

SOMETHING IS MOVING IN CUBA
The Road to Civic Maturity

By Dagoberto Valdés Hernández

*The common good of a nation should be promoted and
sought by its own citizens via peaceful and gradual means.*

John Paul II
(Santiago, Cuba, January 24, 1998)

We either will or will not agree, I know. But I invite you to consider the broader perspective, and not just the immediate context. Some people I've talked to about this topic doubt that we are moving toward civic maturity. They argue that people are still too afraid to express what they feel and believe; they argue that the overwhelming majority are unaware of their rights and duties, and don't know that those rights are "innate," that is, that each person is born with them, rather than receiving them as a concession from somebody else.

Others may say that we Cubans don't understand that neither the state, nor any other institution or social group can ignore our rights, or even grant them to us. Human rights—by virtue of being "human"—are a quality and the heritage of every person who is born into this world with them. Nothing and nobody can take them away or offer them to us. The most a lawful state can do is to establish an appropriate legal framework to acknowledge, respect and ensure respect for those rights and duties that, as those of us who believe in God maintain, the Lord has placed in the soul of every man and woman.

At first glance, maybe in the short term, we could be pessimistic and say: A people deserves what it gets. We haven't learned how to respect those who think differently, who follow other beliefs, or who act in another fashion. Or we could go further and say: Other Cubans—the majority, perhaps—are imprisoned by a mass mentality whose feelings and access

to information are manipulated. Some could even argue that the concept of “maturity” has never applied to Cubans. We tend to be superficial and immature, they would say. We have a dependent, almost childlike attitude and think in terms of “what they are going to give us,” “what it’s our turn to get,” what is allowed; in other words, “what they give us permission to do.”

All of these statements are true to a large degree. We could find still more reasons to show that Cubans have yet to reach the level of civic and political maturity that we would like to see, or that other countries have a longer tradition, more information, and concrete examples of civic action.

Because, in my opinion, that is what it all comes down to: the peaceful and gradual exercise of citizenship.

Every Citizen Is Sovereign

Civic and political maturity means, in the first place, being aware that in a democracy each citizen has a quota of sovereignty.

Sovereignty is the ability to be part of the nation that we belong to.

Sovereignty is the means to participate in decisions taken to improve the nation that belongs to all of us.

Sovereignty is the possibility, acknowledged or not, of transforming the reality we live in, in which we all hold the reins of our destiny.

When we feel that we can endanger ourselves by expressing what we think, it means that we are subjects, not sovereigns, of our own thoughts.

When we surprise ourselves by repressing our feelings or when, at a public function, at work, or in a simple conversation, we realize we are being manipulated—we remain subjects, not sovereigns, of our own feelings, which is the epitome of servitude of the conscience.

When we find ourselves among people or groups, churches or lodges, political parties or musical groups that can't carry out their activities in support of legitimate, peaceful goals, whether religious, political, or cultural, because an official at some level "called to say that it would go against their best interests," or sent a message with a friend that "it wasn't a good idea"—then we are consenting to be subjects and not sovereigns of our own actions, when these actions are peaceful and beneficial for the nation.

The most extreme example of servitude of the conscience is the prohibition to reflect on and take stock of our situation. We Cubans must stop being and acting like subjects and start being and acting like sovereigns; that is, like citizens.

Civic Initiatives Are a Sign of Maturity

When citizens take the initiative, it is one of the best signs of political maturity.

Whether these initiatives are developed and realized is another issue. So too is their universal acceptance, which is virtually impossible, for it would deny the diversity of human beings and the world. But the mere existence of peaceful and constructive initiatives introduced by citizens—and not only the state or a political party—represents an important step toward civic maturity.

All Cubans should aim for this type of maturity, which implies a sense of responsibility for the situations in which we live or suffer; the creativity to propose peaceful solutions to these situations; and active participation in public debate, the space in which citizens agree upon and define the steps that will lead to the solutions that they judge best.

The second step toward civic and political maturity is, I believe, the simple realization that we are moving in that direction. By this I mean being aware that something is happening. Nothing is static, least of all in a society. But first, we have to notice that something is moving.

Something Is Moving in Cuba

This is my vision and my conviction: Something is moving in Cuba.

More and more, it is becoming clear that immobility is the heritage of power structures, and that taking the initiative is what characterizes an incipient civil society and those citizens who choose to stay and create spaces for participation.

We must look beyond the facts of our daily survival and glance back to assess how far we have come. The first trick of immobility is hiding anything that moves to discourage others who have managed to do so. As the Spanish dictator Franco said, “If you move, you’re not in the picture”; that is, you disappear, you don’t exist, you don’t count.

We must lift up our eyes. That is my vision, and I share it with the hope that my opinion will help others not only look beyond the mundane, but also and above all, that it will raise the self-esteem of those citizens who take their role as protagonists (literally, “first in agony”) seriously. In other words, I hope it will be of some use to those who have chosen dedication and sacrifice, who have opted to serve others, in many cases at the cost of their families and security, for the nation that all Cubans represent.

I know that these people are a minority. But the masses have never led in this type of process. Another of the tricks of immobility is to make us believe that we have to wait for the entire population to take to the street, and that minorities are inept and insignificant: “No one knows them,” no one recognizes them, and, if they do, they do not treat them as equal citizens who merely think differently, but rather as enemies who are on the margins of society and life itself.

A closer and objective examination of the last two decades in our country’s history can give us some insight into Cuba’s progress toward civic maturity:

- In the early 1970s, we saw the vestiges of a civil society that had not submitted completely to uniformity and totalitarianism. Its public face was the church as an institution, as well as specific churches, intellectuals, and citizens operating almost on an individual basis.
- In 1976, a few dozen Cubans on their own began to form small human rights associations outside of religious circles. These were few and scattered.
- In the early 1990s, these human rights groups became more visible and led to the formation of other organizations, which began to assume an incipient structure and political or opposition agenda.
- In the mid 1990s, it became easier to tell the difference between dissidents and opposition forces; that is, between members of civil society who think and act differently, without seeking power, and those who form parties or movements with the goal of taking power by peaceful means and operate within a legal framework to change aspects of the country's organization.
- In February 1996, in a true sign of civic maturity, human rights groups began to coordinate with political movements and parties. This first attempt to overcome isolation and seek consensus was known as *Concilio Cubano* (Cuban Conciliation).
- In the late 1990s, clear differences emerged between social reconstruction (led by journalists, librarians, self-employed workers, agricultural cooperatives, study centers, professional groups, and others), and the more ideological mission of the movements and parties that began aligning themselves and seeking recognition from their international counterparts: Christian Democrats, Social Democrats, Liberals and Socialists.
- By the end of the 20th century, another search for consensus emerged, involving more groups and more clearly defined ideologies. This represented another sign of political

maturity and was the greatest civic exercise in the last four decades of Cuban history.

Carried out by Cubans, it won the acknowledgment of Carter and the European Union.

Under a provision of the current Cuban Constitution, participants obtained the signatures of 11,020 citizens acting under their own sovereignty who presented their identity cards for verification. This initiative was called the Varela Project.

- At present, other civic initiatives are under way involving human rights, an Assembly to Promote Civil Society, a Reflection Roundtable of the Moderate Opposition, and other projects that differ among themselves but do not oppose each other. The transition from a sole coordinating effort to many is a sign of the plurality and diversity characteristic of democratic maturity. We aren't there yet, but we are moving in that direction. The goal now is to find consensus among these different initiatives, without seeking to obscure or erase their differences. This will be a further step toward maturity and is the great task and challenge facing Cuban civil society today.

For the objective observer, the progress of these minority groups serves not only as a point of reference for events in Cuba, but also as a sign of hope for the future of this beautiful and enterprising Caribbean nation.

To sum up events between 1976 and 2000, we saw the civic process evolve from just a few individuals, spread out and lacking international recognition, to many different minority groups organized into various alliances and with growing and high-profile acknowledgment from other countries and world figures.

For me, this is both a cause for inspiration and a call to responsibility. For we must acknowledge, too, that the Cuban state has refrained from taking an extreme position toward

these movements from within society, although there have been plenty of birth pangs, pressures and prison terms during this formative period in the creation of a new era for Cuba.

To me, it seems that the state has viewed these events as a simple fact of reality. Of course, the authorities have not remained impassive, and neither have they made concessions. Rather, they have faced the situation as a sign of new times that call for new political and ideological strategies. I believe that this is the origin and the cause of what has been called a “battle of ideas”: None of the individuals—whether dissidents or opposition forces—or groups or parties involved has opted for violent methods. All, in fact, have explicitly and categorically rejected violence. Instead, Cuba is moving toward debate of competing ideas and projects. This is yet another sign of civic and political maturity.

God willing, we will take this project to term, with all its attendant pains and fears, weaknesses and threats from within and without. For it marks the birth of civility and democracy, a birth that will represent the end of violence once and for all, with a healthy outcome for the new life it brings and its two progenitors—the state and the opposition—as well as the participation and cooperation of its civil society siblings.

May these peaceful and gradual processes advance so that the Cuban family may grow, so that the children of this land can achieve reconciliation in an environment of justice and freedom. So that we can join the community of nations that have lived through similar processes and now wait, patiently and attentively, for the return of Cuba, so esteemed and beloved by all.

We must not miss our chance. For all of this to come to a happy conclusion via the gradual and peaceful process that we all desire, let us lift up our eyes and take a good look at reality, because something is moving in Cuba.

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