

CUBA AFTER THE 6TH PARTY CONGRESS: HOW FAR WILL THE REFORMS GO?

Frank Priess

The 6th Party Congress of the Cuban Communist Party had Raúl Castro's signature all over it. Debates on the economy were the order of the day, which is hardly surprising, given the Caribbean island's disastrous supply situation. Raúl's brother Fidel, who will be 85 in August, has handed his last official state position over to his 79-year-old younger brother. The old guard still dominates the leadership structure. The release of political prisoners and the beginnings of dialogue with the church are signs of a change in policies, but the question is how far these changes can and should go. However, once again there is no talk of political reform or more civil liberties.

The 6th Party Congress of the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) has been long overdue as the last one was in 1997 and original intention was to hold it every five years. It finally took place from April 16 to 19 in Havana, attended by 997 delegates, exactly 50 years after the failed U.S. Bay of Pigs operation, which was once again marked with a big military parade. Once again the communist leadership displayed their penchant for symbolism. One of the honoured guests was Margot Honecker, widow since 1994 of the long-time head of state and party leader of the GDR, who celebrated her 84th birthday during the Congress.

NO GENERATION CHANGE

The Party Congress saw an obvious change at the top as revolutionary icon Fidel Castro, who only took part in the emotional closing event of the Congress, has now handed over his position as First Secretary of the Communist



Frank Priess is Resident Representative of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in Mexico.

Party to his brother Raúl. Since 2006, when his serious gastro-intestinal problems became public knowledge, he has stepped down from all other official functions, but has continued to talk to the media on a regular basis.

But most important is what Raúl Castro said at the closing ceremony as he looked over at his silent brother: "Fidel is Fidel. He doesn't need a particular job as he will always hold the number one spot in the past, the present and the future of the Cuban Nation." And Fidel will indeed be needed, mostly as a source of legitimacy for the old guard, who are particularly critical of reforms. His sayings, often rearranged and put into the "right" context, tend to be used liberally by Raúl in his speeches as well as they are appearing in Congress documents and resolutions.

Fidel Castro will indeed be needed, mostly as a source of legitimacy for the old guard. His speeches appear in Congress documents and resolutions.

Raúl Castro was born on June 3, 1931 in Birán in what is known today as Holguín Province as the fifth of nine children of the Spanish immigrant Ángel Castro. He was brought up by Jesuits and later studied Social Sciences at the University of Havana. From the very beginning he was at the side of his brother Fidel during his revolutionary activities – for 49 years he was head of the Cuban armed forces. In 2006 he took over the leadership of the Party from his brother and after the elections in 2008 he also officially became Head of State and head of the government. Raúl Castro, unlike Fidel, is a family man. In 1959 he married his sister-in-arms Wilma Espín Guillois with whom he had four children. She died in 2007. His only son, Alejandro, holds a high position in the Interior Ministry and is an advisor to his father.

CONTINUITY IN THE SECOND RANK

Another 80-year-old veteran of the Revolution, José Ramón Machado, became Second Secretary. The third position in the hierarchy is held by Ramiro Valdés, 78, to whom Raúl Castro also gave a central role in government. By looking at these individuals it is clear that the question of who might one day take over from Raúl Castro is not likely to be too hotly debated just yet and other appointments do not make it easy to draw any conclusions.

The smaller Politburo currently has 15 members, 12 of whom have been confirmed in their positions. The fact that there are five generals, in addition to Raúl, shows that there is still an obvious military presence. The only woman is the 48-year-old regional Communist Party leader from Havana, Mercedes López. Another “youngster” is the 50-year-old government reform coordinator and former Economics Minister, Marino Alberto Murillo Jorge. His appointment is seen as underlining the government’s recognition of the need for economic reform. The minister responsible for university education, 51-year-old Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez, is another member of the 50-year-old group. He has been a member of the Politburo for eight years and has enjoyed particular support from Raúl Castro.

In the 115-member Central Committee there were more obvious changes, with 51 new appointments, more younger members, a more representative ethnic make-up and a significantly higher “female quota”, with 48 female members. The fact that there are 24 officers on the committee underlines once again the central role that is still being played by the armed forces who continue to form Raúl Castro’s operational power base. They apparently control 35 per cent of Cuban companies and 60 per cent of the country’s foreign currency earnings, most noticeably the highly-profitable tourism sector with its numerous joint ventures. Among their ranks there are also professional junior staff, some of whom have been educated abroad and many of whom don’t have a particularly ideological background. They could well be appointed to key positions in the coming years.

President Raúl Castro started the year with a cabinet reshuffle. He changed the personnel at the top of key ministries such as the ministries for construction, information and communication and water resources. Veteran of the Revolution Ramiro Valdés is also set to have a controlling role in the future. Since Raúl took office 24 of 28 ministries have seen changes in personnel. However, the key positions are still mostly held by functionaries in their 70s who took part in the guerrilla activities of the Castro brothers. Younger party

Raúl Castro started the year with a cabinet reshuffle. 24 of 28 ministries have seen changes in personnel. However, the key positions are still mostly held by functionaries in their 70s.

members who are considered to be reformers, especially by foreign observers, have been systematically sidelined by the Castro brothers.

Bearing in mind the age of the country's leadership it seems somewhat ironic that in his opening speech at the Party Congress Raúl suggested that in future appointments should be limited to a total of ten years, made up of two consecutive five year terms, in order to create a younger leadership over time. Currently, however, there are unfortunately not enough younger officials who are ready to take on leadership positions as there is not a big enough reserve of people with the right experience. It sounds as though somebody is trying to buy some time.

DEMOGRAPHIC PRESSURE

It's not just the Party and the government that are getting older. The same dramatic changes are being seen in the Cuban population as a whole. According to the Centro de Estudios de Población y Desarrollo in Cuba's Bureau of Statistics the island will have by far the oldest population in Latin America and the Caribbean by 2025, with one quarter of the population over 60 and elementary schools being attended by only a fifth to a third of the number of pupils who attend today. 11.24 million Cubans currently live on the island and there is a negative population growth of minus 0.2 per 1,000 inhabitants. Cuban women have on average 1.63 children each, a long way short of the 2.1 children required to maintain the population at current levels.

The government has already reacted by raising the retirement age to try to limit the pensions burden and to stop the jobs market drying up, which is ironic given that they are currently having problems with too many unemployed workers. As ever, the military are treated really well in retirement, while other pensioners are struggling with the reduced buying power of their pensions.

The government has raised the retirement age to limit the pensions burden. This is ironic given the problems with unemployment.

Another problem is that young people in particular keep trying to leave the country. According to Cuba correspondent Gerardo Arreola of the *La Jornada* newspaper,

in an analysis of official statistics, 36,903 people left the country in 2008 alone. In the same article he pointed to the claim by Cuba expert Antonio Aja that 1.75 million Cubans currently live outside Cuba, 85 per cent of them in the USA.

Cuba is apparently also considering allowing citizens to travel abroad without first having to get a travel permit, known as a *tarjeta blanca*. Proposals for such a change are to be found in the Party Congress guidelines.

For many people in job categories that are considered particularly important on the island and which are seen as the most likely to offer chances to migrate, this permit has not been easy to come by. This includes for instance doctors, civil servants and the military. On the other hand there are around 50,000 Cuban experts working in 77 countries who are the biggest source of their country's foreign exchange revenues, as their employment contracts are with the Cuban state, partly as compensation for economic support, such as in the case of cheap oil deliveries from Venezuela.

Cuba is apparently considering allowing citizens to travel abroad without first having to get a travel permit. Proposals for such a change are to be found in the Party Congress guidelines.

HOPE FOR ECONOMIC REFORM

Since 2006 Raúl has been trying to step out of Fidel's shadow by introducing measures to improve the lot of the Cuban population, a trend that was apparent even in times of crisis following the collapse of the Soviet Union and which he has reaffirmed with various resolutions at the 6th Party Congress. Christian Schmidt-Häuer writing in the *Zeit* newspaper sees Raúl's development like this: "He has gone from military watchdog to authoritarian pragmatist."¹ Bert Hoffmann thinks he has been shifting for some time from "a charismatic to a bureaucratic socialism" – Raúl is not some "omnipotent *lider*, but the country's highest ranking administrator."²

It is precisely in this area that Raúl needs to deliver. In many respects 2011 could well be a critical year for the

1 | Christian Schmidt-Häuer, "Castro der Zweite," *Die Zeit*, April 14, 2011.

2 | Bert Hoffmann, "Wie reformfähig ist Kubas Sozialismus?" in: *FES-Studie*, May 2011, 3.

Cubans, around 70 per cent of whom were born after January 1, 1959, the day Castro's victorious revolutionaries marched into the capital Havana.

As early as 2008 some of Raúl Castro's initiatives were clearly aimed at economic reform, such as the debate on the link between incomes and business success, the opportunities for people to buy mobile phones and other electronic gadgets, and the possibility to visit foreign currency hotels in tourist areas. In 2009 there was then a debate about taxes and the introduction of job market reform and a rationalising of the state sector. In October 2010 came the announcement that by March 2011 around 500,000 public sector workers would be laid off and forced to look for employment in the private sector, with a further 800,000 to follow in the next 3 years. This target date was, however, later extended for an unspecified period of time. This was in recognition of the huge opposition to the move and the inability of the private sector to offer alternative jobs.

WHAT IS LEFT OF THE OLD SYSTEM?

The big question is how the Cubans are going to deal with this new "freedom" and how Cuban socialism and the market economy are going to be reconciled. This will be a difficult balancing act between current necessity and ideological window-dressing for the political leadership, should they continue to base their limited legitimacy above all on social benefits which in recent years have come more and more under pressure. Cut backs in the health sector and problems in education have already brought about a significant deterioration in public services.

Cut backs in the health sector and problems in education have brought about a significant deterioration in public services.

No wonder then that the debate over vouchers for subsidised foods, known as *libreta*, was one of the main issues during the months of discussions leading up to the Party Congress. There are grave concerns, especially amongst those who do not have access to foreign currency or do not get any support from relatives abroad. Their national pesos are quickly becoming devalued, while convertible pesos, known as "CUCs", which are essential for shopping in foreign currency shops are impossible to come by.

It is this social aspect in particular that has rocked the once uniform social structure of the past decades and started to cause a split. What is interesting is that there seem to be strong ethnic trends underlying these changes, with dark-skinned Cubans coming off worst. And of course party officials are immune to these problems as they benefit from politically-motivated appointments in foreign currency-generating sectors such as tourism. Michael Zeuske, writing in the supplement to the weekly newspaper *Das Parlament* (No. 41-42/2010), paints a pretty bleak picture: "The biggest failure of the Cuban Revolution [...] has been the race issues, as the crisis has in the main hit coloured and black people the hardest. The new positions created during the economic reforms, which give access to the dollar and foreign exchange sector, have mostly gone to people with *buena presencia* (good looks), and *cultura* – basically white people."

It is older people – who have never known any system other than the paternalistic one that came out of the Cuban Revolution – who are most afraid of change and of losing what little they have. It is no surprise then that further reform proposals that are currently under discussion are being rejected as "inconsistent with the essence of socialism" or "promoting the accumulation of wealth." And it is therefore also no surprise that the Party Congress took place behind closed doors so that it was not possible to get a direct impression of how the discussions were progressing.

Older people have never known any other system. They are most afraid of change and of losing what little they have. Further reform proposals are being rejected.

BRINGING THE MODEL "UP-TO-DATE"

The conflict between ideological purity and tangible economic necessity was clear to see in the preparatory documents for the Party Congress, with plenty of woolly statements: "Economic policies during this new stage are based on the principle that only socialism is capable of overcoming the current difficulties and maintaining the achievements of the Revolution. In bringing our economic model up-to-date it is planning and not the market that will be the determining factor", was the basic message.

The *Maximo Lider* Fidel Castro added to the confusion himself when in September 2010, around the time of his 84th birthday, he started appearing in front of the cameras in public, looking fitter than he had for a long time. In

Fidel Castro said in an interview that the Cuban model was not working anymore. Afterwards he tried to reconstrue his words but the genie was out of the bottle.

an interview with the U.S. journalist Jeffrey Goldberg, at which the Cuba expert Julia Sweig was also present, he said: "The Cuban model is not even working here anymore." The question he had been asked was whether he thought the Cuban model could be exported. Afterwards he tried to reconstrue his words – but the genie was already out of the bottle.

In any case, Julia Sweig is of the opinion: "For me it was a statement that in the Cuban system the state has too much influence on economic life." Other observers on the island such as the independent economist Óscar Espinosa Chepe even saw it as a surprising sign that Fidel does in fact support his brother's reform plans. This is something which has always been doubted and even now it is not really convincing.

Raúl Castro also did not shy away from criticising the mistakes made by this form of Socialism during his speech at the Party Congress. He said that the country had ignored its problems for too long and most importantly had spent much more than it had received. The long-term subsidy of foodstuffs in particular had become an "intolerable burden" on the domestic budget. He stated that the Party had to step away from certain functions and the inflexibility of empty dogma and symbols must be brought to an end. But he said it could be five years before there were any visible results from the reforms which were now to be introduced.

Sometimes it sounded as if he and his brother were not around when the mistakes were being made – as if it wasn't the fundamental ideas which were the cause of the problems, but rather poor implementation of these ideas. Here Cuban rhetoric is no exception in the history of Socialist failed attempts. Left-wingers in Germany still put forward the same arguments. But what if the model simply does not work, as seems to be the case? Patching things up with a few market economy sticking plasters will no longer suffice.

For the journalist and long-time Cuban observer Klaus Ehringfeld one thing is clear: "More than half a century after the revolutionaries took over Havana, Cuba is finally taking its leave of communism. On the political front the old guard are still in charge, but a market economy is now taking hold on this last communist island in a sea of capitalism."³ And for Andrés Oppenheimer the old joke has proved to be true – communism is just the long way round to get from capitalism to capitalism.⁴

HOPES FOR ENTREPRENEURS

In any case, the results of the Party Congress are largely summarised in the 313 points of the "Economic and Social Policy Guidelines for the Party and the Revolution". These are available everywhere and probably provide the fundamental basis for the present implementation efforts. Self-employment, co-operatives, decentralised planning and private initiatives are all being encouraged and even the agricultural sector is to be resuscitated through private enterprise. There are to be loans for private entrepreneurial projects and a limited property market is to be established. These look more like gradual adjustments rather than a cohesive plan. For the Cuban economy, the success of these experiments is linked to its very survival.

Above all, the government is hoping that hundreds of thousands of new entrepreneurs will make use of these opportunities. There have reportedly been 80,000 applications to start up new small businesses since October 2010, with the numbers fluctuating strongly. Licenses are now available for 178 different types of self-employment, some of which are quite comical. But up to now the new entrepreneurs are concentrated in three main areas: opening small family restaurants (*paladares*), running small food stalls and selling home-made CDS or other pirated products.

There have reportedly been 80,000 applications to start up new small businesses. Licenses are now available for 178 different types of self-employment.

3 | Klaus Ehringfeld, "Kuba entdeckt die Marktwirtschaft und sagt Fidel Castro ade," *Handelsblatt*, April 14, 2011.

4 | Andrés Oppenheimer, "Raúl Castro compra tiempo," *El País*, April 25, 2011.

In an interview with the German newspaper *taz*, economist Omar Everleny Pérez Villanueva from the Centre for the Study of the Cuban Economy (CEEC) at the University of Havana even stated that 190,000 licenses have been handed out and suggested this shows a corresponding “dynamism”.⁵ In a report published in April in the lead-up to the party congress, the Mexican newspaper *La Jornada* suggests there are now 295,000 self-employed people in Cuba.

But for Everleny Pérez, the success of the reforms requires access to credit and a market where the new entrepreneurs can get hold of raw materials and other supplies. He also compares the process which has been started with the changes taking place in China and Vietnam. Other observers, such as the economist Carmelo Mesa Lago of the University of Pittsburgh are more sceptical: “The reforms are much too timid and contain too many restrictions.”⁶

Along with this, perhaps the most major change is the opportunity to buy and sell property and cars. Previously the Cubans officially owned their homes, but they were not legally allowed to sell them. As a result homes could only be swapped, which opened up a huge black market. Registering the change of dwelling with the authorities also provided huge scope for corruption. What is still lacking are concrete regulations, but nevertheless there is now the hope that private money will be invested in the renovation of the country’s many decaying properties.

Cuba has abolished the ten per cent “revolution tax” on transfers of money from relatives abroad. In future Western Union will be able to convert transfers into convertible pesos without tax deductions.

The government has tried to ease a little of the burden on some of its citizens by doing away with the ten per cent “revolution tax” on transfers of money from relatives abroad.

In future Western Union will be able to convert these transfers from dollars into Cuban convertible pesos (CUCs) without deductions for tax. In the past these deductions meant that this method of transfer was rarely used. There are no official figures on the amount of money which is sent to Cuba from abroad, but it is estimated

5 | Knut Henkel, “Der Staat zieht sich zurück,” *taz*, April 15, 2011, <http://taz.de/1/politik/amerika/artikel/1/der-staat-zieht-sich-zurueck> (accessed June 28, 2011).

6 | Carmelo Mesa Lago, quoted from Oppenheimer, n. 4.

as being up to one billion dollars. In the USA President Obama has already eased a series of restrictions on people wanting to transfer money to Cuba.

PROBLEMS IN THE AGRICULTURAL SECTOR

For the time being, however, the supply situation is the main problem. Many everyday items such as toothpaste, soap and washing powder can no longer be bought at a subsidised price via the *libreta* system but instead have to be obtained on the free market using the meagre 20 U.S. dollars which makes up the monthly income of the average Cuban. In the past the state spent the equivalent of 600 million Euros every year on subsidies

which it found it could afford less and less.

In order to take control of its balance of payments crisis, the government also drastically reduced imports and postponed foreign exchange payments. Foreign companies also

found themselves under massive pressure because Cuba was not paying its debts and they were not getting their foreign exchange. The situation seems to have eased a little at the moment, perhaps also because those affected don't want to jeopardize future business by broadcasting their negative experiences far and wide. It is also clear that the whole Cuban banking system is in urgent need of an overhaul.

Foreign companies found themselves under massive pressure because Cuba was not paying its debts. It is also clear that the whole Cuban banking system is in urgent need of an overhaul.

The effect of this is that Cuba has to import around eighty per cent of its food, as for many years now its own totally unproductive agricultural sector has not been in a position to supply the country's needs to any great extent. Even traditional export products like sugar are now scarce. The coffee harvest in Cuba in 2009 was the worst in the country's history. And in 2010 it only came to around 6,700 tonnes, whereas at the beginning of the 1960s it was almost ten times higher. There is a lack of workers, modern techniques, methods of cultivation and productivity, and the attempt by an army general in his position as head of the Ministry of Sugar to give production a new impetus was doomed to failure. On top of this, in the current year there has been a general increase in global raw material

prices, which according to official reckoning will cost Cuba an extra 308 million dollars, an increase of 25 per cent over the previous year on the cost of food imports.

According to official figures, Cuba has around 6.6 million hectares of agricultural land, but a third of this is lying fallow. Now it is possible to set up as a small farmer: up to 13.42 hectares can be leased from the state and worked for 10 years on a "usufruct" basis, with the lease being renewable. 63 per cent of the fallow land, at least according to official figures, is to be handed over – but this does not necessarily mean it will be used for agricultural production. And another small glitch is the fact that many of the new farmers clearly have no experience or training.

Small farmers and co-operatives have to hand over most of their harvest to state-run collection centres at fixed prices which bear no relation to production costs.

An additional problem with this system is that small farmers and co-operatives have to hand over most of their harvest to the state-run collection centres (*sistema de acópio*) at fixed prices which bear no relation to production costs. The abolition of this system was mooted, but the government did not want to take this step towards price liberalisation. The 6th Party Congress has just made noises about "greater flexibility" and "transforming the system". On top of this, a lot of land is exhausted and there is limited availability of fertilizers, seeds and agricultural machinery.

LOW MARKS FOR CIVIL LIBERTIES

So there are at least some prospects of limited economic reforms, but things still look bleak on the civil liberties front. The legitimacy of Cuban politics is still somewhat shaky and it is a long way off being a democracy. And the 6th Party Congress gave no indication that the democratic changes hoped for by so many people are in the pipeline.

For some time now, the sense of disappointment has been manifested less in open opposition than in apathy and abstinence, particularly among younger people who no longer expect anything from the system. An example of this could be seen at the local elections in early 2010. The Cuban electoral authority declared that turnout was 95.86 per cent of the 8,562,270 Cubans who are eligible to vote. But what was noticeable in the results was the increase

in abstentions and spoilt votes, the only possible form of protest in such ballots. Both of these almost doubled compared to the last time elections were held and together totalled 1,083,510 votes, or 8.89 per cent (4.59 per cent *en blanco*, 4.3 per cent spoilt). The civil rights activist Guillermo Fariñas, who at the time was starving himself to death on hunger strike, had called on people to invalidate their votes. New representatives were being elected in 169 of the island's districts.

In its annual report for 2011, Human Rights Watch alluded to the precarious situation in Cuba: "the only country in Latin America where almost every form of political dissent is repressed".⁷ They reported that Raúl Castro had left the country's apparatus of repression untouched.

RELEASE OF POLITICAL PRISONERS

The report welcomed the release of various political prisoners which was set in motion in summer 2010 through the intervention of Cardinal Jaime Ortega, Archbishop of Havana, and the then Spanish Foreign Minister, Miguel Àngel Moratinos. This process was continued in 2011. The timing of the agreement had a certain political logic, as it was made just before a decision was due from the European Union about the continuation of their "Common Position" on Cuba. Spain in particular needed some signs to come out of Cuba to support its attempts to soften the common policy.

But this was not enough for prominent civil rights activists on the island. Oswaldo Payá of the Movimiento Cristiano de Liberación (MCL) urged the EU to maintain its "Common Position" until such time as Cuba committed to real reforms. Together with Martha Beatriz Roque and Vladimiro Roca he also questioned the role of the church: they criticised Cardinal Ortega, saying he was playing a role which was not appropriate and furthermore the procedures were not transparent. But it cannot be denied that the Catholic Church has played an active role in the current reform debate, for example via the Catholic

The Catholic Church has played an active role in the reform debate, for example via newspapers published by the Church and many activities carried out at grass-roots level.

7 | Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2011 – Resumen de País: Cuba*, January 24, 2011, 1.

newspapers published by the Church and the many activities carried out at grass-roots level. Nevertheless, the fact that it garnered a favourable mention in Raúl Castro's speech at the Party Congress only served to increase the opposition's scepticism. They view the release of prisoners as being more connected to the recent international pressure which has been exerted on the system since the death on hunger strike of Orlando Zapata Tamayo and the role of Guillermo Fariñas, both of whom have grabbed the world's attention. The spokesman for the exiled PDC-Cuba, Marcelino Miyares, said that their sacrifice had forced the regime to go on the defensive.

New methods of communication meant that images of repression and martyrdom were broadcast into every household, blogs such as that by Yoani Sanchez were pored over by long-time fellow travellers of the Cuban Revolution and spurred them to criticism. Many national parliaments passed resolutions, some in scathing terms, which demanded that Cuba do more to uphold human rights.

Government's hardline strategy against any public expression of opposition has not changed, as is shown by numerous acts of repression which went hand in hand with the release of prisoners.

But it is clear that the hardline strategy of the government against any public expression of opposition has not changed, as is shown by numerous acts of repression which went hand in hand with the release of prisoners.

This is a special kind of two-pronged strategy: January 26, 2011 saw the arrest of Guillermo Fariñas, who had constantly drawn attention to the position of prisoners of conscience (*prisioneros de conciencia*) in Cuba through his hunger strikes. Another 15 civil rights activists were also imprisoned, according to Cuban members of the organisations Coalición Central Opositora, Foro Antitotalitario Unido and Bibliotecarios Independientes. Fariñas was released again after seven hours, only to be arrested again shortly afterwards – this time apparently because he had joined a protest against the arrest of his fellow protesters. Fariñas says that he has so far not been subjected to beatings, unlike his fellow prisoners. Instead the police chief in charge has told his officers: "Don't beat him up, otherwise he'll win the Nobel Prize."

The Cuban government then carried out their policy of successive releases of political prisoners: Héctor Maseda and Ángel Moya of the Group of 75 were released after eight years in prison and have stayed in Cuba, refusing exile in Spain. They say they will continue with their work: “The fight goes on, Cuba will be free”, said Moya after taking part in a church service at the Santa Rita church along with the Damas de Blanco opposition movement. The release of Maseda and Moya has a particular symbolic significance, as they are married to the leading lights of the Damas, Laura Pollán and Berta Soler.

On February 27 Diosdado González was also released, another member of the Group of 75 who had also been sentenced to 20 years in prison. His wife is also actively involved with the Damas de Blanco. Hot on its heels came the news of the imminent (March 11, 2011) release of Óscar Elías Biscet, the 49-year-old doctor from the same group who had been sentenced to 25 years in prison and who founded the “Fundación Lawton por los Derechos Humanos” in 1997. Biscet also wants to stay in Cuba.

Out of the Group, only Librado Linares, Félix Navarro Rodríguez and José Daniel Ferrer García were still languishing in prison – all three had refused to accept compulsory exile to Spain and in the end they won out: Linares was released in mid-March, with Navarro and Ferrer following on March 23. All three want to continue fighting for democratic change in Cuba. At the same time it has become known that twelve family members of Zapata Tamayo, who died while on hunger strike a year ago, have been allowed to emigrate to the USA.

NO END TO THE REPRESSION

According to Raúl Castro no more prisoners will be released and the opposition will find “no room in the squares and streets of Cuba”. In the end 126 political prisoners were released between July 2010 and April 2011, 114 of whom have since left the island for Spain. No doubt the government hopes that the release and partial exile of

The government hopes that the release and partial exile of leading figures will weaken the visible presence of the opposition in Cuba and internationally.

leading figures will weaken the visible presence of the opposition in Cuba and internationally, but the Damas de

Blanco are still campaigning for the release of their family members in particular. It remains to be seen whether they will be successful.

Depending on the interpretation of Castro's words, the fact that life for opposition activists in Cuba remains dangerous is shown by the fate of Juan Wilfredo Soto (46), who died on May 8, 2011, after apparently being beaten by police in the town of Santa Clara. The government claims that he died of an existing illness, but many of the opposition see things differently. Soto was a member of two small opposition groups in Cuba's interior, the *Coalición Central Opositora* and the *Polo Antitotalitario Unido*. Three days before he died he was arrested for "public order offences" and evidently mistreated.

Elizardo Sánchez of the Cuban Human Rights Commission CCDHRN strongly condemned this "unnecessary death" and saw a direct connection between the beating and Soto's subsequent death. He said that the police were acting "more brutally every day" against the opposition. Lisset Zamora, spokeswoman for the well-known hunger striker and human rights activist Guillermo Fariñas, also spoke of murder. Yoani Sánchez wrote in her blog: "this is not a one-off act of police brutality."⁸

A documentary entitled *Peones del imperio* was recently screened on Cuban television where members of the state security forces who had infiltrated critical movements such

as the Damas or the independent Cuban human rights organisation (some for many years) outed themselves. But the "evidence" for regulation by the USA remained slender.

The Cuban government is trying to isolate opposition activists, to stir up public opinion against them or to intimidate them with short-term imprisonment.

The Cuban government is also trying to isolate opposition activists, to stir up public opinion against them or to intimidate them with short-term imprisonment. Communication channels such as that of Yoani Sánchez are branded as being part of a "cyber war" against Cuba – the "mercenaries of U.S. imperialism" now have young faces.

8 | Elizardo Sánchez, quoted from Yolanda Martínez, "Denuncian golpiza mortal a opositor cubano," *Reforma*, May 9, 2011.

THE GENIE IS OUT OF THE BOTTLE

So for now there is nothing really new coming out of the sugar island, just a little change of style here, a tiny reform there, sometimes two steps forward and one step back. It's still a case of muddling through and gradual adjustments under the command of the old guard. They are trying to play for time, both for themselves and for an antiquated system. But system errors are becoming so apparent that even the leadership elite can no longer deny them, even if they do wrap them up in hedging and euphemisms. The genie is out of the bottle.

The parallel dismantling of the familiar "achievements of the Revolution" has led to a loss of legitimacy domestically which should not be underestimated, and Fidel Castro's charisma is no longer there to compensate for this loss. His brother has to hope that the international parameters will remain the same and that above all his financier, Hugo Chavez, doesn't disappear too quickly; that prices for Cuba's export products will go up and that tourism will increase as a source of foreign exchange. He will be hoping that his gradual reforms will ease the pressure for change and quieten down the system's main support groups. However he cannot totally discount the fact that the reform process which has begun will develop its own momentum and gradually spill over into the political arena. This has been seen many times throughout history.