortage of fuel for Cuba's thermoelectric plants.

Power outages lasted up to 12 hours in some areas, leaving people without fans in the sweltering heat of Cuba's summer, and causing the spoilage of food that people had stood in line for hours to buy. The blackouts touched off neighborhood protests in several dozen towns and cities, but none expanded beyond a few hundred people or catalyzed nationwide demonstrations as happened in July 2021. Making matters worse, on September 27, 2022, Hurricane Ian ravaged the western provinces of Cuba, knocking out power to the entire island. In the hardest hit areas, people lost water and telephone service as well. Several dozen protests over the slow pace of restoring power and water broke out in the areas affected, especially in Havana, including the relatively well-off neighborhood of Vedado. In some cases, women banging empty pots blocked streets, demanding action and chanting "Give us light!" Unlike the violent police reaction on July 11, 2021, the police response to most of these localized protests was restrained.

Two elections in 2022 offered insight into the erosion of regime support. On September 25, Cubans approved the new Family Code by a substantial margin, 66.9 percent voting yes, 33.2 percent no. However, turnout was just 74.1 percent, well below the norm, and the margin of victory was also significantly less than in past referenda and legislative elections, in which support for the government's position typically surpassed 90 percent.

Two months later, Cubans went to the polls again to elect more than 12,400 delegates to municipal legislative assemblies. Hoping to capitalize on public discontent, dissident groups banded together in a coalition, "D Frente," to propose candidates, who are nominated in open neighborhood meetings. In the 2017 election cycle, over 100 dissidents stood as candidates, but the Communist Party mobilized to oppose them and none were nominated. In 2022, several dissident candidates were reportedly prevented from nominating themselves. Only one managed to win nomination, but dropped out of the race, reportedly under pressure (AFP 2022). The opposition then shifted to a social media campaign urging people not to vote, to spoil their ballots, or to leave them blank. Turnout was historically low at 68.6 percent, down from 89.0 percent in 2017. The opposition declared the drop-off in turnout a victory, but the increase in the number of blank and spoiled ballots, which were a clearer indicator of active defiance, rose less dramatically from 8.2 percent in 2017 to 10.9 percent in 2022. At the very least, the 20.4 point drop in turnout represented increasing disenchantment with the political process (Sherwood 2022).

As 2023 began, the public's general mood was one of exhaustion and unease. Recent events—the runaway inflation touched off by the *Tarea Ordenamiento*, its apparent reversal by the re-establishment of dual exchange rates, the explosion at the Hotel Saratoga, and the fire at the Matanzas terminal—conspired to

create the perception of government incompetence. Despite Díaz-Canel's best efforts to reassure people, he failed to paint a convincing picture of a path out of the country's current misery.

Senior officials recognized they had a serious political problem. Even as they blamed discontent on U.S. subversion and "mercenaries," they worked to rebuild a measure of grassroots support. At the Communist Party Congress in April 2021, Raúl Castro (2021) called for the party and mass organizations to strengthen ties with the people. In the aftermath of July 11, Díaz-Canel (2021) spoke of the need to revitalize institutions to better address the needs of poor communities where the July 11 protests were concentrated. The programs to improve infrastructure and services in vulnerable communities were the most tangible example of state action. As COVID restrictions were relaxed, senior officials, Díaz-Canel foremost among them, hit the streets, trying to be more visible to the citizenry. The president traveled the country to preside over every provincial Communist Party annual review meeting and some municipal meetings, exhorting party members to be more politically active, more exemplary, and innovative in problem-solving. A common theme was the need to engage young people. Roberto Morales Ojeda, organizational secretary of the Party, reported that fewer members of the Union of Young Communists (UJC) were interested in joining the Party—one more sign of the generational divide in Cuban politics (Diario de Cuba 2022b). In February 2022, the government launched a "Comprehensive Policy for the Care of Youth and Children," acknowledging the problems of alienation and youth migration. Unless these problems are attended to, Díaz-Canel warned, they could "break the continuity of the revolution" (Martínez Hernández 2022).

To bolster Díaz-Canel's standing, the three most prominent historical leaders of the revolution still living-- Raúl Castro, José Ramón Machado Ventura, and Ramiro Valdés--reappeared on the political scene. All three attended the December 2022 meeting of the Communist Party's Central Committee although none were members any longer, having retired from the party's leadership at the Party Congress in April 2021. Valdés was still a vice-president of the Council of Minsters, but all three had front row seats at the National Assembly session following the Central Committee meeting. Díaz-Canel and state media began referring to Raúl Castro as "leader of the Cuban Revolution," almost as if it was an official title rather than just an honorific. Invoking the prestige of the historic leaders was potentially a two-edged sword. The legitimacy of the regime's founders might help Díaz-Canel, especially with the older generation. But for young people more eager for change than for continuity, the resurrection of the old guard suggested the regime's unwillingness to make the bold changes necessary to restore their faith in the future.

Moreover, the new prominence of the old guard raised the question of who was really in charge, undermining Díaz-Canel's authority. No doubt it also complicated decision-making at the highest levels of the party and government. When Raúl Castro became president, he fostered an ethos of collective decision-mak-

ing, trying to reach consensus within the Cuban "cúpula" before taking major decisions. That approach ensured elite solidarity during the risky generational succession and stress of the economic reform program, but it also enabled conservatives to slow the implementation of reforms. Raúl, like Fidel before him, had the authority to break the log jam when it became too obstructionist. Díaz-Canel did not. In his public pronouncements, he was clear-eyed and candid about the nation's problems, yet action to redress them remained glacial.

VII. LEGITIMACY AND RESILIENCE

In 2022, the Cuban leadership faced a crisis of legitimacy as serious as any since 1959, but that did not necessarily mean the regime was unstable or at risk of collapse—a conclusion to which some Cuban exiles and U.S. policymakers eagerly jumped. Despite the deterioration in popular support and legitimacy, the regime has exhibited substantial resilience in the face of enormous challenges.

Over the past six decades, legitimacy has rested upon several pillars: the foundational legitimacy of having fought and won a revolution against a hated military dictatorship; the charismatic appeal of the revolution's leader, Fidel Castro; an ideology embracing social justice and eliminating the gross inequities of pre-revolutionary Cuba; economic and social policies providing universal free health care, education, low cost housing, and guaranteed employment; and nationalism (Dominguez 1993; Hoffmann 2009). For at least a decade after 1959, the regime enjoyed broad public support.

Of course, legitimacy is not static. The foundational legitimacy of a revolutionary regime tends to dissipate with time, especially as the generation that made the revolution passes from the scene (Levitsky and Way 2022). For Cuba, that transition has been underway ever since Fidel Castro, whose enormous prestige carried the regime through a series of political and economic crises over the years, was forced to step down for health reasons and passed away in 2016. The transition was formally completed when Díaz-Canel took over Raúl Castro's leadership roles in the state and party in 2018 and 2021, respectively, although Castro, Valdés, and Machado Ventura still play an important role behind the scenes. Gone, too, is the generation of Cubans who lived through those halcyon days of revolutionary enthusiasm and have formed the core of its support ever since.

Cuba's new generation of leaders needed to establish their right to rule by new criteria, first and foremost economic performance. China and Vietnam were successful at making the transition to market socialist economies, unleashing productive forces stifled by central planning. Rising GDP raised the standard of living of millions, building "performance legitimacy" based on results (Le Hong Hiep 2012; Yang & Zhao 2015). Cuba's economic reform program, by contrast, has thus far failed to raise the standard of living of most Cuban families.

The collapse of European communism in 1989-1991 dealt a heavy blow to Cubans' faith in socialism as an organizing ideology, spurring both a turn to religion and a surge in individualism as families struggled to make ends meet (Hernández 2010). The ensuing economic crisis of the "Special Period" witnessed a surge in inequality and a deterioration in the social services that were the pride of the Revolution. The economy gradually recovered from the Special Period, aided by support from Venezuela in the decade after the millennium, but the twin blows of Trump's sanctions and the pandemic pushed the Cuban economy back into decline.

The deterioration of the social benefits of the Revolution had echoes of the problems encountered by European communist regimes in the decades before 1989. Their stability was based in part on a "social pact" in which the population tolerated authoritarianism in exchange for the provision of social welfare: health care, education, employment, and consumer goods—what Hungarians called "goulash communism." However, the centrally planned economies were not productive enough to sustain such consumption, in effect breaking the pact. Eastern European efforts to reform their economies by introducing market mechanisms were unsuccessful because of resistance both within the elites themselves and from Moscow (Saxonberg 2013). By the end of 2022, Cuba faced a similar dilemma.

The one pillar of legitimacy that remained largely intact on the 64th anniversary of the revolution was nationalism. In this, Cuba was not unique. In all the surviving communist systems, nationalism was a key element in the revolution's original popular appeal and has continued to serve in tandem with socialism as the state's legitimizing ideology. When socialism was discredited by the collapse of European communism, the surviving regimes in China, Vietnam, North Korea, and Cuba were able to re-emphasize nationalism as the central focus of their legitimacy (Dimitrov 2013).

For Cuba, nationalism was always the cornerstone of the regime's ideological foundation. Having won independence three quarters of a century after the rest of Latin America, only to have its sovereignty hamstrung by the U.S.-imposed Platt Amendment, nationalist sentiment has always been especially strong in Cuba. Fidel Castro appealed to that sentiment, and nationalist resistance to U.S. hostility has been an important pillar of regime support ever since 1959. By fusing defense of *la patria* (the homeland) with defense of the revolution, Cuba's leaders have been able to define patriotism as support for the regime in its confrontation with the imperialist north (Pérez-Stable 1999).

During the Special Period, the regime focused even more on the nationalist underpinnings of the revolution. In 1991, the statutes of the Communist Party redefined it as the party of the "Cuban nation" rather than the party of the working class, and emphasized its ideological roots in the ideas of José Martí as well as Marx and Lenin. The political resolution adopted at the Fifth Party Congress in 1997, "The Party of Unity, Democracy and the Human Rights We

Defend," (Communist Party of Cuba 1997) made the case for Cuba's one-party system by rooting it in the history of Cuba's struggle for national independence, portraying the revolution of 1959 as a direct continuation of the struggle for national sovereignty stretching back to 1868 and casting the Communist Party as the "legitimate heir" of José Martí's Cuban Revolutionary Party. Washington's unceasing policy of hostility has continued to invigorate the regime's nationalist appeal, fueling a "rally 'round the flag" effect (LeoGrande 2016).

Apart from the spontaneous demonstrations in July 2021 and during the 2022 power outages, the Cuban regime has effectively maintained social control despite the erosion of popular support. In addition to nationalist appeals, several factors contribute to the regime's resilience: elite unity; the use of "low intensity" repression against a weak and divided opposition; the availability of migration as a political steam valve; and a loyal security apparatus.

The Cuban political elite has been divided over the economic reform program ever since Raúl Castro introduced it in 2011 (Dominguez 2021), and Castro (2016) himself attributed the slow pace of reform to bureaucratic resistance. That resistance has come from conservatives who fear that concessions to the market are a slippery slope leading to capitalist restoration or even regime collapse, as happened in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Ironically, their resistance to reform parallels the bureaucratic resistance to similar reforms in Eastern Europe that produced a stagnant economy in the decade of the 1980s leading to collapse. In Cuba, the bureaucrats' "success" at limiting the reform process has meant that by 2023, the reform program remained far from complete.

However, the advocates of economic reform have support from an important part of the state sector—the military business conglomerate, GAESA. In the past two decades, the military has dramatically expanded its role in the economy with businesses concentrated in tourism, remittance services, and retail trade in convertible currency, all of which generate foreign exchange earnings. The military's business success is traceable to the fact that it reformed its enterprises in the 1980s, following the model that became the blueprint for the 2011 civilian reform program. That makes the armed forces an influential voice in economic as well as security policy and a powerful advocate for reform (Frank 2017).

Despite its disagreements, the Cuban leadership has not suffered the sort of factional cleavage that split "reform" and orthodox communists into warring factions in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, leading to regime paralysis and collapse. There appears to be consensus among Cuba's top leaders that economic reforms are necessary, despite differences over their pace and scope. More certainly, there also appears to be a consensus against any significant political liberalization analogous to *glasnost*. Cuban leaders have spoken openly about not repeating Mikhail Gorbachev's error of democratizing in the midst of socially disruptive economic change. Two additional factors bolster elite cohe-

sion despite internal policy differences: the ongoing efforts by the United States to undermine regime stability, posing a threat to them all; and the absence of any significant opposition with which a reform faction of the elite could make common cause, setting the stage for "pacted transition" (O'Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead 1986).

The Cuban government has been highly successful at suppressing opposition. When dissident organisations first appeared in the 1990s, the government responded by decapitating them, sentencing their leaders to long prison terms. As president, Raúl Castro shifted to less visible methods that gradually wear down opponents, including infiltration, loss of employment, harassment by regime loyalists (*actos de repudio*), house arrest, short-term arbitrary detention, and coerced emigration. One diplomat in Havana referred to this constellation of measures as "low intensity repression."

The result has been to deprive opponents of any "free space" to build organizational capacity for the mobilization of diffuse discontent (Nepstad 2011). Although the internet has played an important role in creating virtual communities and was responsible for the nationwide spread of demonstrations on July 11, it has proven inadequate for developing strategic planning, coordination, and an on-the-ground capacity to organize people for political action. Finally, the government actively encourages dissidents to emigrate, making the option of "exit" far easier than exercising "voice", in effect, exporting the opposition.

With the exception of the aggressive use of force against demonstrators on July 11, Cuban police typically respond to protests by containing them and avoiding direct confrontations. Arrests come later. This approach avoids what Nepstad (2011) refers to as "moral shock"—police violence that shocks the conscience of the nation, catalyzing additional protests and mobilizing broader opposition. Moral shocks can initiate a cycle of expanding mass demonstrations and escalating repression, leading either to extreme violence against opponents or regime collapse, depending upon the loyalty of the security forces.

Cuba's Revolutionary Armed Forces have been an institutional pillar of the regime since the triumph of the revolution. Until the Communist Party was founded in 1965, the armed forces were, as Fidel Castro put it, the "vanguard" of the revolution. The military has always been well-represented at the highest echelons of the party and has enjoyed a degree of autonomy unusual in communist systems (LeoGrande 1976). The loyalty of the armed forces is reinforced by its strong institutional interest in the current system, and the fact that its current leadership rose through the ranks under Raúl Castro's leadership as minister of defense.

In short, despite pervasive discontent with the government's performance, the state still has important sources of resilience and faces no significant organized opposition. But the continued hardship endured by the Cuban people is gradually eroding regime legitimacy, posing a risk to stability in the medium and

long-term if not in the immediate future. The constellation of economic and social problems facing Cuba's leaders is complex and not easily solved, especially since key causes of the country's difficulties are beyond the government's control. Cuba is at the mercy of international economic forces—the prices of food and oil, the vitality of the tourism market, and the U.S. economic embargo. The embargo, in particular, is the biggest external obstacle to Cuban economic development, not only because of its direct effects but because of its extraterritorial impact on travel, trade, and investment by third countries. Moreover, the intensity with which the embargo is applied depends more on the vicissitudes of U.S. domestic politics than on any actions by the Cuban state.

The one aspect of Cuba's problems that its leaders do control is how the state manages the domestic economy. The economic reforms laid out in 2011 provided a roadmap to a more productive model of market socialism. The leadership's failure to move with dispatch to implement that reform agenda has left many of the economy's structural problems intact, exacerbating its vulnerability to external shocks. In the immediate future, Cuba's leaders have relatively few options to relieve the population's hardship, other than relying on help from foreign friends and allies. But if they hope to make significant progress in the medium and long-term, they need to lay the groundwork now by pushing through to conclusion the economic changes Raúl Castro unveiled more than a decade ago. Thus far, that reform agenda has been too frequently postponed or implemented piecemeal, lacking the coherence of an overall strategy. The leadership's urgent political challenge is whether they can overcome the bureaucrat resistance that has impeded the reform process thus far. At the close of 2022, the population saw scant evidence of elite willingness to embrace a clear vision and coherent strategy for economic transformation, without which prospects are slim for achieving the "prosperous and sustainable socialism" that Raúl Castro promised.

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