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Cuba's regime at a crossroads

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Life is stranger than fiction. And so it has been in Cuba recently: hundreds of marches, millions of signatures, live broadcasts of National Assembly deputies declaring socialism irrevocable, with ordinary Cubans supposedly hanging on their every word. All because 11,000 citizens signed the Varela Project's petition, which asks for a referendum that offers a common-sense path to improve life in Cuba.

This pantomime may be the end of a stretch that began in the early 1990s. Then, many expected the regime to fall, or at least make meaningful changes. Neither happened. Fidel Castro balked at anything more consequential than modest economic reforms, and the elite lined up behind him. Ordinary Cubans turned ever-deaf ears to official harangues. A balance of sorts was struck.

In Cuba, reforms were frozen in mid-1995, but still a moderate recovery ensued. Except for the rafter crisis in 1994 and the riot on Havana's waterfront in 1995, the citizenry appeared calm. The regime had survived against all odds and seemed set for the long haul, or at least until after Castro's wake. Washington whispered hints of change.

LOYALTY PLEDGES

Then Elián González was rescued from the Florida Straits. Castro mobilized the country with some success, as most Cubans empathized with the father's right to get his son back. Since then, weekly town gatherings, nightly round-table discussions on TV, loyalty pledges and revolutionary-vigilance brigades have demanded a nearly nonstop performance of outward support from ordinary Cubans.

The new crusade to render socialism irrevocable has raised the temperature further. Yet the balance of the past decade already may have begun to totter. Former President Jimmy Carter's visit, which spotlighted the Varela Project, may have tipped the international balance. Now the world is asking more forcefully: Why doesn't Cuba change? Decline in tourism and remittances after Sept. 11, uncertainties in oil supplies and the closing of nearly half the island's sugar mills, all manifest a new economic downturn.

Rhetoric aside, the Bush administration has not really applied a markedly harsher policy. Congress still could seek to lift travel restrictions and allow U.S. credits for food purchases. That, however, would be less likely if Castro carries out recent threats to close the U.S. Interests Section and abrogate the migration agreement.

The regime is approaching a crossroads of three paths:

- Continue with more of the same. But this avenue may already be exhausted. Castro has not been able to work up the same enthusiasm for the five men convicted of spying for Cuba last year in Miami as for the return of Elián. Yet he could keep on trying.
- Engage in a new frenzy of mobilizations, which could be risky. How long ordinary Cubans will oblige Castro's insatiable thirst for feigned expressions of allegiance is anyone's guess. Down this road also could be confrontation with the United States -- with uncertain outcome -- that conceivably would fan nationalism and give Castro the cause he needs to raise the pitch higher.
- Implement economic measures la China or Vietnam, reducing the number of marches and putting the economy at the heart of policymaking.

No doubt, the latter is the reasonable alternative. Unfortunately, the first two are more likely in the short run.

FOR A FREER SOCIETY

Even if some measures are taken, such as legalizing entrepreneurship, these likely would come, as in the 1990s, with so many rules that positive effects would be tempered. Castro's aversion to market reforms takes second place only to his hatred of capitalism. "It's the economy, stupid!" has no place in the fidelista world view.

Yet it isn't just the economy that needs urgent attention, but the establishment of a more-open, freer society: in short, democracy. Cubans are citizens, not masses. Castro is incorrigible, but what about others in the government elite?

Are they really set on eternal socialism? Probably not. That's for the best -- for their own self-interest and prospects for a peaceful transition, which is in everyone's interest. But their waiting until the wake might not do. Continuing to acquiesce to Castro's delirium could damn their political future. Even with him alive, they could run into a citizenry roaring "Enough is enough!" The question becomes ever more pressing: When will they stop giving the *comandante* a pass?

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