

Sixty Years After the Revolution, Is a 'New Cuba' Emerging?

William M. LeoGrande | Monday, Jan. 14, 2019

Is the Cuban Revolution reinventing itself at age 60? That was my unmistakable impression during a visit to Cuba last month. Change is in the air as the island celebrates the anniversary of the 1959 revolution.

Last year, Raul Castro stepped down as president in favor of his protégé, 58-year-old Miguel Diaz-Canel, who promised a “new Cuba”—a government more open and responsive to people’s needs. In the ensuing months, three constituencies—the churches, the private sector and the arts community—took advantage of that promise to launch organized campaigns pushing back against government policies they opposed. And in each case, the government backed off.

The internet played an important role in these campaigns. Since 2009, when Cuban leaders decided that a wired nation was essential (<http://www.juventudrebelde.cu/cuba/2009-02-06/internet-es-vital-para-el-desarrollo-de-cuba>) for a 21st century economy, internet access has exploded. The government has opened over 800 public Wi-Fi hot spots (<https://www.apnews.com/65ae62dac77b4dad91b0969108af6bb9>) and cybercafés in the past five years, and home internet access became available in 2017. By the end of 2018, nearly half the Cuban population had personal cell phones (<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/milestone-first-time-cubans-will-have-internet-access-their-cell-n944111>)—illegal until 2008—and there was 3G internet access for anyone who could afford it, though the price is still out of reach for many (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/trend-lines/27120/expanded-internet-access-in-cuba-could-lead-to-networked-authoritarianism>). These changes have made possible new forms of communication, networking and organizing via social media.

The first battle began last July, when the government issued over 100 pages of new regulations (<https://uk.reuters.com/article/cuba-economy/cuba-to-prune-back-private-sector-as-new-rules-start-in-dec-idUKL8N1U60Y4>) on the private sector, covering a wide range of operations: food safety, labor contracts, procurement, taxation, the allowable size of private businesses. The new rules were widely interpreted as an attempt by conservatives in the government to limit the growth of the private sector, which had come under intense criticism for black marketeering and tax evasion.

But private entrepreneurs pushed back (<https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/cuba/article222432485.html>), pointing to the government’s own economic plans that envision the private sector as an important contributor to growth and employment. They wrote to government officials and met with them, while also speaking out publicly about the damaging effect the new rules would have on the economy.



Young Cubans attend a march celebrating the 60th anniversary of the arrival of Fidel Castro and his rebel army to Regla, an area within Havana, Cuba, Jan. 8, 2019 (AP photo by Ramon Espinosa).

When the final regulations were announced last month, several that had caused the most resentment were dropped. The government's decision to revise the regulations was based on "the opinion and experiences of those directly involved," explained (<http://en.granma.cu/cuba/2018-12-06/legal-norms-governing-self-employment-modified>) Minister of Labor and Social Security Margarita Gonzalez Fernandez.

The one area where the government refused to retreat was on regulations governing "almendrones"—private taxis for Cubans that run regular routes and charge in Cuban pesos. The new regulations limited fares, forced drivers to buy gasoline at filling stations—instead of on the black market—and required safety inspections. More than 2,000 taxi licenses were canceled (<https://havanatimes.org/?p=145137>) when vehicles failed the tests and hundreds of drivers turned in their licenses because they couldn't afford to buy fuel at the government's prices. In late December, drivers staged a work stoppage (<https://havanatimes.org/?p=145481>) by refusing to pick up passengers. Havana's transportation system, always aggravating, became insufferable. But the government held firm and the taxi revolt petered out, although two weeks later, the minister of transportation lost his job (<https://www.voanews.com/a/cuban-cabinet-chiefs-ousted-amid-cash-crunch-transportation-woes/4736747.html>).

The government also backtracked on a new law, Decree 349 (<https://www.miamiherald.com/latest-news/article222724555.html>), 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 work with pornographic, violent or racist content, and empowered state inspectors to shut down any offensive exhibition or performance.

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Since the 1980s, Cuban artists have had more leeway for critical expression than other social sectors, and they guard that space jealously. Decree 349 sparked a revolt of the literati, with widespread protests by artists who feared a return to the dark days of heavy state censorship in the 1970s. Social media served as the platform for mobilizing opposition both within the Cuban arts community and among artists abroad. Silvio Rodriguez, one of Cuba's most popular singers, came out publicly against the law on his blog (<https://segundacita.blogspot.com/>). After dozens of meetings between various groups of artists and musicians and officials in the Ministry of Culture, the government agreed (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cuba-art/cuba-defends-controversial-arts-decree-but-seeks-consensus-on-norms-idUSKBN10705C>) not to enforce the law until implementing regulations could be worked out in consultation with the arts community.

From August to November, some 8.9 million Cubans debated (<https://www.apnews.com/9f2a3d8f9f7c495fb1234c62898f35f4>) the draft of a new constitution in their workplaces, neighborhoods and schools. Communist Party members were ordered not to argue with even the most radical proposals for amendments, and the ensuing debates were freewheeling, often lasting past their scheduled time. Among the main topics: whether the president and state governors should be directly elected by voters; whether the concentration of wealth and property should be allowed; whether terms limits and age limits for leaders were a good idea; and whether the Communist Party should be subordinated to the constitution and hence the law. But the article drawing the most attention and debate was one recognizing same-sex

marriage.

Mariela Castro, Raul Castro's daughter and a long-time activist for LGBTQ rights, managed to have the draft constitution recognize gay marriage. The proposal sparked an unprecedented public campaign (<https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2018-10-16/in-rare-campaign-for-cuba-churches-advocate-against-gay-marriage>) in opposition led by evangelical churches and supported by the Catholic Church. Not only did church leaders speak out against the provision, believers put up posters reading, "I'm in favor of the family as God created it," and "Marriage is the voluntary union between a man and a woman." Gay rights advocates countered with posters of their own. In the town hall meetings to discuss the draft constitution, the gay marriage issue was the most contentious, raising the possibility that opponents, with the churches' approval, might vote "no" in the referendum on the constitution scheduled for Feb. 24. The prospect of a significant "no" vote led the government to drop the provision (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/18/world/americas/cuba-gay-marriage-constitution.html>) from the final draft of the constitution with a promise to consider it later in an upcoming revision of the Family Code.

This unanticipated surge in political mobilization by well-organized constituencies resisting state policy, from private sector regulations to gay marriage, is remarkable. No comparable campaign has been allowed in Cuba since the early 1960s. The government's willingness to not only tolerate these organized challenges but to change policies in response to them indicates a new openness to public debate.

To be sure, none of these issues brought into question the basic structure of the Cuban system. But the precedent of organized interest groups mounting successful campaigns to change government policy is now established, and it will be hard for the state to prevent future mobilizations around more sensitive issues to come.

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