

Conclusion: The Meaning of 11J

The Editors

This Symposium opened with a three-part question about the events on July 11, 2021 in Cuba. Were the island-wide demonstrations that day a “one-off,” a day that will go down in the history of Cuba as perhaps a footnote if it is remembered at all? Were they evidence of deep-seated problems that will continue to plague Cuba for the foreseeable future? Or were they an inflection point, an important moment that will signify for Cubans a meaningful point of departure in the development of the Cuban Revolution?

Contributors to the Symposium disagree with those who argue that the July 11th demonstrations were of passing importance. To be sure, some Cubans at the protests seemed to have come out merely to witness the spectacle. Protestors shouted disparate messages and demands, indicating a variety of grievances rather than a common goal. Unquestionably some were incited to act as a result of a coordinated social media campaign sponsored by provocateurs in the United States, and perhaps even the U.S. government itself. However, to deny the importance of July 11th, one would need to overlook the fact that thousands of Cubans participated in the demonstrations in cities across the country—the first such protests since the triumph of the Revolution in 1959. Carlos Alzugaray aptly observes in his chapter that “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.” As Helen Yaffe concludes in her narrative of the events, “The battle lines are being drawn and more conflict is inevitable.” July 11th was not a single, aberrant event. Something important happened in mid-summer 2021 that warrants more attention than a mere footnote.

Still, it seems too soon to conclude that July 11th was an inflection point in Cuban history. Cuba is in a period of flux, and the way Cubans reference “11-J” – as the events are now commonly called – will depend on how the protest movement evolves and how the government responds, both to the circumstances that engendered 11-J and to future protests. As Zuleica Romay Guerra explains in her chapter, initial responses by officials and state media after July 11th reinforced a widespread sentiment that “the high leadership” has little understanding “about the reality experienced by the popular strata.” At first, officials disparaged demonstrators as “criminals, outcasts and hooligans” and a few days later with softer but patronizing condescension as “confused, misinformed, deluded.” Indeed several authors observed that there is a palpable anger about corruption and inequality that the government has not addressed. In 2005, Fidel Castro publicly vented his own foreboding about the consequences of corruption. He declared, “[This country can self-destruct; this Revolution can destroy itself, but they \[the United States\] can never destroy us; we can destroy ourselves, and it would be our fault.](#)” In this vein several authors posed the possibility that the current period of flux could become an inflection point

leading to a legitimacy crisis for the government. But none viewed such an outcome as inevitable.

Since July 11, the government has been extremely active in showing concern for Cubans living in economically deprived circumstances. A significant program of repairs has been undertaken in marginal areas, and President Díaz-Canel has visited many of these communities to listen to grievances. It does seem that the “cúpula” of the government and party is aware of the hardships faced by people in these communities. It remains to be seen if this support will continue, or whether this is a superficial response to profound social challenges.

Given the stagnant economic situation and the 11 percent decrease in the national economy in 2020, it was not surprising that one of the major complaints on 11-J was the lack of goods available and a dearth of well-paying jobs. The government responded to these concerns in the weeks following 11-J by stocking stores with more goods and with a seeming effort to accelerate implementation of promised economic reforms. In September, for example, the first 35 micro, small and medium-sized enterprises were announced, with a further 67 opening the following month. It remains to be seen whether these changes will be enough to mitigate people’s frustration. Until the flow of remittances resumes and the tourism industry reopens, the government will lack the resources to remedy current shortages.

An October 13 [editorial in *Granma*](#) sounded patriotic notes about the ability of the Cuban revolutionary process to survive the many current challenges it faced. Quoting Fidel and Raúl Castro, it focused on the continuing threat to Cuban sovereignty posed by the United States and asserted Cuba’s legitimate right to defend itself. But younger Cubans seem skeptical of these rationales for the status quo. They are keenly attuned to the gap between the official story and daily reality. One way to understand the 11J protests, in which young Cubans played a prominent role, was as a demand to close that gap.

Ultimately, we come away from the analyses in the Symposium with the conclusion that the events of July 11th emerged from the impact of immediate shocks –the rising rate of COVID-19 infections and deaths, food scarcity, and rapid inflation caused by the end of the dual currency system – that added to the burden of deep-seated problems. The preceding chapters lead us to the following observations.

- Some demonstrators claimed to represent the “Cuban people,” and the U.S. press has followed suit, tending to describe the situation in Cuba as polarized between supporters of the government and freedom-loving marchers. However, as several authors in the Symposium explain, the Cuban reality is more complex than the simplistic picture of a dichotomized country. One complexity is increasing social stratification. For those with access to hard currency, burdens such as spending hours in line at different stores to buy necessities, are quite different than the hardships suffered by those who do not have the means to shop at stores that only accept hard currency debit cards. Another complexity is generational. Cubans born since the start of the Special Period are unmoved by government references to the contrast between pre-revolutionary Cuba and the advances made during the first thirty years. But even critics from the younger generations are by no means ideologically monolithic. They include anti-system dissidents who support (and are sometimes funded by) U.S. regime

change policies and who oppose regime change, demanding instead that the government act in accord with the 2019 Constitution and the Revolution's espoused commitment to equality and social justice.

- Widespread access to the internet with cellphones provides activists with a means of communication and organizing that was not available before 2018, emboldening critics who can connect with likeminded people on social media. As Hope Bastian's chapter explains, Cubans have also used this capability constructively, as in 2019 when they came to the aid of tornado victims, as well as for protests. Harold Cárdenas adds that for many younger Cubans, "social media is their only contact with reality, and political activism the only control they have right now on their future." The government will have to get used an information environment in which it no longer holds a monopoly but has to compete for audience loyalty.
- The most visible leaders of the opposition to the government undermine their own legitimacy by their association with U.S. "democracy promotion" programs and hardline Cuban Americans who seek to subvert and overthrow the existing Cuban regime. Their problem is not merely that the United States underwrites some of their websites and in effect provides some with salaries. The problem with U.S. support is that the goal of the Biden administration seems to be regime change. Its evident lack of humanitarian concern for Cubans' suffering, as Soraya Castro and others note in their chapters, makes a mockery of the professed claim to "support the Cuban people."
- The grievances that Cubans were decrying on July 11th were legitimate and are ongoing, despite modest efforts by the government to improve circumstances. As Ricardo Torres explains in his chapter, "continuity" is a recipe for continued misery. The government has not taken to heart complaints by farmers who confront bureaucratic hurdles in trying to earn a living, and foreign investors who still are hobbled by obscure regulations and red tape. Corruption and favoritism continue to frustrate Cubans with expertise that could be used to advance the economy. COVID-19 cases will eventually subside and remittances will flow again, easing the immediate crisis. But the "prosperous and sustainable socialism" that Raúl Castro envisioned still requires the government to repair the economy's structural weaknesses, and to do it without generating gross inequality or leaving anyone behind.

Despite the difficult economic situation and the legitimacy challenge it poses for Cuba's post-Castro leadership, the key values on which the Revolution was founded still enjoy broad support: national sovereignty and independence from the United States, and an ethos of social justice in which health-care and education are regarded human rights. But the Cuban government is facing a population tired of sacrifice, tired of promised reforms that materialize too slowly if at all, and tired of a leadership that talks more than it listens. If there is any lesson from 11-J, it is that "la gente" want to be heard, and they want their government to respond.