

## Reflections on Political Possibilities: Cuba's Peaceful Transition That Wasn't (1954-1956)

**Marifeli Pérez-Stable**

PES Program Box 210

SUNY, Old Westbury

Old Westbury, NY 11568-2100

718-478-9340 (T/F)

E-mail: [buendia7489@email.msn.com](mailto:buendia7489@email.msn.com)

*Somos un pueblo desconcertante. Amamos la democracia, la soberanía, la libertad, y sin embargo hemos actuado como si todo eso nos importase un comino. Todos queremos la democracia, pero nos falta, en cambio, la voluntad para hacer por ella, todos los días, el trabajo menudo que exige su conservación. Nos acordamos de la democracia, como de Santa Bárbara, cuando truena poderosamente sobre ella.*

Francisco

Ichaso

Bohemia, April 17, 1955

Recipient of the 1998 Carlos Márquez Sterling Centennial Award, sponsored by the Cuban Research Institute at Florida International University and the Republic Bank of Miami.

Please do not quote or reproduce without the author's permission.

In the early morning hours of March 10, 1952, General Fulgencio Batista staged a coup d'état against the Auténtico administration of Carlos Prío Socarrás. Two hours and sixteen minutes later all of Cuba appeared to be under the military's control; the deposed Prío fleetingly considered taking action in defense of his constitutional mandate, but desisted and went into exile. Nearly seven years later, on New Year's Eve, Batista and his closest associates followed Prío's earlier footsteps as the demise of the batistato became imminent. After 1956, Fidel Castro, the July 26 Movement, and the Rebel Army brought an end to the dictatorship in lightning speed. That the fidelistas succeeded where the mainstream opposition had failed undoubtedly influenced the subsequent radicalization of the revolution: the victory of January 1, 1959 was largely their doing, and so would be the new Cuba they were determined to build.

Why Cuba did not experience a peaceful transition to democracy from the Batista regime is a neglected subject in the field of Cuban studies. And yet, only after the end of 1956 would a revolutionary situation emerge on the island and quickly give way to the revolutionary outcome of January 1: the forceful transfer of power from Batista to the armed opposition. Between 1952 and 1956, political society swirled with rumors about an insurrection, and some violent actions were carried out. During these years, opposition and government alike interacted as if constitutional rule would eventually be restored, whatever the means and the timetable. How to engineer this restoration consumed the dispersed energies of the opposition during the early batistato; how to delay it or rig it in their favor occupied Batista and his allies.

Elections, of course, had been scheduled for June 1, 1952. Running a distant third behind the Ortodoxos' Roberto Agramonte and the Auténticos' Carlos Hevia, candidate Batista saw the coup as a means to achieve through the force of arms what the popular will would almost certainly have denied him at the ballot box. Still, eight years of increasingly corrupt and chaotic Auténtico rule lent credibility to the claim that the coup aimed to bring order and revive public confidence as a prelude

for calling new elections. Shortly after breaching the constitution, Batista himself promised elections as soon as possible. Initially planned for 1953, general elections were held on November 1, 1954 under conditions that merited no confidence: fraudulent voter registration, Batista running unopposed after Ramón Grau San Martín's withdrawal, intimidation of state employees to register in the official Partido Acción Progresista, armed police guards at the polls on election day, three prominent radio commentators (José Pardo Llada, Luis Conte Agüero, and Armando García Sifredo) banned from the airwaves ten days prior to the election. In short, Batista flaunted a flagrant disposition to remain in power. On November 1, the general was overwhelmingly "elected"; one of six voters registered a preference for non-candidate Grau, and eighteen Auténticos gained seats in the Senate. On February 24, 1955, Batista was inaugurated for a four-year term, and the Constitution of 1940 was partially restored. Although the opposition rejected the legitimacy of the 1954 elections and insisted that only a free and open process would provide a solución nacional, most opponents concurred that the post-November situation offered new opportunities for dialogue. Three demands dominated public discourse: an unconditional political amnesty, the reinstatement of full constitutional guarantees, and the safe return of all exiles. In May 1955, the regime granted two of these -- political amnesty and safeguards for returning exiles; the guarantees remained at-large. The mainstream opposition saw a new premium on negotiations with the government over these guarantees and the setting of new elections. The farcical elections of November 1954, then, created an opportunity for a pacto between the Batista regime and the political opposition on returning Cuba to what actors at the time called la normalidad institucional. Over the course of 1955 and the beginning of 1956, this pacto seemed a possibility; by the end of 1956 this opportunity had been irretrievably lost. What were the dynamics of this aborted peaceful transition to democracy in Batista's Cuba? Why did it fail?

### I. The Golpe of March 10, 1952 and the Response of the Mainstream Opposition

Fulgencio Batista was a complex public figure: well grounded in the military, he also had a keen eye for public opinion, even if he did not always like what he saw as was the case during the presidential campaign of 1952. His record in the 1930s partially deserves the label of military populism; in the 1940s he gained a democratic image by convening the Constituent Assembly of 1940 and passing the presidential sash in 1944 to Grau, the candidate of the opposition coalition. When asked a few days after the coup about his having established a dictatorship, the general answered: "The people and I are the dictators." In November 1955, Batista harped some of the themes of his new tenure:

El 10 de marzo de 1952 se hizo una revolución. Se ha hablado mucho, politiqueramente, de las condiciones y de las calidades morales de nuestro pueblo. Nadie podrá negar esa calidad y esa esencia, porque nosotros, mas que esos politiqueros ambiciosos, las conocemos desde abajo. )Que ciudadano protestó de la caída de los defraudadores que hundían al país en los vicios y en las inmoralidades? (Ni un solo ciudadano!)

Though just as guilty of venality and graft during the 1950s and his earlier incumbency as the Auténticos during theirs, the general delighted in proclaiming his social origins: he rose from the ranks of ordinary Cubans who were not as white and middle class as most of his opponents. The coup, indeed, provoked a sigh of relief of sorts in most citizens, even if they deplored the suspension of the Constitution. One

of his first acts in March 1952 was to raise the base pay of enlisted soldiers, a logical catering of favor with his military base, but he did the same with teachers. Throughout the 1950s, Batista dealt carefully with organized labor, protecting many of its gains even in the face of a growing clamor from the *clases económicas* to rein in what they considered the excesses of the late 1930s and 1940s. Indeed, he half-heartedly sought a Peronist-like aura. His wife, Marta Fernández, emulated Evita: she dressed elegantly and tended to the needy. In certain quarters, Mrs. Batista became known as *Marta del pueblo*, *Marta de los pobres*.

True, the Batista of the 1950s had lost not a little of the acumen that had made him a complex figure. He was by then quite used to the good life, diligently amassing an even larger fortune the second time around the presidency and reticently investing the requisite time demanded by his office. Playing *canasta* and eating scrumptious meals seemed to garner equal time on his schedule with the exigencies of consolidating and defending his regime. Aspects of his rule, indeed, fit the neo-sultanistic rubric social scientists have elaborated to characterize certain types of Third World dictatorships. But even during the 1950s Batista was no run-of-the-mill chief pater; his neo-sultanism, moreover, was much less entrenched, not as "institutionalized," and less enduring than those of the Somozas in Nicaragua, Porfirio Díaz in Mexico, and the Shah in Iran. The batistato's most notorious aspects -- in repression and neo-sultanism -- became more pronounced after early 1956, toward the end of the period that is the subject of this essay. Given the right circumstances, Batista might well have put his ear to the ground once more (or been forced to do so) and responded with an eye toward the history books as he had done during the late 1930s.

The *madrugonazo* of March 10 surprised a nation on the brink of an electoral campaign. *Ortodoxos* and *Auténticos* were battling for the presidency, the six provincial governorships, 54 senatorships, and 70 seats in the House of Representatives. Though Agramonte was the front-runner, Hevia might well have upset him. Both men were decent and untainted by corruption, if neither had much popular rapport. Agramonte basked in the light of Eduardo Chibás, the self-martyred founder of the *Partido del Pueblo Cubano* (*Ortodoxo*) who would have been his party's presidential candidate had he taken poorer aim on August 5, 1951. But Hevia had the *Auténtico* party machinery, an unsung contribution by Prío to Cuban politics; there is evidence that party stalwarts were flexing their muscles and mobilizing the resources incumbency afforded them for an all-out fight on June 1, 1952. *Chibatismo* alone might not have been enough to put Agramonte over the top; the *Ortodoxos* lacked a proven party machinery and were adamant about their *independencia política*: they refused to enter into pacts with other parties, wagering that their party alone sufficed for victory at the polls. "Anti-politics" sentiments similar to those of some sectors of public opinion in Eastern Europe and Latin America during the 1980s and 1990s gripped the *Ortodoxos*: they stood for the *adecentamiento* of Cuban politics, and decent politicians eschewed pacts, which inevitably compromised at least some principles. *Auténticos* and *Ortodoxos* were bitter rivals, due in no small part to the fact that the latter broke from the former's fold in 1947 and relentlessly denounced the innumerable schemes and scams of the *malversadores* in the Prío administration. When confronted with the *fait accompli* of Batista's coup, therefore, the two major political parties were not in an ideal situation for crafting a united front against the dictatorship.

Conventional wisdom underscores that in the aftermath of March 10, 1952 the Cuban polity was quiescent. Though I am not at this time ready to qualify this claim, I believe the differences between the absence of a successful challenge to Batista's usurping of power and the underlying difficulties the general confronted in consolidating his regime need to be limned for a better understanding of the political dynamics of the early batistato. The *madrugonazo* clearly succeeded in deposing Prío; by the mere fact that he announced that elections would be held as soon as possible, Batista acknowledged the interim nature of what became known as the *régimen de facto*. Internecine struggles aside, the mainstream opposition agreed on the urgency of returning Cuba to *la normalidad institucional*; *Auténticos* and *Ortodoxos* just could not agree on the exact formula for bringing it about. In 1952, Batista became the *de facto* ruler of Cuba, but he longed to become *de jure* president again, even if through sham elections. From the start, the general faced outright opposition from students, especially at the University of Havana, conspiracies from various quarters, and the threat that the hundreds of police and military officers he had dismissed or shifted to new charges would marshall their discontent in sync with the civilian opposition. Military intelligence (SIM) sporadically rounded opposition leaders for questioning and quickly released them; Roberto Agramonte, José Pardo Llada, Carlos Hevia, Manuel Antonio de Varona, Rafael García Bárcena, and Carlos Márquez Sterling were among the leaders rounded, in some cases more than once. What is noteworthy, though, is the silk-glove approach to repression used by the batistato at the beginning. Compared to the brutal consistency of Marcos Pérez Jiménez in Venezuela after 1950, Batista then seemed like a kindergarten dictator. The general did not want to lose the people's ear completely, which he knew he would if he resorted to indiscriminate repression as Machado had during the early 1930s (or as he himself increasingly would after 1956). Instead, he and his allies went on television to present programs for educational reform, health-care improvements, and agricultural diversification, while assuring the Central Organization of Trade Unions (CTC) that labor's gains were secure.

While the regime reached out to the citizenry, *Auténticos* and *Ortodoxos* quarreled among themselves and with each other. The most radical position was that of deposed president Prío: "I'll triumph by any means, even the most extreme." He set the tone for the opposition by advocating violence to overthrow Batista while allotting considerable sums for the purchase of arms and the preparation of a revolt; most of this was done from the United States, which quickly got Prío into trouble with U.S. neutrality laws. At the same time, some *Auténticos* suggested forming a civic front with the *Ortodoxos* who immediately declined, brandishing their *independencia política*. When a leading *Ortodoxo*, Emilio Ochoa, questioned the wisdom of this position and entered into dialogue with the interested *Auténticos*, Agramonte challenged him to a duel with swords. Other *Ortodoxos*, like Márquez Sterling and Federico Fernández Casas, toyed with the possibility of alliances and a civic movement against Batista. "New times demand new formulas," said Márquez Sterling in July 1952. For pursuing this line, he was reputedly the victim of an assassination attempt by fellow *Ortodoxos*; Fernández Casas was eventually expelled from the party. The Montreal Pact of June 1953 brought together groups of *Ortodoxos* and *Auténticos* around a program of setting up a provisional government, restoring the 1943 electoral code, and holding free and fair elections. The *montrealistas* considered the regime illegitimate and justified the use of force to bring it down.

After March 1952, Cuba awaited the revolt. *Priísta Auténticos* were busy purchasing weapons and smuggling them into Cuba. Aureliano Sánchez Arango, an amateur

pilot, made quite a few secret landings in different parts of the island, daringly bypassing the regime's security every time. In early 1953, political discontent increased and rumors of conspiracies multiplied. Five men tried to burn down the seat of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, the agency in charge of administering the upcoming elections. Small caches of arms were uncovered in numerous sites. Clashes between University of Havana demonstrators and the police produced the first student martyr of the second Batista era, Rubén Batista. De Varona, president of the Senate under Prío and now Auténtico party chairman, was arrested and warned that he would be held accountable for any violence. The house of Ramón Vasconcelos, a leading journalist and member of the general's cabinet, was bombed. At the end of January, Batista declared his determination to exercise an "iron dictatorship" with "no guarantees and no quarter for criminals and terrorists." The elections, initially scheduled for November 1, 1953, were postponed for June 1, 1954.

The opposition's confrontational tempo increased. On Easter Sunday, students armed with knives and pistols marched on Camp Columbia to entice the military to revolt; no doubt, they were hoping to replay the alliance of the students and noncommissioned officers during the revolution of 1933 (though in this case, in reverse, since then the students went to Camp Columbia in support of the sergeants already up in arms). Rafael García Bárcena and 65 other people were arrested and subsequently tried for the frustrated enticement; García Bárcena was given a two-year prison term, 12 others were confined for periods ranging from three to twelve months, and 53 were acquitted. Throughout the month of April, University of Havana students demonstrated against the regime and battled the police; the University Council closed the Alma Mater to avoid further bloodshed. In May, prominent Ortodoxo Pelayo Cuervo Navarro was arrested after appearing on the popular television program, *Ante la prensa*, and saying that Batista would only be ousted by the force of arms. The Montreal Pact in June seemed in rhythm with the opposition crescendo. Then, on July 26, 1953, a young Ortodoxo and former student leader named Fidel Castro led 165 young people in an attack against the Moncada Barracks in Santiago de Cuba. The putsch failed, dozens of young men died in combat or while in police custody, and the dictator's "confident serenity" was destroyed. Law 997 on Public Order, at the time considered one of the most tyrannical ever in Latin America, was decreed in August; the Supreme Court denied the constitutional challenge to Batista's provisional statutes formulated by Auténtico Ramón Zaydín and thus confirmed the general's usurpation of the Constitution of 1940; the elections were again postponed, this time to the date they would actually be held: November 1, 1954.

## II. The November 1, 1954 Elections and Their Aftermath: The Peaceful Transition That Wasn't

After July 1953, the cycle of violence receded noticeably. Student demonstrations had a routine, low-intensity quality about them; the Directorio Revolucionario was yet to be founded. On the eve of a presidential visit in June 1954, six bombs exploded in Santiago, an unambiguous but still infrequent message to Batista. The regime brazenly proceeded with voter registration: for each voter registered in an opposition party, there were seven in the official column. Sánchez Arango, the peripatetic pilot, escaped a sensational cloak-and-dagger manhunt in April, but unwittingly left behind a briefcase with the names of most of his collaborators, known as Triple AAA (Amigos de Aureliano Sánchez Arango); SIM made profitable use of this information and destroyed his wide-cast net. The moncadistas had been

tried and condemned to prison terms. In May, the government repealed the draconian Law 997. Some die-hard Ortodoxos zealously continued to defend the memory of Chibás: Agramonte again challenged an opponent to a duel, this time the flamboyant Aureliano. In an interview published in a Panamanian newspaper, Sánchez Arango had derided Chibás as a publicity seeker who had staged the histrionics of August 5, 1951 when corruption charges levied against him, then Prío's Minister of Education, proved groundless.

On November 1, 1954, the regime held pretend elections. In August, Batista had stepped down and named Andrés Domingo Morales del Castillo interim president, a technicality so the general could run for the presidency. The opposition rejected outright the validity of an electoral process under Batista's supervision without the prior extension of full constitutional guarantees. Batista's only opponent was Grau San Martín, a move which alienated the Prío wing of the party and most others in the opposition who decried the farce. Perhaps *el viejo* (Grau's popular sobriquet) sought to jostle for control of the party machinery while Prío, his main *Auténtico* adversary, promoted rebellion. Twice Grau withdrew from the race: the first time, he returned when the dispute over voter registration was supposedly settled; the second, he stayed out. The regime's strong-arm tactics were so pervasive that Ernesto de la Fe, Minister of Information and chief of anti-communist propaganda, denounced the elections as a sham and was quickly ousted from the cabinet. Perchance Batista had taken notice of the experience of Pérez Jiménez in Venezuela where his fellow dictator had conducted fair elections in 1952 for a constituent assembly, and the electorate had given opposition parties a resounding victory (2 out of 3 votes); Pérez Jiménez nullified the results, recounted the vote, and declared the government party victorious. Batista's fraud was up front. With the general installed as *de jure* (sic) president on February 24, 1955, tenuous possibilities for dialogue nonetheless became apparent.

What changed? Not much regarding regime legitimacy: pretend elections did not absolve the usurpation of March 10, 1952. The forms, however, had changed, and herein lay the opportunities. Batista now had a four-year term, at the end of which other candidates would contend for the presidency as the Constitution banned reëlection. Disbanded in 1952 after the coup, Congress once again opened its doors, with minority *Auténticos* as an opposition nucleus within the regime's institutions. Batista's new cabinet consisted of men largely believed to be in favor of some form of dialogue; several, like Carlos Saladrigas ("*ciudadano civil y constructivo por excelencia*") and Raúl Menocal ("*dotes de caballerosidad y decencia*"), had reputations for honesty and civility. Both Batista and Rafael Guas Inclán gave conciliatory speeches when they were inaugurated as national and Senate presidents, respectively. The *tanquistas*, or hardliners, appeared in retreat. Would the *batistato* put substance behind the forms and follow their words with mollifying actions?

The opposition had plenty of reasons to mistrust Batista: the general had not acted in good faith either in leading the *madrugonazo* or in conducting the 1954 elections. The strategy of returning the country to constitutional rule via an insurrection had failed, however. If armed struggle was not possible, then politics and what Ortodoxo Márquez Sterling called a civic struggle, "*un movimiento de masas enderezado a sustanciosas e imperiosas reivindicaciones públicas,*" were the only alternatives. Renouncing violence as a means to combat the dictatorship thus became the banner of those within the opposition who wanted, however cautiously, to respond in kind to the regime's new forms. Upon Batista's inauguration, Don Cosme de la Torriente, a

colonel in the Liberation Army and a Conservative party public servant in the early republic, and thirty-five leading Auténticos and Ortodoxos, issued a document repudiating violence:

El problema cubano ha de plantearse en paridad de dignidad, de honor y de valor cívico. Mientras un grupo pretenda administrar los intereses de la mayoría y mandar -- no gobernar -- seguiremos sin paz; el ambiente de paz es necesario para resolver la angustiada crisis nacional.

Renowned intellectual and political activist Jorge Mañach called the moment "la hora grande," arguing the opposition needed to craft viable solutions, even if these took time and the outcome was not so radical:

Esa solución sólo podría consistir en que ambas partes cedieran razonablemente de su absolutismo: en que las oposiciones no persigan una anulación imposible de los hechos, ni el régimen se aproveche de ellos para asegurarse a su favor todo el futuro político.

Francisco Ichaso, a distinguished journalist and intellectual, emphasized two of the issues that the opposition united on -- amnesty and exiles -- and added a comment on Cuban political culture:

Mientras haya presos y exiliados por motivos políticos no habrá ambiente de paz ni podremos decir que se ha recuperado la normalidad. Hay que ir -- e ir cuanto antes -- a una situación en que los cubanos de ideología distinta, de conducta en contraste o de partidos antagónicos se miren como adversarios levantados y no como fieras que mutuamente se aperciben para caer sobre su presa.

Subtle changes were, indeed, occurring within the opposition camp. José Antonio Echeverría, a prominent student leader who did not forswear the use of violence, denounced them:

El estudiantado y la juventud han quedado en este momento solos en este camino. La claudicación y la inercia de las llamadas clases dirigentes del país, han colocado sobre nuestros hombros un peso, con el que, sin embargo, no nos sentimos abrumados. Tenemos fe en que la unión del estudiantado y la juventud con las clases obreras, campesinas y profesionales, logrará plasmar los ideales revolucionarios, que constituyen la esencia misma de nuestra nacionalidad.

On Mothers' Day weekend, the government decreed a political amnesty; shortly thereafter, it issued guarantees for the safe return of all exiles. Without a doubt, Castro was the most famous of political prisoners: Moncada had genuinely marked the imagination of Cuba's citizenry. Upon his release, the young Castro said: "No somos perturbadores de oficio. Las grandes reformas políticas, sociales y económicas son lo fundamental. Cuba necesita políticos decentes." When asked about Moncada, he replied: "Algún día se hará la historia del Moncada" and expressed his willingness to change tactics, although never "en virtud de un compromiso con los que detentan al poder a espaldas del pueblo." Still an Ortodoxo, Castro urged the "unión de todas las fuerzas morales del país bajo el pensamiento chibasista." Carlos Prío, the most famous of exiles, had made no secret of his commitment to overthrow Batista by whatever means necessary; yet, his response to the political amnesty signaled a consideration of other alternatives:

Este debe ser un día de júbilo en Cuba y sería mezquino turbarlo con manifestaciones de intransigencia o de arrogancia. Dije hace poco más de un mes que la amnistía podría y debería constituir el primer paso para el restablecimiento de la paz moral en nuestra patria y quiero ahora consignar sin reservas mi satisfacción por el hecho de que ese primer paso se haya dado.

Castro and Prío represented the two poles of the potential insurrection: on one end, the centennial generation, so named for the one hundredth anniversary of José Martí's birth in 1853; on the other, the revolutionaries of 1933, now mature and with a record in office, but with the memory of their earlier ideals -- and the means they had used to pursue them -- still haunting them. In the early batistato, montrealismo, or the priísta advocacy of insurrection, had conditioned the opposition's strategy and action. In no small measure because montrealismo had faltered, the post-1954 period created the opportunity of a political settling of the differences between government and opposition. But the moment also had a hidden transcript: creating the conditions for sidelining moncadismo, the fidelista (and others') advancement of armed struggle as the only language the dictator understood. Prío returned to Cuba in August 1955, a signal of his abandonment of insurrectionary tactics. A few days before his return, José Antonio Echeverría welcomed him only "si adopta la única postura que le cabe: pisar tierra cubana con el arma en la mano, dispuesto a rescatar por la violencia lo que por la violencia le fue arrebatado a nuestra patria." At about the same time, Castro went into exile saying: "cerradas al pueblo todas las puertas para la lucha cívica, no queda más solución que la del 68 y la del 95." The stakes were, indeed, high: the challenge was both easing a dictator out of power and incorporating a new generation into the political mainstream without the use of force. Republican politics offered no precedents on either count.

The partial restoration of the Constitution of 1940 offered an electoral road map out of the batistato and a context for a potential dialogue. Batista's desire for the trappings of de jure rule, however perverted by fraudulent elections and a constricted constitution, opened the Pandora's box of the full procedural substance of democracy. Three options emerged: mid-term elections in 1956, an immediate general election, and a constituent assembly; each elicited a myriad of responses and fears. Underlying all the electoral options were the reestablishment of full constitutional guarantees and the holding of a fairly contested process. The demand that Batista resign and hand over power to a provisional government before trustworthy elections could be held had not yet overtaken the opposition's agenda, something that would be the case after 1956 and that would further dim the prospects of a negotiated solution. Most of the opposition rejected the idea of mid-term elections in 1956 for municipal governments and the House of Representatives: implicit in these was a recognition of the pretend elections and the timeline they established. A constituent assembly, an idea embraced at different times by Márquez Sterling, Mañach, Pardo Llada and some government spokesmen, afforded an interesting alternative that never attained momentum. Some opponents believed the government would muscle a constitutional modification to allow Batista's presidential reelection in 1958; others feared the clases económicas would manage to rescind the articles on social justice in the Constitution of 1940. Immediate general elections became the rallying cry of the civic dialogue propelled by the Sociedad de Amigos de la República (SAR), the closest the mainstream opposition ever got to a united civic front against the Batista dictatorship.

Under the venerable leadership of Don Cosme de la Torriente, SAR sought to open a dialogue with the government. In June 1955, the group published a document containing a few simple ideas: Batista's coup and the pretend elections were not legitimate, but the political amnesty and the partial restoration of the Constitution opened new possibilities; full and effective constitutional guarantees were imperative in order to proceed with a solución nacional. With cautious optimism, the signatories expressed hope that a "civilizado entendimiento" might be possible if all set aside "torpes actitudes de intolerancia." They flatly rejected the idea that "la plena vigencia democrática" could result from "los senderos de la violencia." SAR aimed to mediate between government and opposition: the organization was not a political party, and the 83-year-old Don Cosme clearly had no presidential ambitions. In a sense, SAR was taking up the call that many opponents had proposed, including Márquez Sterling's wing of the Ortodoxos, after the March coup: the mobilization of a civic movement first, leaving political struggles for later. With the impetus for an insurrection dissipated, civic resistance appeared a plausible strategy for negotiating the full guarantees needed to hold free and fair elections. Don Cosme himself put it succinctly: "A Batista sólo se le puede vencer poniéndole frente a toda la opinión pública de Cuba."

Had SAR and the opposition effectively mobilized public opinion over the course of 1955 and early 1956, a peaceful transition might indeed have been the outcome of the civic dialogue. That the citizenry of Cuba favored such an outcome was the perception of most observers at the time; but these sentiments constituted a "malestar difuso" that patently clamored for organized expression. Malaise alone never imperiled a regime. The more relaxed political ambience after Batista's inauguration in February 1955 created conditions conducive to mobilizing a mass movement of public pressure. Prío's return in August provided the first tangible sign of this possibility: though his arrival had been announced and postponed several times, the deposed president finally landed without much advance notice on August 11 to the welcoming cheers of thousands of habaneros at Rancho Boyeros Airport. Given how quietly the citizenry had accepted the coup three-and-a-half years earlier, these cheers clearly had more to do with championing a return to la normalidad institucional than with supporting the presidente de la cordialidad.

In the fall, Auténticos and Ortodoxos organized peaceful opposition gatherings throughout the island. By some accounts, demonstrations in Camagüey and Oriente mobilized up to 20,000 people each. The two most notable events happened in Havana: in October, Prío presided over a 50,000-strong assembly in Los Desamparados Street, and in November, Don Cosme and SAR moderated a meeting of some 100,000 citizens at the Muelle de la Luz. Prío's demonstration was attended only by his Auténticos and Mañach's Movimiento de la Nación; in contrast, SAR's rallied almost the full opposition spectrum. "Operación calle" and a "vigurosa acción de masas" emerged as new bylines. Student demonstrators in Santiago and Havana renewed their march in late November, forcing universities and secondary schools to close. On December 10, a young Ortodoxo was killed during a demonstration in his hometown of Ciego de Avila, Camagüey, and his funeral turned out mourners from all over the island in a gigantic display of protest. FEU appealed to labor and the public to stage a five-minute work stoppage on December 14, which apparently succeeded without official CTC sanction. The crowning manifestation was the famous strike of 500,000 sugar workers at the end of the year when the harvest was about to begin. Cuban civil society had evidently woken up.

Initially, Batista refused to meet with Don Cosme, a slight that garnered the elder statesman even greater popular sympathy. Official spokesmen like Anselmo Alliegro, Andrés Rivero Agüero, and Vasconcelos rebuffed the need for any kind of mediation, asserting that the people wanted jobs and economic development, and Batista was delivering. At the same time, others like Jorge García Montes observed: "Estamos abiertos a toda solución digna del problema cubano, a toda solución que no signifique abandono de responsabilidades ni claudicación cobarde ante actitudes amenazantes." Alliegro and Guás Inclán suggested the opposition show "calma y paciencia," implying some compromise might be possible. Early in October it was repeatedly rumored that one of the official parties, Partido de Unión Radical (PUR), was on the verge of rupture with the government; Santiago Alvarez and Amadeo López Castro, prominent puristas, denied the supposedly imminent break. Raúl Lorenzo, a Batista fellow traveler, criticized the regime for being too conservative and proclaimed himself neither of the government nor of the opposition. Just like the sparks of a mass movement, the inklings of divergence within official ranks suggested an incipient situation in which compromise could have been eventually forced out of negotiations.

On December 28, Batista finally met Don Cosme in a two-hour session. The general did not budge on his refusal to consider immediate elections, but agreed to meet again on January 10. The second meeting resulted in an agreement to form committees that would come together to air their points of view. Batista's stalling tactics worked: the government quickly put together a committee; the opposition lived up to Mañach's concern of June 1955:

Frente a la estrategia batistiana de unir lo disímil para ponerlo al servicio de un designio autoritario y castrense, las oposiciones se han empeñado en desunir lo semejante, como si no quisieran que prosperase su designio democrático y civil.

Though talks continued, no progress was made. On March 10, 1956, the fourth anniversary of the coup, Batista scorned opposition demands as "ridiculous and impossible of fulfillment." At the end of the month, he visited Daytona Beach where he had lived during Grau's presidency, and made a comment about spending time there once he retired in 1958. The two-edged remark allayed opposition fears of a Batista reelection maneuver, while confirming his resistance to SAR's principal demand -- immediate general elections. In July, Batista placed a take-it-or-leave-it proposal on the table: no constitutional modification on reelection, mid-term elections in 1957, and general elections as scheduled in November 1958. By then, the civic dialogue was dead, and the peaceful return to la normalidad institucional derailed, as it turned out, permanently.

The first quarter of 1956 was a crucial moment in the transition that wasn't. After the rapid ascension of civil society during the latter months of 1955, civic resistance practically evaporated. What happened? At this point, I have no satisfying explanation. Leadership was certainly a factor. Batista was the undisputed head of the government coalition; he had no counterpart in the opposition. In fact, all groups and many individuals vied to become first among equals: "Todos quieren que se vaya Batista; pero todos aspiran a sustituirlo y como una sustitución de todos simultáneamente es imposible, cada cual va por su lado sin la más remota posibilidad de coordinación." After the pretend elections, new opposition movements, sprouted overnight, all basically splinters of the Ortodoxos, Mañach's Movimiento de la Nación and Amalio Fiallo's Movimiento de Liberación Radical being the two most

notable examples. When Márquez Sterling, Antonio Martínez Fraga, and Hector Pagés, known as the Ortodoxos libres, flirted with the idea of accepting the call for mid-term elections as long as full constitutional guarantees were in place, intransigent Ortodoxos accused them of scheming to "convertir nuestra cruzada de adecentamiento público en un movimiento oportunista, dedicado a recoger las migajas del festín batistiano." In the context of SAR, Ortodoxos like Agramonte balked at sitting side by side with the Auténticos: "Los ortodoxos no estamos dispuestos a compartir la tribuna con los malversadores y ladrones del PRC." This anti-Auténtico position dovetailed into Batista's earlier justification for the coup and his present reticence to establish a dialogue with the opposition; his words at a meeting of PAP's youth wing a few days after the Muelle de la Luz demonstration were telling:

Estamos pensando seriamente si hacemos daño al pueblo en no ser dictadores. Tenemos que mantener los músculos tensos para la acción con que salvar a la República del desenfreno y del abismo. Los que ahora hablan de desempleo, de miseria y de hambre, bien podrían devolverle al pueblo lo que al pueblo le robaron con descaro y con cinismo. Si fuéramos dictadores, no estaríamos permitiendo, de acuerdo con las inclinaciones de nuestro espíritu, que los que han hundido al pueblo en la miseria y en la ignominia, traten de sobornarlo levantando su voz para pedir reivindicaciones en nombre de ese propio pueblo.

Had he outlived his aldabonazo, Chibás might have, perhaps, provided the missing leadership ingredient in the incipient civic movement. But the fact was that no individual or group was able to overcome the fissiparousness of the opposition. In November 1955, journalist Ichaso insightfully noted:

Un país puede salvarse con un plan o sin ningún plan. Con cientos de planes se pierde irremisiblemente. Entre nosotros no habrá coordinación mientras no se nos pase ese frenesí salvacionista que saca de quicio hasta los más ponderados. Con tantos movimientos, ¿hacia dónde nos moveremos?

Earlier, Ichaso had lucidly diagnosed the problem:

Mientras no surja un líder que se produzca en forma clara y distinta y que por la concreción y el poder de sus ideas logre aglutinar los criterios y las voluntades discrepantes, será muy difícil llegar a ese puerto de la solución nacional.

The civic dialogue did not produce such a leader. When Batista acceded to meet with Don Cosme and proposed setting up representative commissions, the opposition became preoccupied with these elite level activities and neglected *operación calle*. A leader with a vision -- a Cuban Luis Muñoz Marín, for example -- might have also tended the civic movement and gained ground in both fronts. One cannot help but wonder what might have happened if Colonel Ramón Barquín's conspiracy of los puros (more than 40 officers and 200 enlisted men) had come to fruition amid a national situation in April 1956 comparable to that of November-December 1955.

Had the civic resistance movement continued at the tempo of late 1955, the malestar difuso, particularly among young Cubans, might have been channeled toward reform. José Antonio Echeverría and the FEU had partaken in the SAR's assembly in November. Earlier Fructuoso Rodríguez, a fellow FEU leader, had bitterly criticized the context that made the civic dialogue possible:

En Cuba se está escenificando una gigantesca comedia de garantías. Mientras nosotros somos perseguidos y detenidos a cada paso, insurreccionalistas arrepentidos negocian su acomodo en Cuba con los cancerberos del marcismo. Hay garantías para ciertos opositores "de altura", pero no para los hijos del pueblo y del Alma Mater, erguidos patrióticamente contra un régimen de fuerza.

Reining in the radicals on both sides is one of the crucial factors in a peaceful transition; a mass movement, like the Philippines' People's Power in 1986 or the Venezuelan opposition's against Pérez Jiménez in 1958, might have carried out that task in Cuba in early 1956. The fidelistas might not have yielded their position gracefully or peacefully: they had already gained acceptance in public opinion, especially among the young, and stridently chanted (Revolución! (Revolución! at every turn. But Fidel Castro was still in exile, and the Rebel Army yet to be. Mañach concisely outlined the duty of both the mainstream opposition and the government:

Ese idealismo revolucionario, que ya es parte de una tradición, tendrá mucho de vocación inevitable mientras los grandes problemas de la nación estén por resolver. Sólo podrá calmarlo y encauzarlo fecundamente una política "adulta" que, efectivamente, le abra a Cuba perspectivas de servicio digno en las altas esferas. Entre tanto, tiene sólo la fuerza de un elemento emocional. A los líderes más decisivos, tanto de la oposición como del Gobierno, les corresponde actuar de tal modo que ese rescoldo juvenil no se convierta en llamarada.

In April 1956, two developments fatally wounded the fragile dialogue. Barquín and his co-conspirators dangerously revealed the fissures within the medulla of the regime -- the military; a shake up of the armed forces followed the frustrated revolt. In Matanzas, a band of priísta Auténticos attacked the Goicuría Barracks; Prío was placed under protective custody and shortly thereafter put on a plane to Miami. Batista imposed media censorship and suspended constitutional guarantees for forty-five days. In June, SIM uncovered plots, seized arms, and arrested a large number of suspects. When he made his take-it-or-leave-it proposal in July, Batista was talking to an empty auditorium. In November 1955, addressing an assembly of 800 Cuban exiles at the Palm Garden Auditorium in New York City, Castro had starkly highlighted the chasm between the new generation and the mainstream opposition:

A tal extremo de hipocresía moral se ha llegado en cuanto se habla y escribe en Cuba, que tal parece que para algunos ser aspirante a un cargo, cualquiera que sea su precio de sumisión, es una virtud, y ser revolucionario dispuesto a redimirse por un ideal sin aspirar a nada, un crimen. Política de avestruz que se niega a palpar la realidad. (Muy grande va a ser la sorpresa para todos!

Los Partidos de oposición que la respaldan [SAR] han llegado a su momento más crítico. ¿Que harán ante la tajante negativa del régimen? Es preciso repetir las palabras de Martí: "Ya no hay espacio en las mejillas de los pedigueños para las bofetadas. ¿Cuándo se ha levantado una nación con limosneros de derechos? El miedo no ha resuelto una situación que solo podía resolver el valor". Nosotros somos hoy en Cuba los únicos que sabemos a dónde vamos y no dependemos de la última palabra del Dictador.

On December 8, 1956, Don Cosme passed away. A week earlier, the fidelistas had returned in full force: on November 30, santiagueros had staged an urban insurrection, and two days later the Granma had landed (or shipwrecked) in the

southern coast of Oriente. Violence had spiraled after October when two of Batista's henchmen, Blanco Rico and Rafael Salas Cañizares, had been assassinated. The year ended with the notorious Pascuas sangrientas when nineteen men were shot to death and two hanged (all well-known oppositionists), their bodies left to rot by the roadside across a wide swath in northern Oriente. The next two years would not afford another opportunity for a peaceful route out of Batista's dictatorship analogous to that squandered during 1955 and early 1956.

### III. The Malestar Difuso as a Breeding Ground for Radicalism: Concluding Thoughts and Comments

"Cuba reclama dos medidas insoslayables: el respeto absoluto a las instituciones democráticas y honradez en los funcionarios públicos," said Guido García Inclán on his popular radio program (Arriba corazones! in October 1955 as he seconded the clamor for a citizens' movement against Batista. Although these quintessentially reformist demands were endorsed even by *Diario de la Marina*, they also carried parallel, more radical cries for profound economic change that horrified the clases económicas and the more conservative elements of Cuban society. Cuba, after all, had had a revolution in the 1930s, the result of which had been a social welfare state and a compromise with labor that capital considered well beyond the island's economic possibilities. Auténticos, Ortodoxos, and the new movements of the 1950s supported advancing the social gains of the 1940s; even the batistato, presiding over a tentative restructuring of Cuban capitalism during the 1950s, had to pay a bit more than lip service to these gains. Continuing these advances did not perforce entail the dismantling of capitalism, but after 1959 they did. Unintentionally, of course, Batista and the mainstream opposition squandered more than a peaceful transition to la normalidad institucional in the mid-1950s. By clearing the way for successful armed struggle, they permitted a freer rein to the forces that eventually opted to pursue these reforms outside the confines of capitalism.

The malestar difuso of the 1950s criticized the economic and political status quo with moral outrage. Amalio Fiallo, president of the Movimiento de Liberación Radical, pronounced his movement's assessment of the Cuban predicament, one that most in the mainstream opposition subscribed:

EL MLR es una respuesta histórica a las inquietudes del momento cubano. Se encara al presente que ha estrangulado la libertad y también al pasado que debilitó el sentido moral de la autoridad. Se enfrenta resueltamente a los factores que han retardado la integración plena de nuestra nacionalidad: la desmoralización, la desorientación ideológica, la incultura, la imprevisión económica, la ingerencia extranjera, el abandono rural, el peculado, el militarismo, la discriminación y la corrupción política. El MLR es un instrumento de lucha al servicio de la recuperación moral de Cuba, de la dignidad de la persona humana, basada en la primacía de sus valores espirituales. Está al servicio de los campesinos sin tierra, de los trabajadores desplazados, de las juventudes sin oportunidad de trabajo ni de cultura, de los hombres y mujeres discriminados, de los ciudadanos atropellados por la usurpación. De cuantos quieran emprender, desde la raíz, la liberación de la patria.

The MLR's section head for professionals, Heliodoro Martínez Junco, was more confrontational but still within the consensus of the anti-Batista movement:

El actual ordenamiento capitalista ha conducido a incontables abusos y explotaciones, concentrando los bienes en pocas manos, provocando la absorción del hombre por la máquina y la empresa, impidiendo el acceso del mayor número a la propiedad y ahondando los antagonismos de clases. Estos males han sido agravados entre nosotros por la ausencia de una orientación correcta en lo económico, el sometimiento a los grandes intereses extranjeros, el abandono de las zonas rurales, el régimen de monopolios, el latifundismo azucarero y la falta de desarrollo de fuentes de riqueza y trabajo. Por eso el MLR sostiene que urge no sólo propiciar el mejoramiento de las condiciones en que actualmente se desenvuelve la vida nacional, sino provocar un nuevo ordenamiento económico-social en que los derechos de cada cubano reciban el más pleno reconocimiento.

Fidel Castro's words at New York's Palm Garden sounded almost innocuous in comparison:

El pueblo cubano desea algo más que un simple cambio de mandos. Cuba ansía un cambio radical en todos los campos de la vida pública y social. Hay que darle al pueblo algo más que libertad y democracia en términos abstractos; hay que proporcionarle una existencia decorosa a cada cubano.

But economics did not mark the opposition's radicalism; culture and politics did. Moral outrage was more determinant of the opposition's intransigence -- both during 1955-1956 and later -- than prescriptions about socio-economic changes. A frustration with the republic, even a sense of betrayal, permeated the anti-Batista camp well before the fidelistas established their dominance. Mañach eloquently summarized what, again, were widely shared sentiments:

No rebasaremos nosotros la crisis de Cuba con sólo ir resolviendo bien que mal pequeños problemas de gobierno, de hacer y tener. No se trata sólo de subsistir, sino de ser con más dignidad. Lo que necesitamos por lo pronto es darle a Cuba un contenido nuevo de conciencia moral, una nueva carga de ideales. Con esa alma nueva podremos emprender después la tarea de mejorarle a la República su cuerpo, es decir, su economía, su organización social y política, sus instituciones visibles. De esas dos cosas, del alma solidaria y el cuerpo sólido, se hará al fin la Nación verdadera.

José Antonio Echeverría evoked the memory of those who had struggled in the 1920s and 1930s as FEU's banner for the future:

Tenemos un mensaje para la juventud y para el pueblo de Cuba en general. No es un mensaje partidista, sino una exhortación cívica, cuyo deber nos viene de los grandes mártires y guías del estudiantado y de la nación: Julio Antonio Mella, Rafael Trejo, Antonio Guiteras, Eddy Chibás, Ramiro Valdés Daussá; de la reforma universitaria del año 1923, cuando la Universidad Popular José Martí unió a estudiantes y trabajadores en la gestación de una Cuba mejor. En nombre de ese glorioso pasado hablamos para el porvenir.

The Auténticos' record and Batista's coup, together, accounted for the opposition's exasperation, but so did republican history. Being a young nation with aspirations of greatness that had been repeatedly stymied by U.S. interference and the políticos' malfeasance did not contribute to devising an effective political strategy against Batista. In the mid-1950s, restoring la normalidad institucional would have been

hard enough had government and opposition fully partaken of what would have unavoidably been laborious and intricate negotiations; but doing so with dignity, while honoring the memory of Cuba's martyrs and holding the Auténtico malversadores at a distance raised impossible stakes.

Chibás' line of independencia política, dogmatically maintained by many Ortodoxos, no doubt hindered the formation of a united opposition front in the immediate aftermath of Batista's coup. Fulfilling that task was the Ortodoxia's moment of truth as much as the Auténticos' was renewing the hopes of 1933 when they assumed power in 1944; neither party fully and constructively rose to its occasion. But, in fact, the opposition was so fragmented in no small measure precisely because each group considered itself to be the purveyor of Cuba's salvation, a mission determined by the widespread sense of national insufficiency. At the height of SAR's effort, the Muelle de la Luz demonstration, Fiallo inadvertently expressed a crucial opposition weakness:

Esta no es una lucha entre la oposición democrática y el gobierno. Esta es una lucha entre la Republica democrática y la colonia. No puede haber otra solución que la que restaure la dignidad ultrajada del pueblo de Cuba. Cuando el pueblo es protagonista, no puede haber componendas. (Traidor será quien hable de elecciones parciales! (El referéndum está aquí y se extiende desde Oriente hasta Pinar del Río!

Intransigence against a regime that held most of the cards and was putting mid-term elections on the table might have been consistent with a sense of moral outrage, but it blindfolded the opposition to the inevitable horse-trading of politics. Where was the actual strength to back up this intransigence? How was the opposition to muster the resources to force Batista to hold free, fair, and immediate elections? If most of the mainstream opposition recoiled from the compromise of mid-term elections, the only alternative was sustaining the strategy of peaceful resistance. Political winds, however, never turned the sparks of the civic movement into a fire across the Cuban prairie; the mainstream opposition never quite forced Batista to confront the power of public opinion in favor of immediate general elections. In Miami's Flagler Theater a few days after the SAR meeting, Juan Manuel Márquez, one of Castro's lieutenants at the time, ridiculed the mainstream opposition for following "la vía inútil del autonomismo; los esfuerzos de Giberga, Montoro y Varona fueron infructuosos; la razón la tenía José Martí." Ichaso tersely summed up the dilemma: "O la guerra con todas sus consecuencias o la política con todos sus altibajos." The fidelistas successfully assumed the former; the mainstream opposition failed at the latter.

An undercurrent of intolerance lay just below the surface of the malestar difuso. In 1955, Márquez Sterling and Mañach engaged in a heated polemic over the latter's break with the Ortodoxos to found the Movimiento de la Nación; though sharp words were exchanged, they deplored the "verborrea de medios populacheros y encendidos" that hindered public discussion. A debate between the old Liberal Orestes Ferrara and Pardo Llada on Ante la prensa became noteworthy for the contrast between the two: Ferrara was measured and addressed the issues at hand; Pardo Llada resorted to accusations without debating substantive questions. Similarly, an argument over the legality of mid-term elections between Manuel Antonio de Varona and Márquez Sterling stood in stark contrast with the "arengas radiales saturadas de improperios." In October 1955, a group of students pelted Márquez Sterling with stones, eggs, and vegetables after he suggested on Ante la prensa that mid-term elections under full constitutional guarantees might be an acceptable compromise. The incident led Herminio Portell Vilá to ask: ")Y es ésto lo que nos

espera después de Batista? )Esa es la manera de respetar el 'otro' punto de vista que tienen los que protestan de que los suyos no sean respetados?" Civility was not the point, preferable as it is to the alternative; rather the heart of the matter was the hyperactive ambience in which public discussion of la situación nacional took place. It simply was not conducive to moderation, negotiation, and compromise.

Opposition leaders feared the accusations of selling out, cowardice, and being soft on Batista. Journalist Ichaso succinctly described the problem:

Hay un regateo para ver quién resulta más agresivo, más intransigente. Mientras este frenesí no se aplaque será muy difícil ponerse de acuerdo en torno a fórmulas viables de solución nacional. Vivimos en un momento en que los líderes creen que toda actitud transigente les quita prestigio y no hay en la oposición ninguno que se atreva a discutir ni mucho menos a desautorizar públicamente la línea insurreccional de los jóvenes.

Another journalist, Carlos Lechuga similarly commented on the "política utópica en que insisten muchos opositores, porque no se atreven a dar el paso de una táctica radical a una menos gloriosa." In a manifesto clearly written by the level-headed and moderate Mañach, Movimiento de la Nación did not discard any of the tactics then in vogue, reminding readers that Cuba had gained its independence thanks to the heroism of thousands of Cubans; if la patria were again "amenazada de nueva e indefinida servidumbre sólo el heroísmo podrá salvarla." In August 1955, Márquez Sterling, alarmed at Ortodoxo President Raúl Chibás' refusal to state unequivocally that the party espoused only peaceful means, declared: "La bazuca y el diálogo cívico no pueden marchar juntos." Ichaso's words provide a penetrating depiction of the political ambience in mid-1950s Cuba:

Nada es comparable con la hiperestesia de lo actual. Y cuando hablamos de lo actual nos remontamos casi hasta el 33. La caída de Machado soltó todas las válvulas. Hace tiempo ya que vivimos bajo el régimen del grito pelado. Así no hay modo de entenderse. Mientras más gritan las gargantas más callan las ideas. Es indispensable la buena fe mutua.

A semblance of trust is essential for democracy. In Cuba, that trust had been violated by the Grau and Prío administrations, or so, many citizens perceived. Chibás and the Ortodoxos engaged in a holy war against the Auténticos, and they were seeking to gain power on a platform of national redemption. Would the Ortodoxos have succumbed to the altibajos of politics whatever the outcome on June 1, 1952 had been? We will never know; but we do know that the measure of good faith required to conduct a democratic, political society was already sorely strained before Batista usurped the Constitution. The batistato compounded the frustrations of the 1940s and the deep-seated sense of national insufficiency. Though a bit beyond the pale even at the time, Fidel Castro's words spoken at Miami's Flagler Theater in November 1955 after the SAR demonstration reflected views that flowed naturally out of the sea of mistrust and futility then engulfing Cuba:

Aquí están los que no le tienen miedo a las bayonetas. Lo juro aquí: en Cuba quedan ellos o quedamos nosotros. Reuniremos a nuestros compatriotas detrás de una idea de dignidad plena para el pueblo de Cuba y de justicia para los hambrientos y olvidados y de castigo para los grandes culpables. Queremos restablecer la patria digna. Con ladrones no puede redimirse a la República.

Con el pretexto de movilizar a la opinión pública no se puede exonerar de culpa a los grandes malversadores que quieren ahora bañarse en el Jordán del antibatistianismo. Los malversadores no tienen opinión pública. Los politiqueros serán castigados e inhabilitados durante largos años para el ejercicio del sufragio activo y pasivo.

Two weeks later, Miguel Hernández Bauzá, Auténtico Senate leader under Grau and still a grausista, wrote an article titled "La patria no es de Fidel," sounding the alarm of an uncompromising "calvinismo político": "Fidel parece dispuesto a afianzar su revolución en la fuerza de una moral tri-distilada que lo tendría a él y sólo a él, claro está, como único santón dispensador de mercedes cívicas, morales y espirituales." Most mainstream oppositionists probably shared these warnings of the dangers of Fidel's salvacionismo; but many saw themselves as Cuba's saviours -- as the revered Chibás had, most recently -- and failed to act during the mid-1950s in political ways that might have channeled young radicals into the ups and downs of a restored normalidad institucional.

Peaceful transitions to democracy are never straightforward. Structural conditions, historical legacies, the contours of incumbents and opponents, and human agency all interact in convoluted ways. In this essay, I have laid out an analytical sketch of an almost forgotten juncture during the batistato: the months after the pretend elections of 1954 and before the end of 1956 when a rapidly emerging revolutionary situation eventually vanquished the scenario for a peaceful transition to constitutional democracy. I have mostly focused on the mainstream opposition -- the alleged victims in a struggle that was ultimately decided between the batistianos and the fidelistas; but these (mostly) men, many of whom were truly decent and would have served Cuba well had the outcome to the batistato been on their terms, fell victim largely to their own political and cultural trappings. Their story must be rescued from the teleology of Cuban historiography. Like the workers, women, and ethnic minorities who were once on the historical sidelines but have over the past two decades been accorded their rightful place by social historians, the Cuban middle class and its democratic, reformist aspirations are now in need of similar tending by the field of Cuban studies.

The sketch I have drawn is not complete: interaction implies counterparts, the regime and the fidelistas being the two principal ones to the mainstream opposition. Though present in this essay, intra-regime dynamics and the fidelistas' gathering strengths need fuller and more detailed strokes for a richer picture of the transition that wasn't. Fulgencio Batista and Fidel Castro eventually became partners in determining la solución nacional; that they did was a consequence of Batista's and the mainstream opposition's failure to understand and act upon the political possibilities of 1954-1956.

If prudently engaged, counterfactuals -- a "virtual history" -- are a useful intellectual exercise. Though sketched in facts, this essay also relies on imagining what seemed possible and never was. Plumbing the layers of political possibilities at any particular crossroads in any historical setting only enhances our understanding of the actual history that followed, in this case, an outcome of no small significance for historians and social scientists: the Cuban Revolution. For Cubanists, the task is doubly imperative as the field begins to shed the linearity and the air of inevitability that have often marked the study of twentieth-century Cuba. Once we fully do so, we will have at least attained a normalidad historiográfica.