

July 2021

country report

Mexico Office



Unrest in Cuba: Causes, Developments, Perspectives

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The latest massive protests in Cuba show a population that, in light of the precarious situation endured for decades and which has only worsened in the wake of the covid-19 pandemic, is now boldly taking to the streets and manifesting their discontent and despair. Recent access to the internet and other technologies have been a catalyst for change in the Cuban society and are now playing a key role in mobilizing large segments of the population in these unprecedented demonstrations.

Historical protests

Protests in Cuba – although historically quite frequent and largely isolated – generally received little coverage by the foreign press and did not garner much international attention. However, over the past few decades human rights organizations have repeatedly reported the brutal repression and censorship of the Cuban government in the areas of freedom of expression, freedom of the press and basic human rights protection.² What started out as a focused and local protest, has now however spread across the island and is increasingly gaining the interest of the media and the international community.

The San Isidro movement has emerged in recent years as a largely socio-political protest, in contrast to the more common protests initiated by classic political opposition groups. As a result, the movement was met with interest, not only within Cuba, but also internationally. Historically, however, the average citizen has not taken an active part in these protests. That is why the demonstrations of the past few days are so remarkable. They reveal a completely new and different commitment on the part of the Cuban population.

Key facts about Cuban politics

For the first time in six decades, the President of Cuba, Miguel Díaz-Canel, is not a direct member of the Castro family. Nonetheless, it was not surprising that, when he took office, there were no significant changes made from the Castro regime over the past 60 years. The links between the Communist Party, the armed forces and Díaz-Canel as a person were - and remain - too close.

In addition, Cuba has been subject to US sanctions since 1958, and a trade embargo was imposed in 1962. Timid attempts to loosen these restrictions were initiated by the Obama administration, but later reversed by the Trump administration. So far, President Biden has not taken any concrete political measures against Cuba, which means that the status quo established under Trump will remain in place for the time being. The above sanctions have been widely criticized, though not unanimously, by the international community. Just last

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² KAS-International Reports, I. Reyes, H. Blomeier, "Kuba: Keine Besserung im Sicht", 2020
<https://www.kas.de/de/laenderberichte/detail/-/content/kuba-keine-besserung-in-sicht>

month, the UN General Assembly issued a resolution urging the need to end the US trade embargo on Cuba.³

Even if the external framework has hardly changed in recent years, something has changed in Cuba itself. In particular, the wider access and use of the Internet and other technologies (social media) have had a major impact on life on the island. Cubans are becoming less and less isolated from what is happening around the world, and to the same extent the international community has more real-time information and insight into the country's political, economic and social situation. Accordingly, the imprisonment and harassment of opposition members of the regime who took part in peace demonstrations in Cuba could be documented and published with increasing frequency.

In this context, the strike of the so-called San Isidro Movement (*Movimiento San Isidro* - MSI) in November 2020 must be highlighted, during which the arrest of the rapper and MSI member Denís Solís was broadcast live on Facebook. The subsequent hunger strike and the detention of 14 other MSI members were also broadcast worldwide. These events not only resulted in the participation of large sections of Cuban civil society, but also attracted international attention. Several organizations and governments, including the US government, condemned the illegal arrests and called for respect for human rights, particularly freedom of expression.

What is happening in Cuba? Current developments

On Sunday, July 11th, 2021, thousands of Cubans walked the streets of San Antonio de los Baños, a small town roughly 30 km southwest of La Havana. With the chant "Patria y Vida" (Homeland and Life) the demonstrators demanded access to food, health and freedom. The demonstration was broadcast live on social media, while the demonstrators courageously declared that they are no longer afraid and that structural and fundamental change must be brought about in Cuba in order to secure basic services in the long term and thus guarantee that the Cuban citizens can survive.

The sheer number of demonstrators, in the thousands, is an impressive figure in Cuba – a country where demonstrations are formally illegal and punishable by prison sentences. It is noteworthy that the country has not seen protests of this magnitude since 1994. Thanks to internet access and social media, the footage of the first demonstration quickly spread across the island and was subsequently replicated in numerous locations across Cuba (see map).

³ UN General Assembly, A/75/L.97 'Necesidad de poner fin al bloqueo económico, comercial y financiero impuesto por los Estados Unidos de América contra Cuba' (9 junio 2021), <https://undocs.org/es/A/75/L.97> 184 votes in favor 2 against 2 abstentions

Protests across Cuba



Source: BBC

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-57799852>

Live recordings captured the full range of events: demonstrators knocking over police cars, looting of state shops, but also massive interventions by the security forces and arrests.⁴ International human rights organizations have documented government-induced Internet shutdowns, arbitrary arrests and excessive use of force – including police shooting at demonstrators – and report that there is a long list of missing persons. At the time of this report's publication, there is no reliable information on the number of arrests, enforced disappearances, injuries or even killings.

Why? The roots of the protests

During 2020, the Cuban government appeared to have the pandemic under relative control. However, the third wave of Covid-19 on the island has caused a rapid increase in the number of infections, according to Cuban civil society.⁵ The lack of adequate health care, the shortage of drugs and the limited availability of vaccines against Covid-19, coupled with the lack of food, unreliable and inadequate electricity and water supplies has only made worse the precarious situation of Cubans.

In addition, Cuba's already precarious economic situation has deteriorated even further amid the pandemic, with direct consequences for the simple viability of many Cubans. Due to trade restrictions, the island's economy is heavily dependent on tourism, which has fallen dramatically in the past year due to the pandemic. In addition, the new monetary policy was set in motion at the beginning of 2021 (abolition of the double currency system), in which, among other things, the unification of the Cuban currency impaired the purchasing power of the Cubans, who no longer have a "cash flow" (currency in circulation) due to the lack of

⁴ Amnesty International, 'Cuba: Massive protests are a desperate cry to a government that doesn't listen', 12 July 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/07/cuba-protestas-masivas-grito-desesperado-gobierno-no-escucha/>

⁵ Lian Lima, 'Cuba protests: Three key issues that explain the rare unrest', BBC, 13 June 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-57802170>

tourism.⁶

In addition to these economic framework conditions, the enormous effect that improved Internet access in Cuba has in this context should be pointed out again. Wi-Fi spots have become more prevalent in La Havana, cell phones are easier to get hold of and the 3G network has improved. As a result, the use of social media and communication platforms (Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Telegram, and even Zoom) is becoming increasingly popular across the island. This means Cubans can now access news around the world, create independent content (which is still illegal), and share their political opinions online with one another, but also outside of Cuba.

These framework conditions, i.e. the dramatically deteriorating economic and health developments, are the central causes of the deep dissatisfaction, anger and frustration of the population with their government. However, public protests and any kind of criticism and opposition to the regime, including the existence of other parties besides the Communist Party, are illegal, and until recently only a few people dared to take their dissatisfaction onto the streets. Opposition movements such as the MUAD (*Mesa de Unidad Democrática*) were and are subject to constant reprisals and arrests of their members. Hence, significantly increased access to social media is key to understanding why these protests spread so quickly and why citizens who would normally be silent have now felt inspired and determined to become part of these mass protests.

Outlook: What's next in Cuba?

Díaz-Canel attributed the protests to American interventionism, a fairly common justification used by the Cuban government when it comes to crises on the island, even when no evidence has been found. Immediately after the protests, the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) held an emergency meeting attended by Díaz-Canel and Raúl Castro. However, information about the ongoing protests has been limited since Monday (07/12/21). WhatsApp, Facebook, Telegram and Instagram have reportedly been blocked and the internet signal controlled by the state-owned ETECSA (*Empresa de Telecomunicaciones de Cuba S.A.*) is mostly restricted.⁷

Cubans in exile believe that this is a breaking point and see hope for change in such organic and fearless protests. However, given the current lack of information, it is difficult to assess and predict whether the protests will continue and the government will use military force. However, the Cuban president has made disturbing statements calling on Cuba's communist loyalists to demonstrate or even "fight" against the demonstrators.

Nonetheless, the protests inside and outside the island have had an impact. This also includes the surprising resignation of the Cuban government's deputy interior minister, Jesus Manuel Burón, who gave the reason for not wanting to support the excessive use of force by the security forces.

⁶ Since January 1st, the new single currency has been in circulation (1 USD = 24 pesos). This means that the two currencies Peso Cubano and Peso Convertible Cubano (CUC) no longer exist, but that both are now called "Peso Cubano". Two months after the disappearance of the CUC, the spiral of inflation has already had a serious impact on Cuban families.

⁷ El Economista, Cuba corta acceso a Instagram, Facebook y Whatsapp' 13 junio 2021, <https://www.eleconomista.com.mx/internacionales/Cuba-corta-acceso-a-WhatsApp-Facebook-e-Instagram-en-respuesta-a-protestas-segun-NetBlocks-20210713-0042.html>

The international community has expressed deep concern, with the main condemnations coming from the United States. President Biden has since spoken publicly about the protests and has pledged his support to the demonstrators but finds himself in the constant dilemma of American foreign policy: to maintain the embargo that is exacerbating the economic crisis in Cuba and continuously antagonizes the relationship between the United States and Cuba or put an end to the embargo, with the risk that this will both provoke internal American conflicts and be instrumentalized domestically by Díaz-Canel in order to increase his support and legitimacy among the Cubans.

With regard to the European Union (EU) and the international community as a whole, it seems difficult to get out of normative speeches and condemnations and to penetrate into the realm of concrete action.

Nevertheless, the ongoing human rights violations in Cuba can no longer be tolerated and cannot be solely sharply condemned. In view of the massive protests of the population in Cuba, they must also be countered with concrete actions by the international community within the framework of international law.



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