

## The 11J Demonstrations in Cuba: A Provisional Assessment<sup>1</sup>

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Abstract: The 11J demonstrations in Cuba represented a wholly new development for the Island nation and make clear the huge challenges that the country's society is facing. These have been further aggravated by a US system of coercive unilateral measures which continues to impoverish the Cuban population and exerts pressure on the country's government. The current situation represents a stress-test for the Cuban regime. This article contains a provisional assessment of the situation pending that a more complete information is provided by the authorities.

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More than two months after the widespread anti-government demonstration throughout Cuba on July 11, there is no official or unofficial account of what exactly happened. However, all sorts of interpretations abound. At one extreme, supporters of the Cuban government insist on blaming the United States and U.S. financed groups for staging a “soft coup” by artificially promoting the demonstrations through social networks. At the other, opposition activists insist that it was the tip of the iceberg of millions of Cubans who want a “radical change” and the immediate overthrow of “the dictatorship,” a heroic initial chapter in the struggle for a new form of government. As usually happens in Cuban politics there is practically no space for a moderate interpretation.

Nevertheless, a positive signal that something might be changing in Cuban politics is the fact that *Alma Mater* (<https://medium.com/revista-alma-mater>), the official organ of the *Federación Estudiantil Universitaria* (University Students Federation) has made a sustained effort to publish a series of interviews with philosophers, economists, lawyers, sociologists, political scientists, artists and writers, psychologists, journalists, etc., of different ages who have given freely their opinions about what happened, its causes and consequences. In total they are seven articles based on those interviews. The online magazine even published an interview with two university students who were arrested and released after been charged for disorderly conduct.

No matter what the view is or that some Cubans might like it or not, the events of 11 July 2021 will have an effect on how we see ourselves and our country. For most of the population, it was a sad day – and most people would rather not remember sad days. But it cannot be ignored.

What has been established is that, on Sunday, 11 July, there were widespread anti-government protests, some of which began violently, others ended that way – and this had never happened before in Cuba before. As such, many observers and indeed the authorities themselves were surprised. The result were images of violence and a situation which had escalated out of control. Whatever the details, this is objectively damaging for the Cuban government: and even if, as looks unlikely, the situation settles back down, the reputational damage will last. It is also impossible to predict that it won't happen again.

## **Not a surprise**

Actually, the Cuban government shouldn't have been surprised by the course of events – this being the same government that had for months denounced the US originated machinations to provoke a 'soft coup' or a 'color revolution' planned and executed from across the Florida Straights by its arch-enemy, the United States Government. Perhaps it was this element of surprise before an event which had no precedent, that led the government to clamp down so heavy-handedly, while pursuing the same endless communication strategy repeated "ad nauseam" about the perils of the US subversive conspiracy. Unfortunately, it is repeated so much, that this propaganda campaign seems to have had the opposite result: diminish the credibility of the Cuban government's social communication media.

It's equally surprising that this unrest did not surface much earlier, considering the privations to which the Cuban population has long been subjected to and which have been further worsened by the pandemic.

Whatever it may be, the unrest was and is a reality – and its effects are palpable. Just three months after the Eighth Congress of the Cuban Communist Party and two years after establishing a new constitution, the new Cuban leadership finds itself in crisis. A crisis that, in many ways, evokes the situation in the socialist countries of eastern Europe just prior to their collapse.

## **Cuba's early achievements**

There are, however, several differences. Cuba is a Third World State which, after years of neo-colonial oppression, liberated itself by means of a classic anti-imperialist National Liberation Revolution, typical of the post-Second World War era. The radicalization of the Cuban Revolution, which very rapidly became socialistic, was the result of its homegrown resilience and successful resistance to Washington's persistent and relentless encroachment. It can be argued that Cuba was able to resist thanks to its adoption of a radical socialist regime, which was embraced and supported by the Soviet Union. The result was a model which resembled very closely the actually existing socialism of the USSR and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (also known as COMECON), of which Cuba became a member at the beginning of the 1970s. After all, it offered considerable advantages for at least the next three decades.

If the Cuban system was stable and free from any kind of social unrest for many years, it was thanks to the social advancement of the early years and Cuba's international high profile. Essentially, the fact that the socialist regime not only survived a direct confrontation with the US but went on to become a unique actor on the world stage – not only during the Cold War, but beyond – conferred considerable credit on the government and allowed it freedom of maneuver in domestic issues. This was very evident when you add the considerable charismatic legitimacy enjoyed by Fidel Castro until his resignation in 2006, partially inherited by his brother Raúl, who ruled the country between 2006 and 2018.

These achievements and successes are without doubt the foundation of Cuban regime's resilience and the stoicism of the Cuban people in the face of lasting and quite extraordinary difficulties since the end of the Soviet Union and the European socialist community in 1989-1991.

### **The domestic opposition**

An additional and paradoxical element, which has not been pointed out or analyzed by the Cuban drama observers, is the lack of any piece of information that would allow a fair assessment about what role was played by the different sectors of the opposition in Cuba, some of them, but not all linked to the really existing subversion policy fostered officially and unofficially by the United States government.

Both the opposition, foreign and domestic, and Washington were taken by surprise.

Whatever might be the case, it is obvious that neither the homegrown opposition movements like the *Movimiento San Isidro* or the *27N* alliance nor the more openly US-supported groups were able to capitalize the unrest. Maybe the explanation for that phenomenon can be found in recent research by Jean Lachapelle, Steven Levistky, Lucan A. Way, and Adam E. Casey, which attempts to explain the stability over time of regimes like the Cuban one.<sup>2</sup>

During the unrest itself the activists with US support were much less visible but there is no doubt that protests were encouraged on social media – to no small degree by political influencers who do not live in Cuba, but rather mainly in Miami, where there is an anti-Castro local cottage industry financed from a range of state and non-state sources. In Cuban national reality, social media has become a toxic element as millions of dollars are pumped into fake-news campaigns aiming to destabilize the government and society.

However, even if triggered from outside, unrest would not have flared up inside Cuba if it had not found a fertile ground provoked by numerous political mistakes on the part of the government and a very ineffective and counterproductive communications strategy.

The range of situations that are directly a responsibility of government inefficiencies and mistakes are very clear:

- The deterioration and proliferation of destitute areas in many of the major cities and towns, where living conditions are extremely hard.
- The huge difficulties to buy food and other basic products, made even more challenging by inflation and deterioration of salaries and pensions after the government decided to go ahead with the unification of the currency and the exchange rate in the middle of the pandemic.
- After an initial success, the deterioration of the health situation caused by the pandemic during the month of June.

- A tendency to nullify, limit and even criminalize dissension, especially in the public sphere, cultural manifestations included.
- An inefficient communications strategy which tended towards triumphalism, hiding or diminishing the government's own mistakes and insufficiencies, and blaming the US blockade for everything.

The government has underestimated and continues to underestimate to what point its own actions or inactions, perceived or real, provoke the citizens' malaise because it has focused in placing the blame for every failure or scarcity on the exogenous stimulus of a social explosion as the only or the main cause of problems.

This argument has less and less credibility, as people see the hesitant behavior of the government when dealing with the economy.

Proclaiming that= “the blockade is the problem” and talking down the protests as “interference from outside” in an effort to cover up its own errors, the government seems to underestimate the widespread dissatisfaction among the citizens. This mantra provokes even more rejection and denial.

Certainly, the largescale and comprehensive unilateral coercive measures that the US government has applied against Cuba for almost 60 years now represent, to paraphrase what Peter Beinart argued in a *New York Times* column last February, [a kind of economic war against a country under siege](#). Beinart is right to criticize the embargo as a non-military act of war – and one which, given that the stated aim has always been “regime change,” has never had much prospect of success. And while Washington attempts to refute Cuban accusations, it is a simple matter of fact that Joe Biden has maintained sanctions imposed by Donald Trump even as the pandemic rages.

Yes, for more than six months now, the Biden Administration has failed to make good on its manifested promise to reverse Trump's sanctions and remains locked in the Trumpian version of Republican Party logic vis-à-vis Cuba policy – the illusion that ever more extreme sanctions will eventually succeed in dislodging the regime which came to power in 1959. So this much seems likely: sanctions against Cuba will remain in place for the next three years; Cubans will get even poorer; the Cuban government will continue to be bullied.

### **The Cuban government needs a rethink**

In view of this, Havana is currently trying to contain the fallout. Yet the regime needs to examine the political and social situation – and grasp that only economic policy focusing on the proven fact that only efficiency and activating domestic productive capacity can get the country out of the current crisis. Continuing to place all the blame on external factors without any real introspection in respect of home-grown issues would be a grave mistake. The reforms the government has promised, especially in respect of food distribution, need to be enacted – fast.

The issue of how to deal with some of the leading participants in the protests adds another layer of complexity to the situation. Yes, there were violent demonstrators, who provoked riots and ransacked stores, and they must be prosecuted. But, at the same time, the government has to avoid giving the impression, either at home or abroad, that it is cracking down hard on all demonstrators, violent or not. Yet currently, there are rumors about summary trials and questionable court proceedings leading to sentences of ten to twelve months for people who, in many cases, do not seem to have been involved in any acts of violence. Having had recently a very profound and broad experience of debating and then approving a new constitution in which the importance of due process was enshrined and reinforced, Cubans are very sensitive to the fair administration of justice. Now more than ever, citizens are demanding nothing more – and nothing less – than that the police act within the law.

The Cuban government, too, needs to rethink how it works. As its population is increasingly skeptical to the argument that the embargo is the root of all evil, it needs to make a serious attempt to overcome two key political-ideological obstacles in its way. Firstly, there is the outdated approach to socialism as a system primarily steered from central planning bureaus; this dogmatic *dirigisme* reduces the role of the market in distributing resources to a minimum – with all the resulting problems. Secondly, the authorities need to distance themselves from an idea of socialism as an authoritarian model that can ignore or even criminalize those whose criticism is intended to make the country's economy more efficient and its society more democratic, to see its 2019 Constitution enacted and establish the rule of law.

### **A whole new moment for Cuba**

Yet the regime's reaction to the events of 11 July, as communicated by official media channels, showed no signs of overcoming this tendency. Although later partially modified and softened, authorities initially decried and discredited those who took part in the protests as supporters of annexionism, criminal or “confused” citizens – ignoring or overlooking that probably a majority expressed in a peaceful manner specific and legitimate demands. President Díaz Canel has at times returned to that narrative and some official media have supported it. If not corrected, this way of looking at what happened may come back to haunt the governmental leaders.

Furthermore, official announcements have sought to justify the use of repressive violence – a message with which many Cubans who, while not directly involved, have observed (and been shocked by) events, strongly disagree. Internationally, Cuba's image has taken a hit. There is still no clarity about the number of demonstrations or how they played out, how many took part, and how many participants have been placed under arrest. Meanwhile, intellectuals and artists have publicly denounced the security forces' repressive course, with many demanding the release of all peaceful protestors – including such figures as songwriter Silvio Rodríguez, who enjoys a great deal of respect among many in government.

The lack of genuine information has opened large gaps which have been used to spread disinformation among both external actors and the country's population – disinformation which aims at the undermining of the government. At the same time, Cuban citizens have broadly accepted the precept that peaceful protests are legitimate and should be protected under law. This is a precept with which apparently the government, however, in clear contravention of the

principles of a socialist country under the rule of law, does not fully support. This is not sending the right message – neither on a domestic nor at an international level.

These demonstrations represent a wholly new development for Cuba and make clear just what difficulties the country's society is facing. These difficulties have been further aggravated by a US system of coercive unilateral measures which continues to impoverish the Cuban population and exerts pressure on the country's government. The current situation represents a stress-test for the Cuban regime, which would do well to remember that, when faced with similar situations, like-minded politicians had more success when they decided to pursue a path of generosity and listen to citizens' legitimate concerns rather than leaving demands to fall on deaf ears.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article is an updated & expanded version of a text originally published in Spanish on July 27, 2021, under the title “El 11J en Cuba: una reflexión tentativa” by NUSO (Nueva Sociedad), the Latin American online political review published by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES - Germany), <https://nuso.org/articulo/cuba-protestas/>. This original piece was translated into German & English and published by two European websites edited by FES: *Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft (IPG)* in Berlin (<https://www.ipg-journal.de/regionen/lateinamerika/artikel/taube-ohren-5359/>) & *International Politics & Society* in Brussels (<https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/democracy-and-society/its-not-just-the-us-embargo-5373/>)

<sup>2</sup> “Social Revolution and Authoritarian Durability,” *World Politics* 72, Number 4 (October 2020): 557-600.