

Cuba: The Challenge of Reconciliation

Cristina Warren

Recent developments in Cuba such as the sentencing of 75 individuals advocating for political change through non-violent means to prison terms between 6 and 28 years in April 2003, the execution of three men who tried to hijack a boat to the United States, and the blistering rhetoric from the Cuban government in response to the ongoing condemnation of these actions by the international community, highlight the relevancy of a recently-released report entitled, *Cuban National Reconciliation*. This report, on which FOCAL collaborated, was the result of reflection and discussion over the course of three meetings throughout 2001 - 2003 among a working group of 26 academics, human rights and political activists and policy specialists (16 Cubans from the diaspora and 10 persons from other countries). The report will be of interest to anyone interested in better understanding the significant challenges to be faced in a future peaceful transition to democracy in Cuba.

The report was presented by Marifeli Pérez-Stable, Professor of Sociology at Florida International University, and Jorge Domínguez, Director of the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University to an Ottawa audience at a public event hosted by FOCAL on June 6. Canadian commentators included Paul Wilson, writer, editor, radio producer and translator of prominent Czech writers such as Vaclav Havel and Ivan Klima; Erna Paris, author of numerous books, including "Long Shadows: Truth, Lies and History"; and David Mendeloff, Assistant Professor, the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University. This was one of a series of similar events held in Miami, Mexico City, Madrid, New York and Washington, D.C.

Reconciliation among Cubans, on and off the island, is important for achieving a peaceful future, as this report eloquently argues. *Cuban National Reconciliation* looks through the prism of Cuban history to shed light on the root causes of the polarization that divides Cuban society and a number of key challenges that must be faced in order to achieve reconciliation. It explores the thorny issue of how human rights violations could be dealt with in a transition and examines the experiences in Spain, South Africa, Central America, Eastern Europe and the Southern Cone for important lessons that could help Cubans identify long-term, viable solutions as they attempt to realize national reconciliation.

The process of reconciliation has already begun. Reconciliation among families has advanced significantly and the warlike rhetoric on both sides of the Florida Straits has decreased somewhat. In Miami, reconciliation in the Cuban and Cuban-American community has begun, as those with differing views about the island learn to debate their views, rather than seek to impose them by force. But political reconciliation between the exile community and the island remains only a distant hope. This report argues persuasively that genuine reconciliation will require crafting and consolidating a new political culture, in Cuba and in the diaspora, based on tolerance, pluralism, and democratic dialogue for peaceful conflict resolution. This will be necessary to replace a historical pattern of violence, to confront political crises and to move beyond the justification of violent actions based on the genuineness of ideals. It is a process that depends on democratization and

the construction of a state respectful of international human rights norms.

Before the revolution, Cuban politics tended towards polarization. Though broad and plural, the political spectrum before 1959 did not nurture a true culture of dialogue among opponents nor a strong commitment to democratic institutions. Politics, understood as give-and-take, slowly lost credibility, and violence gained ascendancy as a means to defeat enemies. As the use of just means receded, the Cuban arena for public discourse narrowed. With the coup d'état on March 10, 1952, Fulgencio Batista undermined constitutional rule, installed a repressive regime, and violated human rights. Efforts to negotiate a return to democracy failed and armed struggle ultimately decided the fate of the dictatorship. In the view of almost all Cubans, the triumph of the revolution on New Year's Day 1959 offered the nation an extraordinary opportunity to build a new national foundation. Though at first the revolution opened up the public arena, it soon closed off access to anyone who did not second the views on social justice and independence from the United States espoused by the top leadership.

Radicalization entailed the elimination of capitalism, the suppression of independent institutions to settle political differences and a turn towards the Soviet Union. The great majority of those who opposed the revolution's radicalization believed that restrictions on freedom, total state control over the economy and an alliance with communism debased Cuban aspirations for democracy and freedom. The demand for iron-clad loyalty to the country, the revolution and the maximum leader deepened the political polarization. Though the cold war aggravated it, the roots of the polarization were Cuban. Over the ensuing decades, the Cuban government has excluded more and more Cubans from the public arena by suppressing the growing pluralism in Cuban society and even in its own ranks.

This report does not pretend to have covered all of the complexity for Cuba's current polarization. Furthermore, while its signatories understand that Cuba's future depends mainly on Cubans living on the island, they emphasize that true reconciliation requires a respectful discussion among people and groups with different points of view aimed at integrating the disparate memories about the Cuban past. Cubans of goodwill need to become fully aware of their history of human rights violations so as to commit to overcoming Cuba's polarization, lay to rest an approach of defending ends at any cost, help heal the many wounds opened throughout the years, and foster genuine peace.

Even though current conditions in Cuba are not ripe for clarifying the past, the report recommends doing what is feasible: creating a framework for a discussion of Cuba's recent history in light of international agreements and norms on human rights. With this objective, relations between the Cuban government and the organized opposition throughout the decades can be sketched out. The report delimits two periods since 1959 during which violations were committed: the 1960s, when the government faced an extensive armed resistance, some of which cooperated actively with the US and during which time, the worst and most widespread violations happened; and the decades since the 1970s, when a nonviolent opposition emerged and repression has tended to rely on intimidation, harassment, arbitrariness and imprisonment. The report provides a list of allegations, facts and questions regarding Cuban government violations, and abuses perpetrated by the violent opposition that need to be investigated so that the truth of what happened is credibly established. The US government's participation in violent acts against the Cuban government is also discussed. ■

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This initiative, directed by the Latin American and Caribbean Center at Florida International University, was financed by the Ford Foundation and the Open Society Institute. The English and original Spanish version of the report, as well as the bios of the members of the working group, are available on the web at <http://memoria.fiu.edu> This web site is also a repository of documents, publications and links related to Cuban national reconciliation. Although direct participation in this exercise by Cubans from inside the island was regrettably not permitted by the Cuban government, comments being received from Cuba are being posted on this site.



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Which New Brazil?

Jean Daudelin

Those who hoped that Lula's election would usher in some kind of "new" Brazil must be cringing. The name of the game is continuity. Looking at the main planks of the Brazilian government's policy agenda, the "historic" election of October 2002 might as well not have happened. The government's priority, like that of its predecessor, has been to reform the pension system in order to plug a hole that drains 5 percent of the country's GDP. The next big step, again following Cardoso's agenda, is fiscal reform. The same story holds for economic and social policy, as most decisions on interest rates, fiscal surplus and even land reform could very well have been taken by the previous cabinet.

One could say that the government had no choice, given external pressures such as those from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). But this is not true. Nothing would have been easier than changing Brazil's trajectory: A single word, literally, suggesting for instance that debt rescheduling was being contemplated, would have closed the country's access to capital markets and plunged it, along with large parts of the developing world --and quite a few Northern bankers-- into crisis. But no such word was uttered and government spokespersons, beginning with Lula himself, made a point of constantly reaffirming the country's commitment to macro-economic stability and respect for its international financial commitments. The die was cast so quickly, in fact, that few were surprised last month to see the government, piece together a coalition in order to defeat a proposal to significantly raise the minimum salary: no chance could be taken with the ripple-effects of a big change to this widely-used reference price.

More surprising, perhaps, is the political face of that continuity, which to a remarkable extent is the face of the