



[Under the Radar. The World's Forgotten Crises](#)

From Myth to Drama

The Forgotten Crisis in Cuba

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The Cuban crisis¹ has been going on for decades. One low point follows the next. The mass exodus is bleeding the socialist “paradise” in the Caribbean dry, and every relevant development speaks against the survival of the repressive party dictatorship, which, however, stubbornly clings on to power. New geopolitical alliances could even prop up the regime, but there will not be much left of the population.

Historical Context

Cuba is a romantic myth, a political, social and historical symbol that has captivated people for centuries for a variety of reasons. The largest island in the Caribbean, located just 90 kilometres south of the Florida coast, is also of particular geostrategic importance, which almost led to a nuclear catastrophe during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 at the peak of the Cold War.

At the beginning of the *conquista*, the Spanish conquest of the New World, Christopher Columbus “discovered” the island of “Colba”, as it was probably called by the indigenous peoples, as part of his first voyage in 1492. The conquerors then subjugated the local Taíno tribes and gradually cemented their bloody rule over their land. As so often in the course of the *conquista*, the indigenous peoples had little to oppose the enslavement by the Spaniards and the diseases introduced (including measles and smallpox); barely 100 years later, they were virtually extinct.

Until Cuba’s independence at the end of the 19th century, the Spanish crown used the strategically located island as a trading centre between its colonies and Europe as well as a starting point for further expeditions. Even though local gold deposits had been quickly exhausted, lively trading activities ensured prosperity, which aroused the interest of other powers such as Great Britain and France or attracted pirate fleets. Thus, the island of Cuba was repeatedly fought over in the course of time.

The German polymath and naturalist Alexander von Humboldt also travelled to Cuba on his expeditions, where he first set foot on land in 1801. His influential Political Essay on the Island of Cuba later took a critical look at the social and natural implications of colonial rule, in particular the (now African) slave trade and the unsustainable sugar cane monoculture. Von Humboldt predicted that unjust, unnatural social conditions would become unsustainable and would be eliminated by revolutions, and he was proven right.²

After the countries of South and Central America had gained independence from Spain in the course of the 19th century, Cuba became the most important colony of the Spanish crown. However, dissatisfaction of the Creoles (Cuban-born descendants of the Spaniards) with the ruling Spanish class grew and repeated slave revolts (of the Afro-Cubans), which were suppressed by colonial troops, foreshadowed the island’s fate.

Three long, bloody wars and support from the US were to point the way out of Spanish colonial rule. In addition to humanitarian reasons, economic and strategic interests also played a role in the United States’ decision to support the Cubans in their fight for “independence”. The aim was to gain lasting political influence and give US companies a free hand in the Cuban economy. Although Cuba formally became independent in 1902, the US secured its own means of control, for example, through a permanent right to intervene if its interests were impaired, or the lease of Guantánamo Bay; this

open-ended treaty still exists today and can only be terminated by mutual agreement.

The communist revolution (circa 1953 to 1959) of the young lawyer Fidel Castro and his followers against the military dictator Fulgencio Batista was a catastrophe for US interests in view of the fragile global political situation and the ideological systemic struggle with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Despite many attempts, it was not possible to eliminate Castro or free Cuba from his dictatorship. For this reason, and to this day, Cuba is the revolutionary myth par excellence for many people around the world: the “Gallic village” that rebelled against imperialist US hegemony, and, despite the United States’ superiority, could never be subjugated again.

The Cuban economy is producing less today than it did in 1989.

In reality, however, Cuba’s recent history is a social drama in countless acts, (further) proof of the seemingly inevitable failure of socialist planned economies, and a prime example of a totalitarian system that snatched freedom from the people in the name of equality and ended up losing it all: freedom, equality, dignity and prosperity – all sacrificed by the limitless will to stay in power. The supposedly noble ideals of the revolution were betrayed, and the result today could hardly be worse.

Cuba Today: Facets of the Crisis

People have long become accustomed to the “Cuban crisis”. The situation on the island is a humanitarian drama, a permanent crisis that has flown under the radar for a long time. Hardly any news from Cuba is still capable of causing shock. Many in the West, be it politicians or the media, have implicitly given up on the country and its suffering population, shrugging their shoulders, because much has been tried over the years and it has been repeatedly claimed

that this regime should fall at any moment, but it never did.

Between the beginning of 2023 and mid-2024, more than one million Cubans left the island, which corresponds to a population decline of around ten per cent.³ The phenomenon of emigration is not new. However, it has rapidly gained momentum due to the violent suppression of demonstrations in the summer of 2021. Around 1,400 people were arrested at the time, many of whom are still imprisoned today in appalling conditions. The people are clearly voting with their feet on the state repression and the severe supply crisis in the country.

Extreme poverty among the Cuban population is staggeringly high at just under 90 per cent, and living conditions deteriorate with every survey.⁴ The food crisis is an existential problem, with seven out of ten people skipping at least one meal a day. Inflation and the unaffordable cost of living, combined with rampant corruption, make a living in humane conditions unthinkable for large sections of the population. Cubans who are lucky enough to have family or friends abroad (usually in the US) keep their heads above water with foreign remittances (*remesas*). The once vaunted healthcare system has long been unworthy of its name. Medicines are as scarce as food. The regime is barely able to send doctors to the world’s crisis regions as part of its once internationally renowned health diplomacy, but it can send doctors to Mexico, which is difficult to communicate even there.⁵

How can such a system still hold up, and how can it be that even the former achievements of the revolution – health, education or the social system – have been completely eroded by the (homemade) economic crisis?

Hunger

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 plunged Cuba into economic ruin, as the island was completely dependent on Soviet subsidies: the Cuban economy still produces less today than it did in 1989. The ensuing crisis, euphemistically labelled

by the Castro regime as a “special period”, was supposed to be a historic low point. Meanwhile, however, the hardship is even more pronounced for a large part of the population. Even the sugar industry has imploded, and the government has to import almost all goods, which in turn fails due to the chronic lack of foreign currency. Officials speak of a “war economy”. Eggs, milk, rice, flour, vegetables – everyday products are only available on the black market and at eye-watering prices.

Videos are circulating on the internet of people cutting up dead animals in broad daylight; according to official figures, this is said to have happened hundreds of thousands of times in

2023. Such *hurtos y sacrificios* are symptoms of the dramatic economic crisis and incipient famine. Even if the regime is practising calculated optimism, the official discourse cannot conceal the actual supply situation, the regular shortages and the high inflation.⁶ In February 2024, the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) received its first request from the Cuban government for supplies of powdered milk to feed children under the age of seven.⁷

The 1.6 million pensioners in the country, whose pensions are not nearly enough to live in dignity, are particularly affected by the emergency situation. Former professional athlete Manuel Cuña Regil, who won many national and international



Courage born of desperation: Despite the prospect of arrest, opposition members in Cuba continue to protest against what they see as an inhumane dictatorship. Some, like Boris González Arenas (pictured), have lost count of how many times they have been in the regime's prisons. Photo: © Ramon Espinosa, AP, picture alliance.

medals, talks about his life of poverty in old age. The 74-year-old continues to work as a martial arts instructor to supplement his small pension. The house in which the single Cuban lives, in a poor neighbourhood 20 minutes from Havana's old town, is on the brink of collapse. Holes in the walls and roof cause unhealthy humidity. His most valuable possession, a fridge, usually remains empty. Twice a week, Manuel walks about two and a half kilometres to reach the only place where he can get a free lunch; sometimes he only eats part of the meagre portions so that he has something left over in the evening. Life has become unaffordable and impossible, he explains. There has been no attempt to build up stocks or reserves for a long time.

1.2 per cent of the budget is invested in education, 33 per cent in tourism.

70 per cent of people in Cuba who receive state pensions obtain the monthly minimum of 1,528 pesos: this is equivalent to around 5.39 US dollars on the black market. The state pays widowed pensioners 1,070 pesos: 3.78 US dollars. The state openly admits that incomes and pensions are insufficient because the constant loss of purchasing power is simply too high. So it is sold as good news when tens of thousands of pensioners have to start working again.

Education

Cuban schools and educational institutions are in a disastrous state. A central pillar of the revolution was free and good education for all: “No school without teachers, no child without school” was Fidel Castro’s slogan back in 1994. Today, this promise seems more distant than ever. The state of a maltreated infrastructure has reached its (temporary?) lowest point. 30 years after Castro’s statement, parents report untenable conditions in their children’s schools: dilapidated buildings, wet walls and unhygienic conditions in schools that cannot be used when

it rains. Where the state fails, parents sometimes step in and paint or renovate buildings themselves, but this is only possible if someone has access to paint or building materials, which is by no means a given. Above all, this private, self-responsible commitment should not be necessary according to the regime’s ideological self-image.

It is not easy to precisely determine what the government is still investing in the education sector’s infrastructure, even if there are some indications. The National Statistics and Information Authority states that 1.2 per cent of the available budget was invested in education in 2022; 33 per cent of the same budget was apparently invested in the tourism sector. The lack of investment is not only reflected in the quality of school buildings or the availability of teaching materials such as books, exercise books and pencils, which often have to be shared by several children, but of course also in the remuneration and quality of teaching.

Teachers earn very low wages, even by Cuban standards; in 2023, salaries in the education sector were among the lowest of all: between 3,800 and 4,500 pesos, which, depending on the exchange rate on the black market, equated to around 15 US dollars – per month. Even if the state is now attempting to counteract this, for example by paying for overtime, the estimated shortfall of 17,000 teachers is hardly surprising in view of these amounts. To counteract the shortage of teachers, students are being brought into schools and the recognition of exams is being simplified. However, a logical consequence of these measures is a further decline in the quality of teaching. As a result, the performance of candidates at the country’s universities is also noticeably decreasing. In 2023, only 50.4 per cent of school leavers and applicants passed the three central entrance exams at state universities, nine per cent fewer than in the previous year.

As in virtually every problem area, the government’s official strategy seems to be to deny the actual situation and point to the “high quality of the Cuban system” or the “great developments

of the revolutionary decades". Yet, this can no longer fool anyone and reports of high demand for English lessons suggest that the urban classes in particular, who have a bit more financial means or internet access, know how to help themselves outside the ailing system and are making plans to escape it.

Health

It should now come as no surprise that Cuban healthcare also no longer meets humane standards and demands. A decade ago, Cuba was still regarded internationally as a country with difficulties, but as a medical power. Today, the situation in this sector is precarious, too; there are almost no medicines and ever fewer doctors and medical professionals. Obtaining specific, appropriate treatments for serious diseases is hardly realistic. The lack of medicine and food means that emigration, sometimes on humanitarian visas, is often the only way out in the event of illness.

The renowned oncologist Dr Elias Gracia Medina reports that, according to the incidence figures, a cancer is diagnosed in Cuba about every 20 minutes and that more than 140 people succumb to cancer every day. People with such a serious illness are particularly at risk due to the country's miserable healthcare situation.

Expressions of dissent against the political leadership are nipped in the bud.

Other doctors are also reporting intolerable conditions: overcrowding in doctors' clinics, poor pay and working conditions that make it difficult to practise. Nevertheless, some continue to work after their retirement in order to offset the structural shortage of staff, similar to what the country's teachers do. One retired neurologist, for instance, talks about how he attends acquaintances and people from the neighbourhood at

his home. Having said this, he cannot help with medication either; the patients are sent to the black market with his recommendations and have to help themselves there if possible. That is, if they can afford the horrendous prices.

Following a grotesque logic, medical institutions sometimes refuse to use products purchased elsewhere despite the serious lack of their own resources, for safety reasons. This means that patients are not operated on because medical products are unavailable, be it medication or surgical material. If patients or relatives now buy these products themselves and pay absurd prices for them on the black market, clinics refuse to use them because the origin of the products is unclear.

Between 2010 and 2022, 63 hospitals were closed, 37 GP clinics, 187 facilities for pregnant women and 45 dental clinics, according to official figures from the National Statistics and Information Authority. In 2022, there was 22.5 per cent less public investment in the Cuban healthcare sector than in the previous year (now 9.6 per cent of GDP; in comparison: Germany 12.8 per cent).⁸ In the same year, there were 46,663 fewer available employees in the various healthcare professions than in 2021; among others, 12,000 doctors and 7,000 nurses left the profession or went abroad.

The reasons for this are as obvious as they are interdependent. The emigration crisis plays a central role, often exacerbated by inadequate salaries and disastrous working conditions. A government response to the situation? Medical staff have recently been authorised to take on several jobs at the same time.

The Price of Political Opposition

Social rights are non-existent in the socialist Republic of Cuba. Expressions of dissent against the political leadership under President Díaz-Canel are nipped in the bud with draconian punishments. At the same time, the population's disapproval of the tottering, frail ruling class could hardly be higher.

There are many organisations and individuals, both inside and outside the island, who tirelessly draw attention to the population's dramatic living conditions. Yet, due to the repressive nature of the regime and the political and economic isolation, this is associated with considerable difficulties and dangers for those who remain. Many critics and members of the opposition left the country years ago, some forced, some of their own volition, for example to nearby Miami, from where a fragmented opposition of Cuban emigrants is trying to coordinate with each other and with the few who remain. How long can this

go on? Some of the regime's opponents have lived outside Cuba longer than they have ever lived there. The few who still stood up to Castro and his troops have long been on their way to follow him into eternity. How resilient is this dictatorship? Seemingly infinite.

The surveillance state not only focuses on individuals, but also on families.



Reminiscing the "good old days": Relations between Cuba and Russia have recently been revitalised, including by a visit of Russian war ships to the Caribbean. Photo: © Irina Shatalova, TASS, dpa, picture alliance.

Despite all the problems and years of deprivation, despite state oppression and a tightly meshed surveillance apparatus that leaves hardly any room to breathe and think freely, there are Cuban activists who persevere in their homeland, who rebel against the regime and refuse to accept the Communist Party dictatorship.

Boris González Arenas is a well-known voice of the opposition.⁹ He was arrested many times, he estimates up to 18 times but does not know for sure; in any case, he spent a lot of time in custody. A photo of his arrest on 11 May 2019 became known around the world; it radiates both great strength and great despair and captivates the viewer who knows the context of the image. That day, he and many of his friends and activists took part in a march by the LGBT community against homophobia, which had previously been banned by the authorities. The ban characterised the repressive course of the regime, which does not allow any expression of opinion in the public sphere that has not been approved in advance and is in line with the directives of the state, i.e. the party.

Boris González Arenas primarily sees himself as a political activist against the Cuban dictatorship and the opposition as a core part of his identity. He is a historian and an independent journalist. When asked about his main goal, he prioritises bringing about an end to the oppressive regime in which he lives with his family – a regime not only against freedom or democracy, but, as he believes, a regime against humanity. He is convinced that the problems of all Cubans stem from the loss of humanity experienced by his country. How do you come to join the opposition in a country where, according to official “law” and narrative, there is no opposition?

The opposition activist accounts how, as a young man, he felt that his homeland had lost its way. Years later, in the face of injustices suffered by others, he decided to take the step of public demonstration or opposition. What free democracies take for granted, is a radical step in Cuba, as the surveillance state not only focuses on individuals, but also on families. There are

many ways to oppose the system in Cuba. There are countless types of passive and active resistance, but the consequences for dissidents are often serious.

While some paid for their activism with their lives – such as Oswaldo Payá and Orlando Zapata¹⁰ – Boris González Arenas lost his job at the International Film School, where he worked as a lecturer, in 2015. The pressure exerted by the state on defectors is particularly catastrophic for families and children, a fact Boris González Arenas knows from his own experience. Grief and fear felt by the family when the father or the mother disappears again is unbearable for many. To protect themselves from the regime, some activists take their relatives abroad or even refrain from starting their own family altogether. That is a price that some are prepared to pay for the hope of freedom in their own country.

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Cuba in the International System

Cuba is rather isolated in the international context. Under President Eisenhower, the US imposed a trade embargo¹¹ on the island, which the Cuban regime still makes responsible for all economic ills. Although its allies Venezuela, Nicaragua, Russia and China trade with the island and mitigate the consequences of the US embargo, some of them are pariah states themselves. Cuba has an enormous foreign trade deficit, with imports exceeding meagre exports many times over.¹² The horrendous foreign debts mostly remain unserviced, which does not exactly increase its standing among lenders.

Venezuela, which has strong ideological ties, still maintains a close relationship with Havana. After coming to power in 1999, Hugo Chávez was able to use Venezuelan oil to keep the like-minded



regime afloat, at least temporarily. However, due to the ongoing crisis in Venezuela, the autocratic government of Nicolás Maduro is no longer in a position to grant such favours.

Since the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, the Putin regime has been more active in its search for new partners and is intensifying its historical relations with Cuba once again. Both countries want to move closer together economically and in terms of security policy.¹³ The consequences of this rapprochement have recently become visible in the presence of Russian warships in Cuba.¹⁴

Cooperation with the People's Republic of China is cultivated, too, as Beijing and Havana are ideologically close, since both countries are controlled by communist one-party regimes. As a sign of "friendship", China brought food and medical products to the island in spring 2024.¹⁵ However, it is well known that cooperation with or support from China comes at a price. Cuba's geographical location and proximity to the US is of great strategic value for espionage activities, so it is not surprising that China probably has access to some facilities with the appropriate technology.¹⁶ Against the backdrop of tense relations between the two superpowers, this is seen by Washington as a serious threat to national security, and cooperation between Cuba and China is being monitored extremely closely.

The communist planned economy has produced more suffering and hunger than equality and solidarity.

In its search for allies, Cuba is also trying to move closer to the "BRICS plus" association of states, which is being actively expanded by Russia and China and is intended to represent a geopolitical counterweight to the liberal West. The island nation takes part in meetings of the association and applied for membership in October

2024.¹⁷ We can assume that the aim is to gain access to economic support and diplomatic alliances. In times of increasing polarisation in the international system, Cuba would certainly do well to forge alliances. It is doubtful, however, that this will allow the multiple domestic problems to continue to be ignored.

Cuba's precarious economic and social situation may also be explained by the US trade embargo, but it is certainly not exclusively due to this external factor. The embargo seriously impedes access to global markets and financial flows, but many of the country's profound economic and social problems stem from internal mismanagement and the rigid structures of a dysfunctional regime. Owing to the centralised planned economy, the corrupt political class retains total control over industries, resources and property, and prevents any innovation for fear of losing power. Cuba's relations with allies such as Russia, China and Venezuela mitigate some of the effects, but cannot remedy structural deficits. Without far-reaching reforms, Cuba is unlikely to achieve long-term economic stability even if all sanctions were lifted.

Conclusion

Cuba is a story of eternal deprivation, the arbitrary exercise of power and of complete absence of Rule of Law, but also a story of people's eternal hope for freedom. Of course, today it is easy to state that the Cuban revolution has failed, that the communist planned economy (again in this case) has produced more suffering and hunger than equality and solidarity.

The Cuban economy has hit rock bottom, agriculture is extremely unproductive and not even remotely capable of feeding its own people. Almost everything has to be imported, but the regime does not have the necessary foreign currency and is trying, ironically, to earn it in a decidedly capitalist way. Apart from cigars, rum and some nickel, not much of value is exported. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has also been a lack of tourism, which is vital for survival and was at least able to flush a

few dollars into the tormented country. And yet, even after 65 years, the Communist Party apparatus still seems to be firmly in control.

The human exodus in particular is a vicious circle. As described here in relation to various elementary sectors, the situation continues to deteriorate with each wave of emigration: teachers are leaving, further reducing the low quality and availability of education. Doctors and medical staff are leaving their profession or home country due to overwork and the structural shortage, which hardly improves the situation for those who remain. And logically, young people with hope and a future are the first to leave.

Donald Trump's re-election has dashed all hopes of a relaxation of the US economic embargo, for example for humanitarian reasons or strategic interests. The first signs are clear: maximum pressure is to be exerted on Cuba and Venezuela – and it is primarily the civilian population that will pay the price.

– translated from German –

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Do you understand Spanish and want to know more about the subject? Then listen to the four-part podcast series “Radiografía de Cuba”, available on Spotify at <https://ogy.de/j823>



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- 1 In the summer of 2024, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's office in Mexico, in cooperation with the independent multimedia platform elTOQUE, which is primarily dedicated to Cuba, and MUAD, a political alliance for the restoration of Cuban democracy, published a four-part Spanish-language podcast series called “Radiografía de Cuba”, which aims to reflect the real living conditions and challenges of the population in a way that is as unfiltered as possible. Representations, data and information not otherwise labelled are based on this podcast.
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- 9 Boris González Arenas is a long-time friend and partner of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. Among other things, he wrote the article for the first episode of the podcast series “Radiografía de Cuba”. González Arenas, Boris 2024: Radiografía de Cuba: un ejemplo de trabajo coordinado en pos de una nación mejor, Cuba Blog, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Mexico office, 9 Aug 2024, in: <https://ogy.de/fpnm> [4 Oct 2024].
- 10 Zapata died in Havana in February 2010 as a result of an 85-day hunger strike. He was imprisoned in 2003 in connection with the “Black Spring” along with other non-violent dissidents, and his prison sentence was later extended to up to 36 years. The democracy activist Payá died in a car accident in 2012. In 2023, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights concluded that the Cuban government was responsible for his death.
- 11 The trade embargo against Cuba was imposed by the US in 1960 in order to weaken the communist regime economically and thus persuade the government to change its policies. It includes trade, investment and financial restrictions. It severely restricts Cuba's access to raw materials and markets to this day.
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