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Increasingly strong demands by black Cubans about continuing prejudice, lack of good jobs, and low income are heard in Cuba these days in answer to the economic adjustments undertaken by the administration of President Raúl Castro, while civic organizations come forward with much bolder and more critical language than the decades-old rhetoric of the state media.

Discussions on the Afro-Cuban situation in Cuba date back to the 18th and 19th centuries when Africans were brought in to work in agriculture, sugar production, and as domestics. Particularly in the colonial period, there were intense debates about human trafficking, slavery, the Africans’ potential, and the future consequences of racial mixing and religious syncretism.

In attempts to better their economic and social opportunities, Africans and their descendants formed conspiracies and mounted uprisings in the 19th century; later they created political parties and associations de color in the first half of the 20th century. In 1959, Fidel Castro repealed laws that obstructed their free access to education, health care, and employment. The government hoped to put an end to the institutional barriers that perpetuated discrimination against blacks and mulattos.

However, more than half a century after the supposed elimination of institutional racism through official mandate, Afro-Cubans continue to be the most disadvantaged social sector on the island with inferior living conditions, lower incomes, worse housing, limited access to upper-management positions, and lower participation in the growing sectors of the economy such as tourism and foreign-funded enterprises. This is repeatedly confirmed by statistics from the census, demographic studies, and independent groups.

The issue takes an increasingly prominent role in the discussions about the current situation of Afro-Cubans on the island in a society that at first glance seems to have more blacks and mestizos than formally recognized in national censuses. In 2002, statistics indicated that 65% of the Cuban population identified themselves as white, 24.9% as mixed race, and only 10.1% as black.

Racial mixing has continued in the Caribbean nation and the financial gap has widened because of the severe economic crisis of the 1990s and despite the subsequent economic liberalization measures undertaken by President Raúl Castro. Black individuals have the least opportunities for advancement, have less resources available to allow them to emigrate, and, according to the opposition, are now reaching 80% of the prison population.

The supposed advantage gained from the exodus of white people from the island appears not to have left better positions for blacks. "Every time I go to look for work in private restaurants they always promise to call me, but then I find out that they hired a white," says Samuel, a dark-skinned Congolese descendant, who complains that private businesses, now flourishing thanks to the recent government realignments, prefer to have whites serve the customers.

The issue of racism became taboo and was not discussed for decades because the institutional barriers were supposedly removed in the 1960s and equality for all citizens had been created.
However, one just has to look at the Cuban telenovelas, the government and party leadership, and the photos taken during professional conferences on the island to confirm that the presence of blacks is limited.

The prominence achieved by Afro-Cubans in popular music, dance, and sports such as boxing, volleyball, and baseball is the pride of the local population but also has pigeonholed them into the supposedly ideal activities for the race. Their image is still trapped in stereotypes that emphasize physical strength, sensuality, and love of music, dance, and some religious practices.

The Raúl Castro administration has proposed to advance people of African descent, and consequently, in 2013, the Asamblea Nacional was made up of 37% non-white members, showing a better balance with the demographic percentages.

A cordial racism

Popular music styles like rap, hip-hop, and reggaeton have given the island a new, critical voice against racism and the limited opportunities created by it. Both the local musicians and foreign experts emphasize the supposed intention of the government to control speech and to limit the popularity of the concerts because of their evident connotations of political and social discontent.

Similarly, political opposition movements count Afro-Cubans as active participants. Many of the Damas de Blanco (Ladies in White), the most visible face of the Cuban opposition movement (NotiCen, June 17, 2010), are black or mulatta women. Also notable are Afro-Cuban political opposition figures, including Berta Soler, Leonardo Calvo Cárdenas, and Manuel Cuesta Morúa.

Afro-Cubans are no strangers to international awareness campaigns about racism, such as those promoted by the UN, and they have the closest relation to the political reality of the US. Currently, organizations such as the Comité de Ciudadanos por la Integración Racial and the feminist group AfroCubanas, among others, guide their discussions with their own points of view and independently of the official groups.

The election of President Barack Obama in the US served as a reference point for Cubans to compare their reality with that of their neighboring country, historically reported upon by the Cuban mass media as a nation of absolute impossibilities and outrages against the black community. Obama’s presidential inauguration was inspiring in a racially hostile environment, a fact that split the official Cuban rhetoric on the subject.

For Mauricio, an Afro-Cuban professor in US academia, Cuban society is not yet aware of the deep racist scope of its behavior and verbal expressions. In his opinion, countless forms of racism persist on the island in the form of people who calmly say things like, "That black is like my brother," or "He is black, but decent." The racial distinction is clearly underlined through the use of euphemistic rankings and supposedly cordial language.

In turn, the Cuban exile community in the US, starting with the first waves in the 1960s who settled in Florida and New Jersey, constructed an image of a predominantly white, professional, middle-
class community. The result was that Afro-Cuban emigrants from humble origins felt discrimination from their old compatriots and, at the same time, encountered the same obstacles as African Americans.

Caridad, an Afro-Cuban living in Old Havana, says Cuba’s failure to alert the public about racism, shown in its behavior and commonly used everyday expressions, gives real importance to the Afro-Cubans in mass media in proportionate measure to the national reality, to the creation of quotas in higher education and other institutions, and even in strengthening legislation to effectively punish racial discrimination.

The disadvantages of Afro-Cubans on the island are a challenge for the government and for society. Their protests in the speeches of the political opposition and civil society are more articulate and courageous than those in the ruling party. Even though for centuries the Cuban elite aspired to racial whitening, the people on the streets are increasingly mixed and many neighborhoods remain black and mulatto.

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