

IT DID NOT PAY OFF: CUBA 50 YEARS AFTER THE REVOLUTION

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Looking back, on the day on which the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution is commemorated in 2009, the balance can surely not be positive. Moreover, the brevity of the congratulatory message of the former leader, Fidel Castro, suggests that the icon of the revolution is close to death. A remark made by the Venezuelan president, Hugo Chávez, who said that Fidel would not return even suggests that Mr Castro might already have died, and that his death was being kept secret by the government for political reasons, either because of the departure of his mortal enemy, George W. Bush in Washington, or because the government did not wish to cast a gloom over the memorial celebrations. But the 50-year celebrations were modest anyway: there was no suggestion of triumph.

Even so, the Caribbean island does not cut all that bad a figure in foreign policy: in Brazil, it was recently co-opted triumphantly into the Rio Group. Cuba benefits from a fresh breeze in present-day Latin America where both Venezuela and Brazil claim to call the tune. China is consolidating its relations with Cuba under its commodity strategy. Moreover, several heads of state from the region are scheduled to appear in Havana early in 2009: from Panama and Ecuador, from Argentina and Chile. Mexico's president, Mr Calderón, similarly plans to visit the island, his government being anxious for a rapprochement, obviously without regard to the human-rights issue. Lastly, the EU is acting along similar lines, having lifted its sanctions against Cuba and resumed talks, albeit after some internal controversy.

Although floating on an updraft in international politics, it is amazing that Cuba should feel itself justified in making conditions, particularly as its economic situation is disastrous. In 2008 alone, the island was hard hit by three hurricanes, Gustav, Ike, and Paloma, which destroyed thousands of houses and a large part of the harvest. The consequences of the global economic crisis will probably be bad as well. The prices of some of Cuba's most important export goods, such as nickel, are bound to decline, tourism will suffer, and Venezuela might reduce its support as its own oil revenues are shrinking.

It is uncertain whether or not Raúl Castro's zeal for economic reform will stand the test of time, especially as his brother Fidel views it with a critical eye. To be sure, the new man in Havana has already conceded small liberties to the Cubans: they can now buy cellphones and consumer electronics, private taxi licenses are being issued, and a bureaucracy reform has been announced. All this, however, is window-dressing, not surgery. Consequently,

young Cubans remain sceptical, saying that this is a change of style with hardly any impact on real life.

Food supplies are running short because of price controls, at least for the time being. Although 2.5 billion Dollars' worth of food is being imported, the country is unable to support itself. Formerly ranging around 8 million tons per year, the sugar output is now down to 1.5 million tons. Demographic developments have forced Cuba's leaders to raise the retirement age. Another lamentable aspect is the low morale of the workforce, which the government is trying to remedy by abolishing privileges for functionaries and introducing material incentives for workers. Salvador Valdés, the head of the trade union council Central de Trabajadores de Cuba (CTC), thinks that 'either you motivate people or you demobilize them'.

Some segments of the population are unable to meet their basic needs. Even if the official figures were correct, an annual per-capita income of 6,000 US Dollars would still leave Cuba in 21st place among the Latin American countries. The existence of two currencies, the national Peso and the convertible CUC which is often the only currency that is accepted, does not make the situation any easier.

Even the once-glorified system of education and public health is ailing, not least because teachers and doctors have departed the country en masse. People who have been treated there say that ordinary hospitals are in a bad way. Recently, violent protests in foros populares led to the replacement of the minister of education, Luis Ignacio Gómez Gutiérrez, who had been in office for 18 years, by Ana Elsa Velázquez Cobiella. Again and again, lack of resources and ramshackle equipment has aroused the public ire. In view of all this, it appears rather odd that Cuba should have been trumpeting massive – albeit undocumented – growth rates in recent years, even maintaining that the economy had grown by 4.3 percent in 2008, despite the hurricane disasters.

If we believe Cuba's leaders, the sole cause for all the country's ills is the 47-year-old US embargo. Moreover, they maintain that Cuba began to develop in earnest only after the revolution. Yet it is a fact that, although glaring social contrasts were certainly present, the island was one of the region's more developed countries before 1959, with an unusually high rate of alphabetization and an extremely low rate of infant mortality in 1957. Another fact is that in Haiti, a larger proportion of the population is connected to the internet than in revolutionary Cuba.

According to Carlos Saladrigas of the Cuba Study Group, there are various reasons why the regime survived to the present day: the role of the US as a scapegoat, a monolithic ideology, Fidel Castro's charisma, efficient oppres-

sion, the complete isolation of the population, fear of change, a divided opposition, and the safety valve of migration.

It is idle to pursue the question whether Fidel has always been a communist. The facts are these: confrontation with the USA was bound to come, the grand leader suggested a nuclear first strike against the enemy to the chief of the CPSU, Mr Khrushchev, as early as 1962, and Cuba supported the Soviet Union's interventions in Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan, betraying the goals of the non-aligned states which it led at the time.

Today, the record of the Revolution appears seedy, and the shine of the early years has dulled. Yet the propaganda of the state resolutely overlooks the fact that other states within the region have reached a higher level of education without maltreating civic and human rights, as Andrés Oppenheimer put it. Even Mr Batista, who was overthrown by Castro, and Chile's dictator, Mr Pinochet, have fewer deaths on their conscience than the Cuban revolutionary leader.

Even today, there are 200 political prisoners in Cuba, some of them being kept under inhuman conditions. The number of temporary arrests has increased, particularly in the run-up to anniversaries that are relevant for human rights. Yet the opposition is not dead. Invoking the constitutional right to self-articulation, the Movimiento Cristiano de Liberación (MCL) seeks to establish a broad consensus among Cubans. To combat 'intellectual poverty', Gisela Delgado plans to open up new sources of inspiration by providing the people with independent libraries, reading circles, and literary contests. Young people fight to have the autonomy of the universities reinstated. And even within the Catholic Church, criticism is heard. When the foreign secretary of the Vatican, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, visited the island not so long ago, his objectives included facilitating the deployment of additional priests from abroad and the construction of new churches. Human-rights activists like Darsi Ferrer try to improve the peoples' lot as doctors or social workers. To be sure, the opposition is not strong because it is 'minoritary, isolated, and not associated with the right issues', as Haroldo Dilla Alfonso put it. Yet there is ferment under the surface, and the pioneering mood that prevails is not of a kind 'the regime would like to see', according to Volker Skierka.

Once Barack Obama is president of the USA, Cuba's leaders might lose one of their traditional bogeymen, particularly as he has stated that he will permit expatriate Cubans to travel to the island and make remittances to their families without any strings attached. Moreover, many black Cubans probably regard the incoming Afro-American president as a positive symbol. The future secretary of state, Mrs Clinton, has announced her intention to steer a pragmatic course vis-à-vis Havana. Cuba is no longer regarded as a threat. On the other hand, the USA is probably not feeling comfortable with the

prospect of an internal loss of power in Cuba leading to a mass exodus. And the same holds true for certain signals coming from the island; after all, Raúl Castro himself has said he wished to meet Mr Obama.

In the opinion of Carlos Saladrigas, America's traditional Cuban policy has failed, all the more so as it underpinned Fidel Castro's legitimation. From now on, Washington should reward change, permit expatriate Cubans to travel to the island, and offer a hand in reconciliation.

Raúl Castro succeeded in enlisting relevant segments of the old nomenklatura. Dispensing with charismatic gestures, he relies on institutionalization, strengthening the structures of the Communist Party, and securing his leadership collectively. A congress of Cuba's Communist Party has been scheduled for late October. It may be that there will be a standoff between raúlistas and fidelistas, with the former receiving substantial backing from the military camp which still plays a weighty role in Cuban politics.

It is uncertain whether Cuba will follow China's lead in relying on opening the country's economy without granting political freedom. History tells us that instability may lead to deregulation and deregulation to instability. It is certain, however, that the country cannot evade substantial reforms in the long run. There is no other option, given the dramatic situation of the economy and the unpredictable international environment.

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