

Democratic Transition in Cuba: Where is Change to Come From?

Frank O. Mora

The recently published report of the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba (CAFC) is as comprehensive as it is ambitious in its recommendations and offers of assistance to “hasten democratic change” and to help a future Cuban Transition Government overcome the devastating social, political and economic legacy of Fidel Castro’s almost five-decade reign. The report assumes, however, that the “Cuban people” or civil society groups will not only be the agent of change but also the source from which a new government will be created once Fidel passes from the scene. The comparative record of other transitions and the facts on the ground in Cuba, namely continued elite unity and cohesion within the regime and weakness of civil society due to atomization and repression, indicate that the report’s faulty assumptions about process and conditions for democratic transition could present challenges to U.S. policy.

One important pattern or lesson drawn from democratic transitions in Southern Europe, Latin America and Eastern Europe is that change came as a result of elite defections or divisions within the regime coupled with pressures from strong nationally-recognized opposition groups within civil society. There was sufficient political space, either due to the weakening of the regime, as in Poland, or liberalization due to modernization or reforms permitted by the non-democratic regime, as in many Latin American countries, for these groups to organize and mobilize the public against former authoritarian or totalitarian governments.

Romania is often cited as a case where a powerless society brought down a repressive government. However, in that example, Ion Iliescu, former Romanian Communist Party Central Committee secretary, broke with the Stalinist regime of Nicolae Ceausescu in 1989 and led the revolt. Iliescu governed Romania for two terms with the help of the former nomenclature. Arguably, the evidence suggests that transitions from authoritarian and totalitarian rule require, at a minimum, fissures within the regime that lead to conflict and defections exacerbated by pressures for democratic change from an organized and highly mobilized civil society.

As of the time of this report's release, the Cuban political and security elite remain united behind Fidel Castro and the regime's "effort to ensure a succession within the revolution," a prospect viewed as unacceptable by the report's authors. Elite cohesion and especially current support for a smooth succession is based neither on legitimacy nor to a belief in Fidel's bankrupt and disastrous legacy but rather on the fear that instability and social chaos could ensue in the absence of Fidel. A political vacuum leading to a lack of political order is their nightmare scenario. The perception, especially among high ranking Cuban military officers, is that the US would see such a situation as an opportunity to intervene. Unfortunately, those in power believe that broad and deep democratic reforms as urged by the report will contribute to social breakdown, violence and a total loss of political and economic power. The *perception*, propagated by Fidel and Raul and internalized by elites, is that the report and US policy for promoting democracy is code for destabilization and intervention.

The report's authors attempt to assuage fears within the elite by rejecting "witch hunts" and insisting on reconciliation and significant financial and technical support for a

democratic government. However, when they advocate “creating additional uncertainty regarding the political and legal future of those in leadership positions,” they feed the fears and paranoia of political and military elites about change and democratic transition. Such language and the resulting reaction would limit the possibility for development of cleavages among the elite necessary for hastening democratic change on the island.

As the report emphasizes, the opposition in Cuba has shown great courage in the face of systematic efforts by the regime to intimidate, repress and discredit organizations and leaders of civil society. However, despite their intrepid and persistent work, civic associations remain weak and relatively powerless compared to their formerly stifled brethren in Latin America and Eastern Europe and unable to mobilize the Cuban people against the regime. As the report indicates, civil society faces significant challenges to becoming the catalyst for and implementer of change within Cuba.

The two key conditions that led to transitional democratic governments in Eastern Europe and Latin America – splits and defections within the ruling elite and sufficient political space for civil society groups to organize and project a program nationally—are currently not present in Cuba. As a result, it will be difficult for the “Cuban people” and pro-democracy groups in society to hasten democratic change and assume the reins of a Cuban Transition Government. It is not a question of will nor desire to live in a free, democratic society – these are present in Cuba. The question is whether the sufficient social and institutional conditions exist to forestall the regime’s succession plans.