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Reflections on the Cuban Revolution

by
Gary Prevost

When I visited Cuba in the first few days of 1992, it was not clear that the revolution would survive. Food was in relatively short supply and electricity blackouts were common. Even long-time supporters of the revolution were pessimistic about the future. Everything that had been accomplished in its first 32 years seemed in jeopardy when the Soviet Union went out of existence at the end of 1991 and canceled most of its trade deals with Cuba. The country's gross domestic product was in the process of shrinking by 50 percent. How did the Cuban Revolution survive that shock, and how is it now coping with the illness of Fidel Castro and the transfer of power to his brother, Raúl? The answer lies in a simple truth. The primary strength of the Cuban Revolution was never its linkage with the Soviet superpower or the leadership of Fidel Castro. Soviet support in the face of U.S. hostility was crucial in the early survival of the revolution, and Fidel Castro has been a skilled leader, but the longevity of the revolution is rooted in the hard work and sacrifice of ordinary Cubans. The Cuban Revolution has survived because it tapped into the deep wellsprings of Cuban desire for national independence and because the Cuban people have constructed a society that has improved living conditions for the majority through model programs in health and education and the way it has tackled the historic problems of racism and sexism.

Education is a priority in Cuban society, and the state provides free primary, secondary, technical, and higher education to all citizens. Cuba has an average of one teacher for every 45 inhabitants, and its literacy rate of 96.4 percent is one of the highest in Latin America. Cuba's health-care system has been a priority for the revolution and is a well-regarded model for the developing world, with more than 260 hospitals and 420 clinics. Family doctors are assigned to each community, and there is a doctor for every 260 Cubans. The average life expectancy is 77 years, and the infant mortality rate is 5.1 per 1,000—both the best in Latin America.

Women and Cuban citizens of African descent suffered from widespread discrimination prior to 1959, and the increased prominence of both groups in Cuban society is one of the major achievements of the revolution. Prior to 1959, women worked outside the home only as domestic servants and prostitutes, but today women have been fully integrated into the workplace and have equal access to education and equality before the law. Women also have much greater control over their lives through the widespread availability of contraceptives and abortion. As a result of the equal access to education at all levels since 1959, women now occupy prominent positions in almost all institutions of the society.

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Racial discrimination was formally outlawed at the outset of the revolution, and long-standing customs that barred black Cubans from many public facilities were overcome. Equal access to education has allowed Afro-Cubans to rise to high places in the government, the armed forces, education, and commerce. Recent years have seen a significant increase in the study and appreciation of the contributions made by persons of African heritage to the development of Cuba's distinctive culture.

The social and economic achievements described above were in great danger in 1992, but in large measure they survived because of the political choices made in the revolution's darkest hours. In a purely economic sense, the country survived by a dramatic turn to tourism and a significant increase in the flow of remittances to the island. What is more significant, however, is that the leaders of the revolution never abandoned its socialist principles and the country survived its worst economic times through a spirit of shared sacrifice. Schools and hospitals were kept open, and the rationing of food was reestablished. These measures ran counter to the worldwide sense that socialism was dead and capitalism was fully triumphant. Cuba's voice in the wilderness was rewarded, and by the beginning of the new century its critique of capitalism had found new allies in Latin America with the triumph of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and the emergence of other progressive leaders throughout the region. Cuba entered the twenty-first century more confident and independent than at any time in its history.

The Cuban Revolution entered a new phase in July 2006 when Fidel Castro entered a hospital with a serious illness and temporarily ceded power to his brother, Vice President Raúl Castro. Fidel has survived, but his now limited role in the political leadership was confirmed in February 2008 when Raúl was formally elected to a five-year presidential term. Initially there was considerable speculation both inside and outside of Cuba that his assumption of power would result in significant change of direction for the country. Some analysts suggested that growing Chinese-Cuban trade ties were a signal that Raúl would lead the revolution in a more definitively free-market direction following the Chinese model. Under his leadership there have been some modest reforms, especially in the agricultural sector, but the wholesale changes predicted by some have not materialized to date. Raúl's leadership style is different from his brother's, but the basic policy positions remain the same. This continuity was underscored when the government was reshuffled following the 2007 elections; key leadership positions in the new government were assumed by longtime confidants of Raúl from the days in the Sierra Maestra. For the long haul, the key unanswered question remains what policies might be adopted under the leadership of a new generation that was not present at the genesis of the revolution. Whatever the answer to this question, it will not involve a return to Cuba's past of underdevelopment and subservience to foreign powers.