

Caribbean Influence on Cuban Transition

Jorge Luis Romeu

When Fidel Castro came to power in 1959, Cubans of both sides of the political divide committed a costly political error: they allowed the Cuban internal struggle to become a football in the politics of the Cold War. Castro sided with the Soviet Union, at a time when a nuclear war could destroy everything. The Cuban opposition sided with the United States, who sought to prevent the establishment of a Soviet foothold, 90 miles away from its shores. As a result, we lost the control of our nation's destiny. For, Cubans have never learned the old American political dictum that "politics ends at the water's edge;" nor the Mexican lesson of the French intervention of 1863, brought upon by the conservatives, after loosing their civil war against Juarez' forces, while trying to defeat his secularization reforms.

In 1960, the United States launched its economic embargo, which Castro adroitly used to firmly unite the country around him in the face of a foreign enemy, and to play little David in the foreign relation's arena, both very old strategies in such circumstances. The opposition abroad distanced itself from Latin America and the Spanish Caribbean, because this region supported the Castro government for calculated political, economic, strategic and demagogic reasons. This was yet another mistake that alienated Castro's opposition from its natural milieu. We failed to see the real causes behind the behavior of the Ibero-American countries and, hence, to finesse the situation efficiently.

For, the Spanish Caribbean countries took advantage of the Cuban situation in at least three ways. First, as all produce similar goods (sugar cane, tobacco, fruits, seafood, etc.) they were able obtain the Cuban quotas in the American markets. In addition, they also inherited Cuba's tourism industry and foreign investment. Historically, this is no different from Cuba's economic policy after 1795, when the African slaves revolted in Haiti, destroy-

ing their slave-based economy. Cuba, then under Spanish governor Luis de las Casas and economist Francisco de Arango y Parreno, seized the opportunity to launch its sugar and coffee industries that, until then, had languished while thriving and enriching the neighboring French colony.

Secondly, as the attention of the United States now focused on Castro's Cuba, it eased on the other Spanish Caribbean countries first, by giving them a greater political latitude (and less intervention in their internal affairs); then providing them with badly needed economic aid (e.g. *Alianza para el Progreso*). Their governments thence, had an interest in maintaining an international situation where they gained both, economically as well as politically.

Finally, several of Cuba's sister republics were far from democratic, and could not provide a better life for their citizens. Hence, they found it convenient to nominally support the government in Havana (while internally continuing their support to local oligarchies) as such political posturing was appealing to their poverty-stricken masses, shifting their attention from their own lack of civil liberties, goods and services. Some people refer to such procedures as demagoguery.

Summarizing, there are three main conditions that have helped sustain the present Cuban regime for the past 47 years. They are (1) President Castro's political shrewdness and ability to survive, (2) the Cold War and the US policy toward Cuba, and (3) the national interests and foreign policies of many Ibero-American and European countries, vis-à-vis the current Cuban regime.

A Cuban Transition

In the past few years, significant changes directly related to the above mentioned three conditions have occurred, opening a window of opportunity that facilitates a real transition to a pluralistic system in Cuba. These changes include the following:

President Castro, close to 80 years now, is nearing the end of his natural life. His brother and official heir has a slim chance of becoming his successor (Cuba, and in particular the Communist Party, is full of very capable leaders who have not had a "chance at bat" in the past 47 years). The deteriorated and explosive socioeconomic and political conditions inside Cuba support the possibility for negotiations between Castro's successors and Cuba's internal and external opposition.

The end of the Cold War occurred more than a decade ago, leaving the US as the only superpower. The disappearance of the danger of a US-Soviet nuclear confrontation creates the possibility of implementing a change in the 45-year-old American policy toward Cuba, without the U.S. losing face or endangering its citizens.

Finally, Ibero-America has improved and changed much, in the last half century, and its interests are now broader. This allows the Cuban opposition to seek their support in effecting a transition in Cuba, as occurred in Spain, Brazil, Chile and Argentina.

This paper proposes that the model for a political transition in Cuba is Ibero-American, and not borrowed from Eastern Europe. Castro remains more a *caudillo* than a pragmatic communist. But for this, the Cuban opposition needs to deal with the real or apparent perception, existing in many Ibero-American countries, that they are part of the US foreign policy toward Cuba.

For Cubans in the island, transition to a pluralistic political and economic system would bring political and economic freedom and more prosperity. For Cubans in the Diaspora, who have been away for too long, a transition would bring closure and the possibility to return home to die, or to spend prolonged periods in their retirement. For the current (younger) Cuban leaders, it would provide a real opportunity to access power (presently firmly controlled by Castro's aging inner circle) and the insurance of political and economic safety, after Castro's death. Finally, for the U.S., a Transition would eliminate the presence of an enemy next door.

But, if such a transition is so evidently needed and so beneficial to all, why then hasn't it occurred? Some immediately blame Castro or the U.S. But the fact is that the necessary and objective conditions for it to happen, are not yet in place.

A peaceful transition in Cuba—or anywhere else—requires of a negotiation process (and not a capitulation) with those at the helm in Cuba. Such negotiations require a mutually acceptable arbiter, which could well come from Ibero-America, as occurred, for example, with the *Contadora* process—that helped end the bloody civil wars in Central America in the mid 1980s.

An arbiter is absolutely necessary because all parties strongly mistrust each other (with plenty of reason). Cuban leaders want insurance that, once a transition process is started, they won't be obliterated as they were following Brazilian, Chilean, Argentinean and Spanish transition processes. The U.S. (and the Cuban opposition both internal and abroad) also want insurances that such a transition is legitimate and not another fraud.

A neutral arbiter, acceptable to all sides, would help bring about badly needed and real economic growth, and an orderly process of economic and political reform. Cubans would at last, leave behind the painful past, face a brighter future and regain control of our nation's destiny again, just as in post-transition Chile, Spain and Brazil.

The objective of this paper is to demonstrate how the Spanish Caribbean, to which Cuba belongs both geographically and culturally, and which is its

natural habitat, can play a major role in such a transition. We support the hypothesis that the Spanish Caribbean is homogeneous, with specific characteristics in each country but with a common identity. By cultivating such a natural association, the Cuban opposition inside the island and abroad, can find some of the necessary arbiters required for a transition to pluralism, in the minimum time and with the minimum cost.

The Spanish Caribbean

To start, we need to define what we mean by the Spanish Caribbean. It is the socioeconomic and cultural collection of islands and coastal areas of the Caribbean Basin proper, as well as selected coastal areas of the Gulf of Mexico, which were colonized and held by Spain, throughout the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Therefore, we do not include in such Spanish Caribbean, the islands colonized by the French, English or other Europeans, or the Caribbean coast of Central America, populated by the Black Carib or Garifuna. The Spanish Caribbean, therefore, includes Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Cuba, plus the Caribbean coasts of Venezuela, Colombia and Panama, and the Gulf coast of the Mexican states of Veracruz, Yucatan and Campeche.

Their common characteristics are visible and evident, even to the casual tourist. They include a common language, like religious practices, similar musical roots, commonalities in cuisine and shared colonial histories, including suffering the same Spanish colonial neglect. The proof is that the people of the Spanish Caribbean give their rhythms (*son, merengue, cumbia*); roots (*yautia, yucca*), fruits (*lechosa, papaya, platano, banano*), fish (*pargo, guachinango, chillo*) different names, but they remain basically the same.

The region's main colonial cities and towns—San Juan, Santo Domingo, La Habana, Santiago, Porto Belo, Santa Marta, Cartagena, Barranquilla, Maracaibo, Veracruz, Campeche, Merida, etc.—were founded in the same epoch and look very much alike. Their traditional old sections are so similar, that often movies about one country are made in another. The people wear the same *guayaberas*, use similar straw hats, smoke similar cigars and play equally romantic *boleros* on Spanish guitars. But most important, they share a huge water mass, with its beautiful beaches, that equally separates and unites.

The peoples of the Spanish Caribbean are homogeneous because they were formed through a slow process that took 300 years. Spanish colonialism formed the region's souls, giving it its laws, political traditions, good and bad customs, and creating the Creole and the mestizo. Similar military authorities, corrupt and incompetent administrators and absentee landowners gov-

erned the region, and similar independent Creoles practiced extensive and illicit commerce with the buccaneers, lived side by side with Africans, both slaves and free, thus creating an admixture of European and African that is has become the Spanish Caribbean culture.

Many segmentations of the Cuban population have been made, in order to study them: by race, by gender, by socio-economic strata, by age, etc. This paper proposes that a new category be added: that of "old" versus "new" Cubans, based on their. For, "old" Cubans tend to have stronger links with the country (broader family ties, memories, ancestors who fought for our independence) as well as a higher possibility of being of mixed race, at least culturally. This new category may well shed interesting light in the current political process.

One can establish a parallel between the current Spanish Caribbean, and the subsequent fate of the Roman provinces in the Mediterranean, after the fall of the Roman Empire. These were invaded by the barbarians, which established weak and unstable kingdoms that brought 1,000 years of backwardness and chaos, known in European history as the Dark or Middle Ages, and created today's Spain, France, Italy and the other Mediterranean countries. It was not until the organization of the European Union, that these Mediterranean countries have finally obtained some affluence and clout. The same can be said of the Spanish Caribbean, its present and what will become of its future.

The Arbiters

This brings us back to our main topic: how can the Spanish Caribbean contribute to a possible transition in Cuba and to the start of negotiations between the government in Havana, and the opposition (internal and abroad). Such an assertion begs several important and hard questions. For example, what can the opposition offer Havana, in such negotiation? How can promises be guaranteed? Who can mediate and arbitrate in these conversations?

Cuba is economically exhausted and politically paralyzed. The opposition can offer the government, in exchange for a transition to political and economic pluralism, much needed economic aid, technical know-how, international business connections and internal stability. All this would help increase the wealth of the nation, as well as the socioeconomic level of the population.

To guarantee these promises, as well as the safety and integrity of the current government officials in Havana, arbiters from groups other than the Cuban internal and external opposition, or from the United States are needed. For, as interested parties in these negotiations, neither the U.S. nor the Cuban opposition will be trusted by the Cuban officials, or vice-versa. Such trusted

arbiters can reasonably come from Ibero-America and Western Europe, and especially from among the Spanish Caribbean nations, for they have a strong interest in the stability, both economic and political, of the region to which Cuba essentially belongs.

All parties to this negotiation are today in a better position to work toward a transition. The U.S., sole remaining superpower, no longer needs to control a region so strategically situated near its border. The Spanish Caribbean nations have raised their educational and economic standards, and many of them today enjoy democratic forms of government. They no longer need to take business away from Cuba to survive. The conditions leading to the U.S. economic embargo have disappeared, or have changed considerably. Hence, an American change of policy in Cuba and its acceptance by a Castro succession can be now implemented without anyone "loosing face." And after Castro's natural disappearance, the Cuban government will be in the same conditions in the sense of being able to change its policy without "loosing face," either.

Conclusions

Castro's natural disappearance, and a change in U.S. policy toward Cuba, can provide the initial "face saving" conditions for both the U.S. and Castro's successors to participate in negotiations leading to a peaceful Transition to pluralism. The key is finding a working procedure so all participants feel safe about their fate.

This is not much different to what occurred in Brazil, Argentina and Chile, after the military returned the governments to the civilians during the 1980s. But such conditions do not exist yet in Cuba. Hence, we must work to put them in place, so that a transition to pluralism can successfully occur. For, transitions do not occur by "spontaneous generation."

The current window of opportunity is open, but will not remain so indefinitely. AIf not taken advantage of, it will close again, returning Cubans to the quagmire in which they have remained for the past half century.