

8-2-1990

# Analysis: Is Cuba Ripe for Change?

Nelson ValdÃ©s

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur>

---

## Recommended Citation

ValdÃ©s, Nelson. "Analysis: Is Cuba Ripe for Change?." (1990). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/4979>

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 NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [amywinter@unm.edu](mailto:amywinter@unm.edu).

## Analysis: Is Cuba Ripe for Change?

*by Nelson Valdés*

*Category/Department: Cuba*

*Published: 1990-08-02*

Is Fidel Castro about to fall from power? The recent series of incidents involving Cubans seeking asylum in the embassies of Italy, Spain, and Czechoslovakia was interpreted by some observers as evidence of generalized political instability about to overwhelm Castro's government. However, this does not seem to be the case. The Cuban media described persons seeking asylum in the Spanish and Czechoslovak embassies as misfits. The general public paid little attention to the daily reporting on the embassy imbroglio.

There is discontent in Cuba. Economic conditions have deteriorated considerably since January, and prospects for the immediate future are not very promising. The food supply situation has become so precarious that President Castro has assumed control of national planning in agricultural production, and food processing and distribution. Most economic resources have been allocated to special agricultural projects, the military has been mobilized to provide assistance in agriculture, and high school and university students have been organized to work the land during the summer months.

Cuba is also suffering from a critical shortage of foreign exchange. As a result of changes in eastern Europe, trade relations with those countries are in a state of disarray. On July 12, some COMECON member-nations informed Havana that beginning in 1991 all trade transactions will be based on world market prices and must be paid for in hard currency. For Cuba, long dependent on barter arrangements, this development may prove devastating. Cuba lacks the financial resources to pay cash, and US pressure on potential lenders makes credit difficult to obtain. Former methods of conducting business and economic planning no longer seem viable.

Centralized economic planning is impossible when supply lines are unreliable and export commodity prices may change within a matter of hours. Scarce foreign exchange has compelled the Cuban government to establish import priorities. For instance, some medical products are no longer imported. Chemicals for water purification have been sacrificed, and Cubans have been told to boil their drinking water instead. Spare parts for communications and transportation equipment are increasingly difficult to find.

Shortages have led to corruption, misappropriation of state resources, and theft. Catholic churches report an increase in the theft of gold artifacts. Private farmers complain about raids on fruit orchards, vegetable gardens, and livestock. A recent report by a special legislative committee pointed to the "disappearance" of between 10,000 and 14,000 head of cattle.

For years Cuba relied on assistance from the socialist bloc in order to survive the US economic blockade. Continued survival hinges on greater economic independence. In a March 8 speech, President Castro spoke euphemistically of a "special peacetime period" in which the USSR would no longer supply Cuba with oil. According to the president, Cubans must prepare for the worst. The impact of this news is revealed in the somber attitude of many Cubans. Parents express fears

about their children's future. Some seek solace in religion and others simply hope to emigrate. People openly complain: "Esto no hay quien lo tumbe, ni quien lo arregle." (This regime cannot be overthrown, nor overhauled.)

Demand for significant change is widespread. Concessions are apparent in the economic arena. Foreign capitalists have been invited to invest and Mexican, Brazilian and Spanish capitalists responded by moving into the tourism industry. The terms offered these foreign investors have been extraordinary. They have been given complete control over management, employee training, authority to hire and fire, and profit remittance over a 10-year period.

Many people have reportedly been fired by Spanish entrepreneurs. In the wake of dramatic change in eastern Europe, Cuba's economic strategy has shifted from increasing integration with the socialist bloc to attracting tourists from capitalist countries. Government officials have identified 67 potential tourism locations on the island. Developing all these locations would mean a total of 200,000 motel or hotel rooms. By 1995, the government's "tourism poles" are to be equipped with 50,000 rooms with a capacity of hosting 1.5 million tourists per year. [In 1989, 326,000 foreigners visited the island.]

The social, economic and political implications of a socialist revolution dependent on revenues from capitalist tourism have not been thoroughly addressed by the Cuban media. However, the government's rush to develop the industry has not escaped the notice of average citizens who observe great energy being expended to obtain foreign currency from tourists, while they are denied access to basic consumer goods. Some Cubans ask: "Did we have a revolution so that the person with dollars can get what I cannot buy with pesos?"

Daily life is difficult for residents of the Havana metropolitan area. There are interminable lines for everything from an ice cream cone to a bus. Working telephones are a luxury, making Havana one of the few cities in the world where telecommunications via modem is a midsummer night's dream. Everyday life is not as problematic in other cities. For instance, bus service is quickly and easily accessible in the Sierra Maestra and other isolated regions of the country. Foodstuffs are certainly more plentiful in Santa Clara and other agricultural production centers.

Dissent of a limited sort is flourishing. On March 15, the Communist Party released a document announcing the beginning of a national debate on the revolution's political, administrative and social problems. Citizens were encouraged to express their honest opinions on what needs to be done. The document asserted that there had been a "false, mechanical and formalistic" sense of unanimity which produced double standards and the silencing of opposition. The party statement emphasized the need for diverse opinions and democratic discussion. In general, calls for greater political debate were not taken seriously. Many were apparently skeptical that a true political and cultural opening, a Cuban version of glasnost, was possible.

In an effort to convince skeptics, the Communist Party issued another statement in early April. "Discussion models" were organized throughout the island in May. By June the mass media had published numerous reports on the necessity of cultural debate, while other publications extended debate to encompass almost every facet of the political system. Untouchable topics remain, such as

suggestions for change regarding the one-party state, "the socialist nature of the revolution" and Fidel Castro's role.

The print media has begun to challenge some aspects of censorship, including the release of stories on phenomena officially declared as non-existent in Cuba. An example here is prostitution. In numerous essays journalist Soledad Cruz calls for the transfer of power to the young. The time has come, she says, for better-trained individuals to take over. Carlos Varela's song lyrics and members of the Arte Libre group proclaim the right to one's own opinions and truths.

Members of the National Assembly have also begun to demand greater control over decision-making. There are many legitimate criticisms of the Cuban social, economic and political system. Cubans are more informed and aware of their problems than outsiders. Many may be alienated by one or more features of the revolutionary experiment. However, when thinking about Cuban problems and prospects for change, comparisons with eastern Europe are risky. Nationalism led the citizens of some eastern European countries to distance themselves from Soviet influence, and from the socialist model.

In the Cuban case, nationalism meant a movement away from the United States, but toward socialism. Eastern Europeans may be willing to experiment with capitalist methods of organizing markets and production because capitalism has apparently worked in western Europe. In Latin America, capitalism's track record leaves much to be desired. Cubans are aware of the abysmal living conditions suffered by the vast majority of Latin Americans. They compare the results of their socialist experiment with those of the capitalist mode elsewhere in the region.

Challenges posed by change in the socialist bloc, and the government's success in educating its successor generation(s) are forcing the regime to make political and economic concessions. There are no independent change agents in Cuban society. Many fear that change enforced from the outside could lead to bloodshed. Socio-political transformation in Cuba will come from within the regime itself. \* Valdes, associate professor of sociology at the University of New Mexico (Albuquerque), is the author of several books and articles on Cuba. He recently returned from a four-week tour of the island nation.

-- End --