4-14-2016

Cuban Communist Party Congress Meets amid Economic Changes

Daniel Vázquez

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Cuban Communist Party Congress Meets amid Economic Changes

by Daniel Vázquez

Category/Department: Cuba

Published: 2016-04-14

The Cuban Communist Party, constitutionally considered to be the governing organ of Cuban society, will meet this month for its seventh congress in the midst of internal changes in the national economy and a continuing process of rapprochement with the United States, the island's chief enemy for more than half a century and therefore blamed for almost all of its shortages.

The meeting of a thousand delegates, among them former ruler Fidel Castro and President Raúl Castro, will be held between April 16 and April 19, five years after the last congress. In these conclaves, it is customary to outline short- and long-term political, economic, and social guidelines, a process that will unleash a succession of pronouncements from the state media reaffirming the Cuban socialist project.

On this occasion, however, the preparations for the congress, begun in 2015, did not involve a process of deep debates at the party's core, as did preparations for previous convocations (NotiCen, Jan. 27, 2011). In recent days, this has led some activists to suggest postponing the forum for a few months to allow for in-depth conversations on the island's new situation, specifically the recent economic reforms (NotiCen, Oct. 15, 2015), the rise of self-employment, and the restoration of diplomatic relations with Washington (NotiCen, Jan. 29, 2015, March 26, 2015, and Sept. 24, 2015).

Strikingly, the calls for postponement were mentioned in Granma, the official newspaper, and came after President Barack Obama's visit to Cuba in March, in which he was accompanied by three Cabinet members (from the Departments of State, Agriculture and Commerce) and a representative group of leaders of the Democratic and Republican parties.

However, in spite of the predictable articles about the upcoming congress published in the Cuban press, the reality is that some of the complex topics to be discussed result from changes put into motion by Raúl Castro—namely, the boom in private business and self-employment; the easing of restrictions on travel, emigration or repatriation; and the possibility of investing and purchasing houses or cars. Complicating all of this is the presence of bold opposition groups and their unified voices (NotiCen, May 14, 2015).

The impact of Obama’s visit

Questioned in the US by some Cuban exile leaders and in Cuba by the opposition as a generous and unqualified concession to the Castro government, Obama’s visit has had a symbolic significance on the island, perhaps greater than the concrete measures that Obama himself signed throughout 2015 and 2016 in order to lighten the restrictions imposed by the half-century-old US economic embargo, which can only be completely dismantled by the US Congress (NotiCen, March 26, 1998, and Nov. 16, 2000).

Obama’s natural demeanor, his spontaneous smile, precise speech, and desire to collaborate with Havana made an immediate positive impact on the island. This was evident as much in the Cuban
social networks, accessed by the privileged with internet access, as in the conversations heard in humble neighborhoods. Meanwhile, the official press continued repeating the familiar half-century old slogans, as well as a few of more recent design, such as the one exhorting Cubans to create a “prosperous and sustainable socialism.”

“Obama turned up the heat” for the Cuban government, said Luisa de la Caridad, an Afro-Cuban who watched as the US president landed in Havana on Sunday, March 20, and walked with his wife through the rain, shielded by a large umbrella. The elegant and vital African American president projected an image of friendliness on the island, where the population is a mix of races, but where people of African descent have little representation in the higher spheres of political power.

The visit’s official schedule was hardly publicized, which reduced the possibility of encounters between Obama’s entourage and the population, so many Cubans heard Obama for the first time when, live on national television, he rejected Washington’s portrayal as a fierce enemy of the island, argued that Cubans should solve their own and their country’s problems among themselves, and encouraged a future of cooperation for the internal powers and those in exile.

Obama was a quite skillful, with impeccable rhetoric and confident demeanor, when he appeared in public with Castro. His training allowed him to respond to the press without intimidation or hesitation, which contrasted with the behavior of the octogenarian Cuban leader, who seemed uncomfortable or disturbed as he nervously clutched the earphones while he listened to the translation and, at times, seemed to tremble.

In the aftermath of the visit, the impression has grown in Cuba that the official media are trying to deride the refreshing sense of freedom and hope left by the US president. His willingness to make an appearance on a Cuban television comedy, his arrival on Air Force One, and the sight of his imposing official car, known as “The Beast,” on the battered streets of Havana, revived in the common Cuban the old admiration for the supremacy of the neighbor to the north, a supremacy that, for the last half century, created fears of US interference or meddling, or even a potential military invasion.

A congress in a scenario of reforms

Cuba arrives at the Seventh Congress of the Communist Party with a society that has changed significantly in the last five years, and at a higher speed than the traditional ruling political discourse admits, even though it was the government itself that gave rise to these transformations by freeing up the productive forces of the people, encouraging the emergence of private enterprise, and reducing the state’s role as the sole and paternalistic employer—all changes that would have been unthinkable 15 years ago.

The internal changes, of course, leave much of the Cuban population unhappy, particularly those who remain dependent on meager salaries of about US$20 per month, and who see their acquisitive possibilities undermined by the complex network of currencies established within the country. Many in the population lack the resources, expertise, and capital to open their own businesses and if they managed to open one, they would be faced with a population with limited purchasing power. The current changes in Cuba must ultimately account for the burden left by the previous decades of totalitarianism, stagnation, and paternalism.

At the same time, the coming and going of Cuban nationals with dual residence (in Cuba and in other countries) who have jobs abroad and the possibility of keeping a house on the island, and who
carry with them fresh information and other viewpoints, are spreading a growing skepticism on the island. The question is whether the generation that led the historic Cuban Revolution, with the Castro brothers at the forefront, has the capacity for flexibility, as well as the time and expertise, to continue driving the economic reforms that could eventually reduce the absolute political control they have held for half a century.

The transformation and modernization of Cuban society and the introduction of entrepreneurial mechanisms engenders the coexistence of two models, the battered totalitarian model and the emerging capitalist formula, both leading to political contradictions and deep economic contrasts.

“I, who have been a party member all my life, who participated in impassioned sugar harvests, who completed international missions during the war in Africa, and who ‘stepped forward’ every time Fidel Castro summoned, I can now confirm that I am the one who has the least in this country,” said a rather annoyed Manuel, a retired engineer who for decades held administrative, union, and communist party positions but in return received only meager wages along with congratulations and certificates.

The challenge for the Cuban government and its Communist Party appears to be to expand the reach of the reforms without abandoning the sectors of the population that have missed out on the benefits of those reforms because they were trapped in the former model of paternalism and faithful Communist Party membership. The challenge of the Castro government could be to achieve the freshness and credibility that President Obama managed to create in only a few hours in Havana, and begin again to connect with the poorest Cubans on the street.

-- End --