

Spring 2023

Contemporary Crises in Cuba: Economic, Political, and Social

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Online ISSN: 2643-7759

Recommended Citation

Silvia Pedraza & Carlos Romero, *Contemporary Crises in Cuba: Economic, Political, and Social*, 17 FIU L. Rev. 609 (2023).

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.25148/lawrev.17.3.10>

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CONTEMPORARY CRISES IN CUBA: ECONOMIC, POLITICAL, AND SOCIAL

Silvia Pedraza & Carlos A. Romero*

ABSTRACT

Cuba is living through an extremely deep crisis that has two main sources: a dismal economy and an old revolution.¹ Inequality has risen dramatically—of both social class and race. Moreover, the massive exodus continues, particularly of the young, not only to America but also increasingly to other lands. The Cuba-Venezuela alliance that bolstered both revolutions remains politically strong but is increasingly weak. The revolution is now an old revolution—sixty-two years old. It houses distinct political generations, as well as a growing dissident movement and increased social protests, which challenge the government’s political legitimacy. The economic sanctions imposed by former President Trump deepened the economic crisis, as did the COVID pandemic. The Cuban people face their deepest crisis to date.

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This article draws from our *REVOLUTIONS IN CUBA AND VENEZUELA: ONE HOPE, TWO REALITIES* (Univ. Fla. Press 2023).

¹ This article was presented at the Thirty-Second Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy (ASCE) at Florida International University College of Law on September 15–17, 2022. See generally Karla Rivas, *Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy (ASCE) Thirty-Second Annual Conference: Introduction*, 17 FIU L. REV. 479 (2023).

I. THE ECONOMIC CRISIS AND ECONOMIC REFORMS

For over half a century, Cuba relied on the twin leadership of the two Castro brothers: Fidel at the helm of government supported by Raúl at the helm of the military. Through their joint leadership, Cuba managed to survive the deep economic crisis that intensified with the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union in 1989, a crisis that Fidel dubbed “*el período especial*”—a special period in a time of peace. Cuba lost its benefactor and its economic lifeline, which was particularly serious given its isolation from the rest of the world. That crisis reached its maximum depth from 1989 to 1993, when Gross Domestic Product (GDP) contracted by one-third.² The food shortages were so severe that one could see signs of famine in people’s faces; people also became more vulnerable to disease. The *balseros* (rafters) crisis resulted when in the summer of 1994, over 36,000 rafters put out to sea. Rescued by the U.S. Coast Guard, they were taken to Guantanamo, where they awaited processing to enter the U.S.

The crisis of “the special period” ushered in a period of economic reforms from 1993 to 1996, when the government strengthened the role of the private sector in the economy, legalized the use of foreign currencies (the euro and the dollar), and promoted foreign direct investment (joint ventures between Cuba and Spain in hotels for tourism). Moreover, the government began to allow private economic activity, expanding self-employment. Suddenly, very small restaurants called *paladares* appeared inside people’s homes, mostly for tourists. The government also broke-up the large state farms, converted them into cooperatives, and established private farmers’ markets, where farmers could sell their extra produce of fruits and vegetables after meeting their quota to the state. As Mesa-Lago and Pérez-López pointed out, these measures “undertaken reluctantly by the Cuban leadership, were sufficient to stop the contraction of GDP and bring about modest economic growth.”³ However, the Cuban leadership aborted the market-oriented reforms—probably because they feared the reforms would weaken their political control. Even more, from 2003 to 2004, they took steps to reverse them, re-centralizing the economy and eliminating the limited spaces opened to private economic activity.⁴ Along with this retrenchment came increased

² Carmelo Mesa-Lago, *Social Services in Cuba: Antecedents, Quality, Financial Sustainability, and Policies for the Future*, in *THE CUBAN ECONOMY: RECENT TRENDS* 1, 6 (José Raúl Perales ed., 2011).

³ CARMELO MESA-LAGO & JORGE F. PÉREZ-LÓPEZ, *CUBA’S ABORTED REFORM: SOCIOECONOMIC EFFECTS, INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS, AND TRANSITION POLICIES* xi (Univ. Fla. Press 2005).

⁴ See OMAR EVERLENY PÉREZ VILLANUEVA & RICARDO TORRES PÉREZ, *MIRADAS A LA ECONOMÍA CUBANA: ENTRE LA EFICIENCIA ECONÓMICA Y LA EQUIDAD SOCIAL* [CONSIDERING THE CUBAN ECONOMY: BETWEEN ECONOMIC EFFICIENCY AND SOCIAL EQUITY] 9, 11 (Editorial Caminos 2013); see also OMAR EVERLENY PÉREZ VILLANUEVA & RICARDO TORRES PÉREZ, *MIRADAS A LA*

repression for the dissident groups that, through non-violent means, sought to effect change. While Fidel remained at the political helm, and articles signed by him reflecting on Cuba's condition regularly appeared in *Granma*, unbeknownst to most a leadership transition from Fidel to Raúl was gradually taking place.

Mesa-Lago and Pérez-López assessed Cuba's economic and social performance from 1990 to 2012, comparing it to 1989 (the year before the crisis) and 1993 (the trough of the crisis).⁵ They showed the slow-down in economic growth that occurred from 2001 to 2004, concluding that although external factors contributed to it, its root cause was the "politically motivated paralysis of essential structural reforms."⁶ The social services—particularly education and public health, which had proved paramount to the success of the Cuban revolution—steadily deteriorated.⁷ However, the strong alliance and friendship between Fidel Castro in Cuba and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela served to buoy up the island. Venezuela replaced the Soviet Union as Cuba's economic and political benefactor, and the island was, yet again, dependent on an external power.

Raúl Castro's new government again underwent a cycle of pragmatic reforms that began with a national dialogue provoked by the 6th Congress of Cuba's Communist Party in 2011 and the *Lineamientos* (Guidelines) to put in place its major policy objectives in the 7th Congress in 2016.⁸ As Richard Feinberg pointed out, it was a lengthy document "rife with internal contradictions" that led one to "imagine the fierce internal debates between orthodox planners and reform advocates."⁹ The guidelines were more about *what*, rather than *how*, thus they were not a coherent national development model. Feinberg noted that the guidelines were reminiscent of the "tepid reform documents" common in socialist Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, which included "nods in the direction of market mechanisms and nonstate management" that were repeatedly "subsumed under genuflections to the hegemony of socialist planning."¹⁰ Nonetheless, the guidelines began

ECONOMÍA CUBANA: ANÁLISIS DEL SECTOR NO ESTATAL [LOOKS AT THE CUBAN ECONOMY: ANALYSIS OF THE NON-STATE SECTOR] 112 (Editorial Caminos 2015).

⁵ See generally MESA-LAGO & PÉREZ-LÓPEZ, *supra* note 3, at xi–xvi; CARMELO MESA-LAGO & JORGE F. PÉREZ-LÓPEZ, CUBA UNDER RAÚL CASTRO: ASSESSING THE REFORMS 1–3, 22–25 (Lynne Rienner Pub. 2013).

⁶ MESA-LAGO & PÉREZ-LÓPEZ, *supra* note 3, at xiii.

⁷ See Mesa-Lago, *supra* note 2, at 2–4.

⁸ See Raúl Castro Ruz, First Secretary, Presentation of the 7th PCC Congress Central Report at the 7th Congress Opening Session (Apr. 18, 2016) (transcript available on the CUBADEBATE website at <http://en.cubadebate.cu/news/2016/04/18/7th-pcc-congress-central-report-presented-by-first-secretary-raul-castro-ruz/>).

⁹ RICHARD E. FEINBERG, OPEN FOR BUSINESS: BUILDING THE NEW CUBAN ECONOMY 29 (Brookings Inst. Press 2016).

¹⁰ *Id.*

a process of reforms that made a difference in people's daily lives, particularly allowing the growth of the small-business private sector and the market mechanisms as well as a wider opening to foreign investment and international tourism. As Feinberg expressed it, the result soon became evident: "Commercial districts in Havana were increasingly dotted with new restaurants and small retail outlets, often located within owners' homes. Licenses were issued for private taxis, barbershops, and beauty salons, even as many middle-class professions (lawyers, engineers, architects) were still excluded from private practice."¹¹ By 2014, Cubans everywhere offered their family homes and apartments as bed and breakfast-style rentals, and hundreds of private restaurants "were improving the island's culinary offerings."¹²

However, from 2017 to 2018, the conservative faction in the Party gained ascendancy over the reform advocates and froze the reform process, reversing some measures. Moreover, to date, the authorized private activities do not include the white-collar professions, such as doctors, lawyers, and professors, that often moonlight working in the more profitable occupation of driving a taxi, particularly for tourists. Mesa-Lago captured the voices of change in Cuba from this emerging small business sector, voices that often emphasized the obstacles to growth in the excessive taxation and arbitrary bureaucracy the government subjected them to.¹³

Perhaps the major accomplishment was the political rejuvenation of the Party's Central Committee and the greater representation of women and Afro-Cubans among its members. The size of the State sector also declined, from 81% to 71%, while the private and cooperative sector increased. Raúl Castro emphasized this did not mean a return to capitalism, lauding the successful economic reforms in China and Vietnam. He remained as First Secretary of the Party and appointed his successor: Cuba's new President, Miguel Díaz-Canel.

To lift Cuba's economy, Raúl also turned to tourism. An avalanche of tourists then arrived in Cuba to witness the allure of a beautiful Caribbean island and a "tropical socialism." In 1990, Cuba received 340,000 international visitors; in 2016, a record 4 million tourists visited the island (for a nation of 11.2 million people), including some 140,000 U.S. residents (not Cuban-Americans).¹⁴ However, in 2020, with the arrival of the

¹¹ *Id.* at 32.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ See generally CARMELO MESA-LAGO, VOICES OF CHANGE IN CUBA FROM THE NON-STATE SECTOR (Univ. Pitt. Press 2018).

¹⁴ Paolo Spadoni, Professor at Augusta University, Panel Presentation at the Twelfth Conference on Cuban and Cuban-American Studies of the Cuban Research Institute of *The Expansion of International*

coronavirus pandemic, COVID-19, the government closed the door to all tourism as well as shipments of goods to Cuba (including the mail). While that helped to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 inside of Cuba, it further damaged an already dismal economy. The situation became even worse when the new American President, Donald Trump, imposed new sanctions. For an economy dependent on tourism and remittances, the closing of the door to the island by both the Cuban and American governments was devastating.

Since 2016, the Cuban economy has stalled. As Mesa-Lago explained, “the island’s economy is neither efficient nor competitive.”¹⁵ Simply put, for the last 62 years Cuba relied on substantial aid and subsidies from a foreign nation (first the Soviet Union, then Venezuela) and was unable to finance what it imports from what it exports, generating appropriate, sustainable growth.¹⁶ Mesa-Lago noted the massive aid Cuba received from the Soviet Union from 1960 to 1990—\$65 million dollars; triple the total amount of aid that Latin America received from Kennedy’s Alliance for Progress.¹⁷ Venezuela also aided Cuba. At its peak in 2012, Venezuelan aid, subsidies, and investment amounted to \$14 billion, or close to 12% of GDP.¹⁸ Yet, despite the staggering foreign aid subsidies Cuba received, the economy’s performance was dismal.¹⁹ To Mesa-Lago and other analysts, the Cuban economic situation is due to the failure of the “inefficient economic model of centralized planning, state enterprises[,] and agricultural collectivization its leaders have pursued despite the failure of these models worldwide.”²⁰ Raúl Castro’s reforms sought to tackle “Fidel’s legacy of economic disaster head-on, by enacting a series of market-oriented structural reforms.”²¹ However, these policies were timid and incomplete. To Mesa-Lago, there have been too many restrictions, disincentives, and taxes, which impeded the growth of the private sector.²² Domestic capital accumulation has been insufficient, an obstacle for economic growth.

Mesa-Lago argued that the market socialism model could provide a way out, an economic model that proved far more successful in China and Vietnam, while still under Communist Party rule.²³ In both China and

Tourism in Cuba in the Post-Cold War Period (Feb. 15, 2019) (paper presented at Florida International University).

¹⁵ Carmelo Mesa-Lago, *There’s Only One Way Out for Cuba’s Dismal Economy*, N.Y. TIMES (Mar. 28, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/28/opinion/cuba-economy.html>.

¹⁶ *See id.*

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.*

²³ *Id.*

Vietnam, the government allowed farmers to sell their products to whomever they wanted, at prices set by supply and demand.²⁴ In Cuba, they must sell them to the State, despite the constant food shortages people suffer. In both China and Vietnam, self-employment in the private sector was an important engine of economic growth. In Cuba, the *cuentapropistas* (self-employed) are extremely important for tourism, one of the pillars of the economy. But they are heavily taxed and seriously restricted. Yet, the new President, Miguel Díaz-Canel, only promised “continuity” with the existing economic model, failed as it has been. Feinberg underscored that, rather than providing the long-suffering population “a strategic vision that might light the way towards a brighter future,” the new President “showed little inclination to risk new measures.” Rather, the government has devoted itself to managing a grueling austerity, reserving scarce foreign exchange to import the essential foodstuffs and energy that the economy is failing to produce on its own.²⁵ Moreover, the new Cuban Constitution (approved in February 2019) did not introduce any significant changes to the model of centralized planning and State dominance over the economy.²⁶ Fear of returning to capitalism, they say, guides their reluctance to engage in these sorts of reforms that proved so successful in two other nations still under Communist Party leadership—China and Vietnam. Fear of losing power and retribution must also underlie their reluctance. Throughout the island, billboards now show the portraits of Cuba’s heroes of the war of independence against Spain, Carlos Manuel de Céspedes and José Martí, followed by Fidel and Raúl Castro, followed by Miguel Díaz-Canel.²⁷

Raúl Castro took over the presidency of Cuba in 2006, due to Fidel’s retirement at age 80 since he was gravely ill. Raúl started the debate, together with members of the Communist Party and the National Assembly, regarding the need to reform some laws, public policies, and economic practices to correct the worst effects of the centralized economy. Since the “revolutionary offensive” of the late ‘60s, that penalized private initiative in the island, the private sector was almost non-existent. After the severe crisis of “the special period,” the people clamored for changes, as did economists, academics, and other analysts inside and outside Cuba. Thus, Raul’s government initiated

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ Richard E. Feinberg, *The Cuban Economy: Socialist Stagnation with Caribbean Characteristics*, in HANDBOOK OF CARIBBEAN ECONOMIES 249, 250 (Robert E. Looney ed., 2021).

²⁶ See generally CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF CUBA Apr. 10, 2019.

²⁷ Photograph of Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, José Martí, Fidel Castro, Raúl Castro, and Miguel Díaz-Canel, titled *Revolución–Somos Continuidad* [Revolution–We are Continuity].

them—as he repeatedly stressed, “*sin prisa pero sin pausa*” (“without haste, but without pause”).²⁸

From 2006 to 2014, Raúl Castro introduced various reforms and an economic opening took place that allowed for the legal development of the non-State sector that, in truth, already existed clandestinely as an informal economy typical of all Latin American countries.²⁹ After Raúl became President of the Council of State, then First Secretary of the Party, and then President, with the support of the reformists within the Party, he was able to introduce important changes. Among the most important were that, beginning in the summer of 2010, the government authorized the self-employment of *cuentapropistas* (the self-employed) in particular jobs on a government list of approved occupations.³⁰ Ritter and Henken tell the story well of the rise, fall, and rebirth of the *paladares* (small restaurants) from 1994 to 2014.³¹ Originally approved for only 12 chairs, many *paladares* had distinct personalities that made them quite popular, such as “*La Guarida*” and “*El Hurón Azul*.” Now *paladares* are approved for 50 chairs.³² Ritter and Henken underlined that the

thick web of legal restrictions. . . on these *paladares* and on self-employment in general were so great and taxes so high that they often overshadowed the benefits of legal status itself. . . forc[ing] them to utilize informal strategies or to go into outright clandestine existence to make a living.³³

While they did not result in the creation of new jobs, as initially hoped, they did result in the growth of an extensive underground network of *jineteros* (hustlers) that guided many a tourist to better places to eat and drink and to sexual services. As of June 2014, the government legalized or expanded 201 occupations, among them the *paladares*.

Another important reform came when the government also guaranteed the distribution of idle State-owned land (usufruct) for a specified time to individuals, cooperatives, and State entities. Moreover, the government boosted non-agricultural production, as well as service cooperatives, allowing private taxis and other forms of transportation to improve public

²⁸ *Indecision Time: Never Rapid, Raúl Castro's Reforms Seem to Be Stalling*, THE ECONOMIST (Sept. 15, 2012), <https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2012/09/15/indecision-time>.

²⁹ See generally Miguel Angel Centeno & Alejandro Portes, *The Informal Economy in the Shadow of the State*, in OUT OF THE SHADOWS: POLITICAL ACTION AND THE INFORMAL ECONOMY IN LATIN AMERICA (Patricia Fernández-Kelly & Jon Shefner eds., 2006).

³⁰ ARCHIBALD R. M. RITTER & TED A. HENKEN, *ENTREPRENEURIAL CUBA: THE CHANGING POLICY LANDSCAPE* 127 (Lynne Rienner Pub. 2015).

³¹ *Id.* at 245–96.

³² *Id.*

³³ *Id.* at 245.

transport. Cubans were also allowed access to hotels and restaurants from which they were barred, leaving them feeling humiliated. With respect to the unpopular rationing booklet, known as *la libreta*, many food items were eliminated. Moreover, the government began to allow the sale of homes, forbidden since 1960. And the government did away with the restrictions preventing Cubans from traveling abroad.³⁴

Raúl's reforms were supported by the reformers within the Party loyal to his way of thinking; they were opposed by the orthodox members of the Party loyal to Fidel's way of thinking. Such efforts that initiated important changes but were subsequently reversed were observed in the past with respect to self-employment (e.g., with the Rectification Campaign that followed the 3rd Congress of the Communist Party) and with the liberalization of farmers' markets. Yet this time, there was to be no reversal. As Raúl himself observed: "The steps we have been taking and shall take towards broadening and relaxing self-employment are the result of profound meditations and analysis and we can assure you this time there will be no going back."³⁵

The excessive red tape involved in implementation; the exaggerated State interference; the absence of a wholesale market; the difficulties in acquiring inputs; the lack of access to the Internet; the dual currency; and the very low incomes and wages were all obstacles that rendered the reforms less fruitful than hoped for.³⁶ Feinberg argued that Raúl Castro's greatest achievement was in foreign affairs, where he succeeded in diversifying Cuba's diplomatic and commercial relations around the globe: "Cuba had been a colony of Spain, a dominion of US capital, a cog within the Soviet-dominated COMECON system. Now, for the first time in its 500-year history, Cuba had escaped the grip of a single world power."³⁷ Yet, Cuba was unable to take advantage of its diplomatic prowess. Feinberg put it well:

No international economic strategy will work unless Cuba can transform itself into a more efficient and reliable business partner. No amount of geopolitical influences will provide Cuba with the capital and technology it needs unless it creates a more welcoming investment climate. And no

³⁴ See MESA-LAGO & PÉREZ-LÓPEZ, CUBA UNDER RAÚL CASTRO, *supra* note 5, at 221–22 tbl.6.1 (displaying a full list of reforms).

³⁵ Raúl Castro Ruz, President of the Councils of State and Ministers, Address during the Closing Ceremony of the Sixth Session of the Seventh Legislature of the National People's Power Assembly (Dec. 18, 2010) (transcript available on the CUBADEBATE website at <http://en.cubadebate.cu/opinions/2010/12/18/speech-delivered-during-closing-ceremony-sixth-session-seventh-legislature/>).

³⁶ See generally MESA-LAGO & PÉREZ-LÓPEZ, CUBA UNDER RAÚL CASTRO, *supra* note 5; RITTER & HENKEN, *supra* note 30.

³⁷ FEINBERG, *The Cuban Economy*, *supra* note 25, at 256.

international alliances, by themselves, will loosen the balance of payments pressures until Cuban farms and factories churn out products that can compete on international markets.³⁸

In 2020, COVID-19 arrived to a devastated economy, further deepening the crisis.³⁹ Thus, a series of modifications were decreed to expand the reforms. The independent economist Oscar Espinosa-Chepe noted that the changes in Cuba were few, limited, and late.⁴⁰ Among the welcomed changes were doing away with the list of approved jobs for the *cuentapropistas* and lifting the penalty from the American dollar when exchanging it (penalty that the European euro never had). As 2021 opened, the government engaged in currency reform. The convertible dollar—the CUC—disappeared, leaving only the traditional Cuban *peso* and the U.S. dollar. But immediately, spiraling inflation resulted, making it impossible for most people to buy food and other scarce goods. Only a few months later, on July 11, Cuba witnessed the largest social protests ever in its history, along the full length of the island, protests which became known as *11J*. They expressed both economic and political suffering, as Cubans who participated in them called for jobs and food as well as freedom and democracy. The new government's reply was swift and harsh. Díaz-Canel unleashed the forces of the police upon them, and hundreds of protesters were sent to prison. It is clear, however, that today's Cuban youth has now become a political actor.

II. THE RISING INEQUALITY: CLASS AND RACE

In recent decades, social inequality continued to grow in Cuba,⁴¹ social class inequality between the “haves” and the “have nots” that also had a racial dimension. The exodus always had a racial dimension, as White Cubans disproportionately left the island. Thus, so did the remittances the émigrés sent. The émigrés' remittances were another pillar of the Cuban economy. Sarah Blue's survey of Havana residents assessed the impact of the 1993 to

³⁸ *Id.* at 258.

³⁹ Ricardo Torres, *El Rompecabezas Económico Cubano Frente a la Pandemia* [*The Cuban Economic Puzzle in the Face of the Pandemic*], NUEVA SOCIEDAD (May 2020), <https://nuso.org/articulo/el-rompecabezas-economico-cubano-frente-la-pandemia/>.

⁴⁰ See generally OSCAR ESPINOSA-CHEPE, CAMBIOS EN CUBA: POCOS, LIMITADOS, Y TARDÍOS [CHANGES IN CUBA: FEW, LIMITED, AND LATE] (2011), <https://reconciliacioncubana.files.wordpress.com/2011/03/cambios-en-cuba.pdf>.

⁴¹ See generally Mayra Espina-Prieto, *Social Effects of Economic Adjustment: Equality, Inequality, and Trends toward Greater Complexity in Cuban Society*, in *THE CUBAN ECONOMY AT THE START OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY* (Jorge I. Domínguez, Omar Everleny Pérez-Villanueva & Lorena Barbería eds., Harvard Univ. David Rockefeller Ctr. Latin Am. Stud. 2004).

1995 economic reforms on the rising racial inequality in Cuba.⁴² She found that the increased access to education—the structural means through which the revolution had once equalized the income levels of various sectors of the population—had lost its equalizing force, while differential access to State employment, self-employment, and remittances from abroad resulted in rising racial inequality in Cuba.⁴³ From the Cuban-American population flowed remittances back to the island to help the family left behind. These remittances aggravated the problem of racial inequality, since Afro-Cubans did not have as many family members living abroad to help them.

Alejandro de la Fuente has long studied the issue of race in Cuba from the later part of the twentieth century until the new millennium.⁴⁴ Always he emphasized that the Cuban revolution had important impacts on issues of race, eliminating the structural racism of the past, and opening new opportunities, particularly through the enormous expansion of the educational system and the public health system, to Black and mixed-race Cubans.⁴⁵ Data from the recent censuses of Cuba in 1981, 2002, and 2012, comparing the educational levels of White, Black, and mixed-race Cubans, show that over time the race differentials became very low, as the improvements in education took place for all races; as did the improvements in life expectancy resulting from good public health. Twenty years after the triumph of the revolution, by the 1980s Cuba had become a more racially equitable society. By the new millennium, racial disparities in education and in professional jobs were few. Thus, Cuba had become a more racially equitable society than most multicultural societies. However, De la Fuente underscored, by the 1990s “racially differentiated effects became immediately and painfully visible.”⁴⁶ White Cubans mobilized to exclude Black Cubans from the burgeoning tourist sector; racist attitudes continued to flourish, as epithets, discourses, and practices could again be seen and heard. Today there is an absence of Black Cubans in the tourist sector, as well as in the private, non-State sector, where lie jobs that pay well (approximately one-third of all jobs), contrary to the public sector jobs that pay very little, not allowing people to accumulate resources.

⁴² Sarah A. Blue, *The Erosion of Racial Equality in the Context of Cuba's Dual Economy*, 49 *LATIN AM. POL. & SOC'Y* 35, 35 (2007).

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ See generally ALEJANDRO DE LA FUENTE, *A NATION FOR ALL: RACE, INEQUALITY, AND POLITICS IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY CUBA* (Univ. N.C. Press 2001) [hereinafter FUENTE, *NATION FOR ALL*]; Alejandro de la Fuente, *Racism with Equality in Cuba: 1980–2010* (paper presented at Cuba from the Castros to COVID: An Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy (ASCE) Virtual Conference) (Aug. 14, 2020) [hereinafter Fuente, *Racism with Equality*].

⁴⁵ See FUENTE, *NATION FOR ALL*, *supra* note 44, at 23, 210; Fuente, *Racism with Equality*, *supra* note 44.

⁴⁶ Fuente, *Racism with Equality*, *supra* note 44.

This is particularly salient since the government insists on portraying the Cuban people as Mestizo in a land where there is no racism and all forms of racism are understood, as befits the Marxist ideology, as “vestiges of the past.” Increasingly, however, activists that are part of an Afro-Cuban movement contest the notion that racism is a vestige of the past.

Even more, in the last decade, the municipal university system that opened up opportunities for all to be educated in the *municipios* and was in place from 2000 to 2010 came to an end. As a result, there has been a rapid and massive whitening of the university system. Moreover, as de la Fuente also showed, the proportion of Cubans living in abysmal conditions that lack running water and decent bathrooms in the tenements of the major cities of Havana and Santiago is quite low among Whites, much higher among Mestizos, and rather high among Blacks. De la Fuente concluded that three factors combined to produce massive racial inequality in Cuba today: a history of unequal race relations; the impact of remittances; and the public sector’s retreat from being an agent of equality.⁴⁷

Thus, after the frontal attack of the Cuban revolution on inequality since 1959, today there is massive inequality in Cuba that cannot be hidden—of class and of race. Yet it is largely ignored in the official statistics that need to incorporate the reality of skin color with multiple social indicators.⁴⁸ Katrin Hansing and Bert Hoffman were able to conduct a survey with over 1,000 respondents throughout the island that showed the restratification taking place.⁴⁹ They concluded, “With much less access to financial capital, goods, and mobility, Afro-Cubans are being clearly disadvantaged. In the current restratification of Cuban society, this racial bias is turning back one of the proudest historic achievements of the Cuban revolution.”⁵⁰

The impact of differential family remittances is aggravated by the tendency of the tourism industry—hotels and restaurants, in particular—to prefer hiring White Cubans, imagining the tourists prefer them. Writing as the editor and publisher of the *Casa de las Américas* in Havana, Roberto Zurbano highlighted that after nearly 60 years of revolution, racial inequality still persisted in Cuba.⁵¹ Two different realities diverged:

47 *Id.*

48 Esteban Morales Domínguez, *El Tema Racial en Cuba y el Informe a Naciones Unidas del 2018: Un Balance Crítico* [*The Racial Issue in Cuba and the 2018 Report to the United Nations: A Critical Balance*], ESTEBAN MORALES DOMÍNGUEZ BLOG (Aug. 14, 2018), <http://estebanmoralesdominguez.blogspot.com/2018/08/el-tema-racial-en-cuba-y-el-informe.html>.

49 Katrin Hansing & Bert Hoffmann, *When Racial Inequalities Return: Assessing the Restructification of Cuban Society 60 Years After Revolution*, 62 *LATIN AM. POL. & SOC’Y* 29, 30 (2020).

50 *Id.* at 45.

51 Roberto Zurbano, *For Blacks in Cuba, the Revolution Hasn’t Begun*, *N.Y. TIMES* (Mar. 23, 2013), <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/24/opinion/sunday/for-blacks-in-cuba-the-revolution-hasnt-begun.html>.

The first is that of white Cubans, who have leveraged their resources to enter the new market-driven economy and reap the benefits of a supposedly more open socialism. The other reality is that of the black plurality, which witnessed the demise of the socialist utopia from the island's least comfortable quarters.⁵²

That racism is never openly discussed, he added, only makes it flourish. Zurbano acknowledged that the first decade of the revolution, the 1960s, “signified opportunity for all” and that the 1980s produced a generation of Black professionals, such as doctors and teachers, “but these gains were diminished in the 1990s as blacks were excluded from lucrative sectors, like hospitality.”⁵³ Now in the 21st century, it is apparent that Black Cubans are “underrepresented in universities and in spheres of economic and political power,” while they are “overrepresented in the underground economy, the criminal sphere, and in marginal neighborhoods.”⁵⁴

III. THE SOCIAL CRISIS

On November 27, 2020, an unprecedented event took place as around 400 artists and intellectuals, mostly young, led by the *Movimiento San Isidro*, protested for days in front of the *Ministerio de Cultura* (Ministry of Culture) in Havana. Their main demand was greater freedom of expression in Cuba for all its citizens and respect for political dissenters. They demanded a real dialogue with the government as well as real participation and representation in their nation's political institutions. While the government tried to dismiss them, it is no longer possible to do so. The spread of the internet throughout the island allowed a collective movement to take shape. But the Cuban government ended the dialogue with the artists, calling them “mercenaries.”

Eight months later the island was gripped by the spontaneous protests of July 11, 2021, that lasted a week, coming out of the poor neighborhoods of Havana and Santiago de Cuba. The large participation in the protests of Afro-Cubans was evident. Thus, some observers thought race was a major issue in the protests. Moreover, for many years Black Cubans have been at the forefront of the dissident movement, as with Orlando Zapata, who died in prison; Manuel Cuesta-Morúa, with the *Arco Progresista* movement; Dimas Castellanos, independent journalist with *Diario de Cuba*; Guillermo Fariñas with *UNPACU* (*Unión Patriótica de Cuba*).

⁵² *Id.*

⁵³ *Id.*

⁵⁴ *Id.*

Even more, the authors of *Patria y Vida*, the song which became the banner of the July protest movement, were also Afro-Cubans,⁵⁵ including Yotuel Romero, Gente de Zona, and Decemer Bueno in Miami, together with Eliexer Marquez (*el Funky*), Maykel Osorbo, and Luis Manuel Otero-Alcántara in Cuba. However, it is important to realize that they were not saying “Black Lives Matter,” they were saying “Cuban Lives Matter.”⁵⁶ Their collaboration was a form of political and social transnationalism between those who lived outside and those who lived inside the island.⁵⁷

Patria y Vida turned Fidel Castro’s *Patria o Muerte* slogan upside down. The song is a clear expression that came from the people, from Afro-Cubans, who captured life in Cuba in this *reggaeton*. It also gave expression to the suffering of the Cuban people with lines such as “And mothers cry when their sons and daughters leave.”⁵⁸ As usual in this musical style, the song is quite free with its lyrics, which entail a social critique. Written and played by both Cuban immigrants and Cubans in the island, together they were able to give everyone a compass for the struggle against a repressive government in Cuba.

Both the *San Isidro* movement and the *Patria y Vida* movement that issued from it asked for a dialogue with the government and for real political participation—for democracy and freedom for all Cubans, for real social and political citizenship. As Marquez underscored, those who lived inside the island knew they would be the ones to pay the social costs, but they went ahead and risked it.⁵⁹ At present, both Maykel Osorbo and Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara are political prisoners, who Amnesty International declared to be “prisoners of conscience.”⁶⁰ Cuba’s state security escorted “*el Funky*” to the plane at the airport. Their parting words were “Do not return.”

IV. THE CONTINUING EXODUS

The contemporary exodus from Cuba that began when the economic crisis of “the special period” became a political crisis has never ceased. It first reached its apex in the summer of 1994. That July, some Cuban families left in a small tugboat called *13 de Marzo* to cross the dangerous waters

⁵⁵ YOTUEL, GENTE DE ZONA & DESCEMER BUENO FEAT. EL FUNKY & MAYKEL OSORBO, *PATRIA Y VIDA* (Chancleta Records 2021).

⁵⁶ *See id.*

⁵⁷ *See generally* SILVIA PEDRAZA & CARLOS A. ROMERO, *REVOLUTIONS IN CUBA AND VENEZUELA: ONE HOPE, TWO REALITIES* (Univ. Fla. Press 2023).

⁵⁸ *See* *PATRIA Y VIDA*, *supra* note 55.

⁵⁹ Interview with Eliexer Marquez “El Funky,” Musician, in Havana, Cuba (Dec. 2021).

⁶⁰ *Cuba: Amnesty International Condemns Sentences of Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara and Maykel “Osorbo” Castillo*, AMNESTY INT’L (June 24, 2022), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/06/cuba-amnesty-condemns-sentences-luis-manuel-otero-alcantara-maykel-osorbo-castillo/>.

standing between Cuba's north coast and the Florida Keys. Due to the actions of the Cuban Coast Guard, who directed powerful shoots of water at the tugboat, it capsized, and 41 lives were lost. People in Cuba were outraged. Fidel replied by telling the people that the gates to their departure were open, as he ordered the Cuban Coast Guard not to detain them as illegal emigrants. This gave way to the enormous, chaotic exodus of the *balseros*, the fourth wave of the Cuban exodus—over 36,000 rafters who tried to cross the Florida Straits from July to August.

That summer of 1994 culminated in Cuba with the massive street protests in Havana on August 5th, which came to be called “*el Maleconazo*,” as they mostly took place along the seaside wall of the Malecón.⁶¹

The *balseros* crisis gave way to President Clinton signing a new Migration Accord with Cuba, as part of which he devised the “Wet Foot/Dry Foot” policy that shaped the fourth wave of the Cuban exodus. This policy was in effect until President Obama overturned it just before he left office, arguing that U.S. immigration policy should treat Cubans the same as all other immigrants wanting to come to America. While the Cuban Adjustment Act remains in place, it is the case that it is increasingly difficult for Cubans who manage to enter the U.S. to be granted political asylum, needing to give evidence of the probable fear of persecution. Nevertheless, the fifth wave of the Cuban exodus, mostly over land, developed in recent years. The exodus continues unabated and remains a loss of enormous talent and resources for the country.

Now both the exodus and the social protests have peaked again, with renewed strength. Despite Obama doing away with the “Wet Foot/Dry Foot” policy that guided U.S. policy towards the Cuban exodus, the situation in the island is so dire that the year 2021–22 saw the single largest exodus of Cubans in the last 62 years.

V. THE CHURCH AND RELIGION

That suffering of the rafters' crisis in 1994 culminated in a sermon by a small town priest, José Conrado Rodríguez, in Palma Soriano on September 8, the day that Cubans commemorate the feast day of their cherished patron saint, *la Virgen de la Caridad* (Our Lady of Charity).⁶² That day's homily consisted of his reading a letter he had written to Fidel Castro, telling him:

⁶¹ SILVIA PEDRAZA, *POLITICAL DISAFFECTION IN CUBA'S REVOLUTION AND EXODUS* 180 (Cambridge Univ. Press 2007).

⁶² José Conrado Rodríguez, *Cuando la Patria Peligra* [*When the Homeland Is in Danger*], EL NUEVO HERALD, Mar. 25, 1995.

For over 30 years, our country engaged in a politics at the base of which was violence. This politics was justified because of the presence of a powerful and tenacious enemy only 90 miles away, the United States of America. The way we confronted this enemy was to place ourselves under the power that for years confronted it, the Soviet Union

While the Soviet Union gave massive assistance to our economy and our arms race, Cuba gradually fell into a state of internal violence and profound repression The use, within and without our country, of hatred, division, violence, suspicion and ill will, has been the main cause of our present and past misfortune.

Now we can see it clearly. The excessive growth of the state, progressively more powerful, left our people defenseless and silenced. The lack of liberty that would have allowed healthy criticism and alternative ways of thinking caused us to slide down the slippery slope of political will and intolerance towards others.

The fruits it bore were those of hypocrisy and dissimulation, insincerity and lying, and a general state of fear that affected everyone in the island

We are all responsible, but no one is more responsible than you⁶³

Many in Cuba and in the exile applauded Father José Conrado's courage and action, which expressed their sentiments. However, many in the Church leadership did not support him, thinking that the Church first had to regain its strength before it could engage in political action.

A watershed moment in the history of the revolution came with Pope John Paul II's visit to Cuba in January 1998.⁶⁴ His visit not only strengthened the Catholic Church and affirmed the religious beliefs of the people, it also made it possible for Cubans to begin to speak freely. In a visit that lasted a full week, over four masses across the full length of the island, his messages were quite clear: do not be afraid; the destiny of your nation is in your own hands.⁶⁵ In Santiago de Cuba, the Pope symbolically crowned *la Virgen de la Caridad*, the patron saint.⁶⁶ The Cuban people accompanied him in song to

⁶³ *Id.*

⁶⁴ Carol Morello, *A Family Divided: Reunion, Reconciliation, as Pope Arrives Today*, USA TODAY, Jan. 21, 1998, at 1A.

⁶⁵ Silvia Pedraza, *The Impact of Pope John Paul II's Visit to Cuba*, ASS'N FOR THE STUDY OF THE CUBAN ECON. (Nov. 30, 1998), https://www.ascecuba.org/asce_proceedings/the-impact-of-pope-john-paul-iiis-visit-to-cuba/.

⁶⁶ *Id.*

the tune of “*Virgen Mambisa*”—the Lady to whom Cuba’s patriots who fought for independence from Spain in the 19th century prayed.⁶⁷ Monsignor Pedro Meurice, Archbishop of Santiago, gave a stirring sermon in which he emphasized that the Cuban nation lived both on the island and in the diaspora.⁶⁸ The Church’s commitment, he underlined, is with “the poorest of the poor.”⁶⁹ He added, “And the poorest among us are those who lack liberty.”⁷⁰ The event was a moving reunion of the Cuban people with themselves—a newly found tradition.⁷¹ Thereafter, the churches began to fill.

Recognizing the important role that the Catholic Church has played in Cuba all these years, in 2010, Raúl Castro also met with then-Cardinal Jaime Ortega. They began a process, which also involved the government of Spain, whereby 166 political prisoners were to be released from jail, including the 52 remaining from the 75 arrested during “the Cuban Spring,” in the 2003 protests, many of whom left Cuba for Spain. Their imprisonment gave birth to *Las Damas de Blanco* (the Ladies in White). These dissident women that every Sunday, fully dressed in white and holding a flower, left from the Church of Santa Rita to walk throughout the streets of Havana, peacefully protesting the imprisonment of their husbands, brothers, or sons.

Given its perennial state of crisis, from 1998 to 2016, three Popes visited Cuba. When the second Pope, Benedict XVI, visited in March 2012, he visited the patron saint in her shrine of *el Cobre*, in Oriente. There he prayed, leaving the future of Cuba in her hands. His message was one of hope and reconciliation, of gradual change. Both Raúl Castro and the Catholic Church saw his visit as a success.⁷²

The third Pope to visit Cuba, Pope Francis I, did so in late September 2016, shortly before Fidel Castro died at the end of November. Right after Cuba, Pope Francis visited Washington, D.C., where he celebrated the rapprochement between both countries under Barack Obama and Raúl Castro. However, in comparison with the two Popes before him, his visit delivered little. As Miroff underlined, “Pope John Paul II’s visit in 1998 put Christmas back on the Cuban calendar. When Pope Benedict XVI arrived in 2012, the Cuban government made Good Friday a national holiday. Both men brought to the Catholic Church a bigger role in Cuba’s public life. Pope

67 *Id.*

68 *Id.*

69 *Id.*

70 *Id.*

71 *Id.*

72 Nick Miroff, *Pope Meets Fidel Castro, Wraps Up Visit to Cuba*, NPR (Mar. 28, 2012, 3:40 PM), <https://www.npr.org/2012/03/28/149549480/pope-wraps-up-cuba-visit-with-mass-castro-meeting>.

Francis?”⁷³ Indeed, Pope Francis simply brought no new concessions for the Church. This, at a time when, amidst the decline in Cuba’s safety net, the Church had stepped in to help *el pueblo* in many ways: opening day-care centers and health clinics, providing free meals for the elderly, and assisting disabled children. None of the three Popes who visited Cuba, however, met with the dissidents. Nor did they meet with representatives of the Afro-Cuban religion, known as *Santería*, which is a large part of popular religiosity in Cuba today.⁷⁴ Both groups felt excluded. Still, Pope John Paul II’s visit was a watershed. In his sermons, he urged Cubans not to be afraid, but to take the reins of history into their own hands.

VI. THE CUBA-VENEZUELA ALLIANCE

Despite the deep economic crises in both Cuba and Venezuela, their alliance has never ceased, given its political importance to both nations. Cuba traded its doctors and public health expertise for Venezuela’s oil. Little by little, the Venezuelan process is becoming closer to Cuba’s, in a symbiosis that opens the door to a totalitarian model and in which each provides the conditions for the other to exist. However, the number of Cuban doctors and health personnel sent to work in the social missions in Venezuela has vastly declined, from a peak of around 50,000 to now only 20,000. Likewise, given the collapse of its economy, Venezuela’s contribution to the island’s economy has halved. From 2000 to 2012, under Hugo Chávez’s presidency, Venezuela was supplying around 100,000 barrels of oil a day to Cuba; from 2013 to 2016, under Nicolás Maduro, that became around 65,000 barrels a day.⁷⁵ By 2017, it was less than half—43,000 barrels a day. In 2019 and 2020, it has declined even further, to 10,000 barrels a day.⁷⁶ Neither country can now uphold the other; their alliance can no longer be an alternative to the rest of the world, a living critique of capitalism—as Fidel and Chávez had hoped.

VII. THE UNITED STATES-CUBA RELATIONS

A turning point in the history of the relations between Cuba and the United States came with the restoration of diplomatic relations under President Obama, relations that the U.S. government severed in 1961 during

⁷³ Nick Miroff, *What the ‘Pope Francis Effect’ Hasn’t Delivered in Cuba*, WASH. POST (Oct. 7, 2015, 4:08 PM), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/10/07/what-the-pope-francis-effect-hasnt-delivered-in-cuba/>.

⁷⁴ See PEDRAZA, *supra* note 61.

⁷⁵ PEDRAZA & ROMERO, *supra* note 57.

⁷⁶ *Id.*

the Cold War—over half a century earlier.⁷⁷ Cubans in the island, and many on the mainland, greeted the re-establishment of relations in July 2015 with hope. Then Secretary of State John Kerry underscored that “U.S. policy is not the anvil on which Cuba’s future will be forged” since Cuba’s future is for Cubans to shape. However, he stressed his convictions regarding the importance of developing a genuine democracy “where institutions are answerable to those they serve; and where civil society is independent and allowed to flourish.”⁷⁸ Yet Raúl defended the primacy of the one-Party system, which could not be challenged. He argued, “If they manage someday to fragment us,” in the name of bourgeois democracy, “it would be the beginning of the end.”⁷⁹

Overall, despite their profound differences, United States Presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden, all followed the traditional line of conditioning the lifting of the embargo to the implementation of real democratic reforms in Cuba, particularly freeing the political prisoners and engaging in electoral democracy. President Obama, however, took the different tack of restoring diplomatic relations with Cuba, effort in which he engaged together with Cuba’s President, Raúl Castro, who announced it in December 2014. Obama’s measures had a significant impact on Americans’ travel to Cuba. Working with data provided by Cuba’s *MINTUR* (Ministry of Tourism) as well as *ONEI* (Office of National Statistics), Paolo Spadoni showed the dramatic rise in tourism to Cuba from 1990 to 2018 when tourism grew almost seven-fold in just three years from 2014 to 2017—an avalanche.⁸⁰

Wanting to undo Obama’s legacy and wanting to deprive the Cuban state of U.S. dollars, Trump’s measures put an end to the avalanche of tourists.⁸¹ Trump curtailed travel to the island by American citizens; restricted the remittances sent by Cuban Americans; cancelled the popular cruise ships; and drastically reduced airline flights. He also prohibited American companies from doing business with firms owned or controlled by *GAESA* (the Cuban military’s holding company). He ended the travel to Cuba by cruise ships authorized by President Obama and the individual people-to-people travel and visas that President Bill Clinton initiated. Trump also curtailed the airline flights (Delta, American, Jet Blue, and others) allowing

⁷⁷ William M. LeoGrande, *Normalizing US-Cuba Relations: Escaping the Shackles of the Past*, 91 INT’L AFFAIRS 473, 473 (2015).

⁷⁸ Secretary Kerry, Remarks at Flag Raising Ceremony, U.S. Embassy of Uru. (Aug. 14, 2015) (transcript available at <https://uy.usembassy.gov/secretary-kerrys-remarks-at-flag-raising-ceremony/>).

⁷⁹ LOUIS A. PÉREZ, JR., *CUBA: BETWEEN REFORM AND REVOLUTION* 353 (Oxford Univ. Press 2015).

⁸⁰ Spadoni, *supra* note 14.

⁸¹ Raúl Rodríguez, Presentation of *Back to the Future: What is New in Trump’s New Cuba Policy?* (paper presented at the University of Michigan, School of Public Policy) (Oct. 19, 2017).

them to fly only to Havana, rather than to various cities on the island.⁸² The result was a dramatic drop in tourism to Cuba. In April 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government closed all airports and ports, causing a complete halt to tourism. Now Cubans fear for their future, given both the harsh response of Díaz-Canel towards the recent protests and the growing dissident sectors in the island, as well as the new efforts to isolate Cuba stemming from the United States. With his extreme sanctions, Trump was quite able to court the Cuban-American vote. All Cuban-Americans want the return of democracy and elections to Cuba, in addition to the free expression of opinions and free association. However, this community is divided between *los intransigentes* (those who think one should not give an inch to Cuba's communist government) and *los moderados* (those who think that through dialogue and negotiation one may attain more). The former identifies with the Republican Party; the latter, with the Democratic Party.⁸³

The U.S. delivered the message that Cuba's support of Maduro's regime would entail a real cost. John Bolton, then National Security Advisor, expressed it in a speech in Miami, delivered on April 17, 2019, the anniversary of the Bay of Pigs invasion, at the site of the veterans: "In no uncertain terms, the Obama administration's policies toward Cuba have enabled the Cuban colonization of Venezuela today."⁸⁴ Trump's policies were designed to reverse the Obama-era policies.⁸⁵

Former President Trump also stressed he would not ask Congress to end the commercial sanctions with Cuba—until the political prisoners were liberated and free elections held. As was to be expected, Cuba's President Raúl Castro insisted that they would not allow themselves to be pressured—that they would not make political reforms to negotiate economically with the U.S. Thus, both countries returned to the chess game that for many years was frozen in these two positions, with the chess pieces unable to move.⁸⁶ The lively two-way flow of communication established in recent years among relatives and friends on both sides of the Gulf waters ended.

When the new U.S. President, Joe Biden, arrived, slowly he began to reverse Trump's extreme sanctions and to return to Obama's older policies.

⁸² *Id.*

⁸³ PEDRAZA, *supra* note 61.

⁸⁴ John Bolton, National Security Advisor of the United States (2018–2019), U.S. Embassy in Nicar., Speech on Venezuela and Cuba in Miami, FL (Apr. 17, 2019).

⁸⁵ Nora Gámez-Torres, *U.S. Restricts Travel, Remittances to Cuba as Part of a New Policy Under Trump*, MIAMI HERALD (Apr. 17, 2019), <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/cuba/article229341009.html>.

⁸⁶ William M. LeoGrande, *The United States and Cuba, in CUBAN FOREIGN POLICY: TRANSFORMATION UNDER RAÚL CASTRO* 161, 164 (H. Michael Erisman & John M. Kirk eds., 2018).

VIII. THE POLITICAL LEGITIMACY CRISIS

Cuba's crisis is also the crisis of a revolution that is now quite old. After the passage of 62 plus years, and the dramatic changes that accompanied the many stages of the revolution, distinct political generations formed.⁸⁷ Following Mannheim, a political generation consists of people who in their transition to adulthood, their coming of age (roughly 18 to 25 years old) were deeply influenced in their political attitudes by the dramatic historical events they lived through, events that marked their consciousness and their lives.⁸⁸ Based on participant observation, fieldwork, as well as in-depth semi-structured interviews, Pedraza identified and named four major political generations present at the dawn of the 21st century.⁸⁹ For the sake of brevity, only the first and last generations are contrasted here. At present, members of these generations live side by side in Cuba—more often than not in the same household.

The Generation of the Glorious Revolution consists of people who came of age at the start of the revolution (1950s and early 1960s). They made the revolution through their own efforts and substantial sacrifices fighting in the mountains or the urban resistance, assisting those who were part of the struggle. Today, they are in their mid-70s to mid-80s or older and often in positions of leadership in the Communist Party, government, or major cultural organizations. Mesa-Lago noted that the reluctance of the Party at present to engage in real structural reforms to benefit the economy might well be the result of the opposition to the old guard.⁹⁰ Pedraza's interviews with those who participated in the struggle and glory of the revolution found that this generation, no matter how poor the country has become, still sees communism as a good system that looks after the poor and gave women and Black Cubans their rightful place in the nation.⁹¹ Not blind to the dismal economy, they blame it solely on the U.S. embargo. This generation has never really handed over the reins of power to the next generation; they still dominate most institutions. For example, though Cuba now has a new president, when Miguel Díaz-Canel formally became President, in his

⁸⁷ Silvia Pedraza, Presentation of *Cuba and its Exile: Political Generations* (paper presented at the University of South Carolina Sociology Department) (Oct. 17, 2016).

⁸⁸ See KARL MANNHEIM, *ESSAYS ON THE SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE* 2–3 (Paul Kecskemeti ed., 5th ed. 1952).

⁸⁹ Pedraza, *supra* note 877.

⁹⁰ Carmelo Mesa-Lago, *There's Only One Way Out for Cuba's Dismal Economy*, N.Y. TIMES (Mar. 28, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/28/opinion/cuba-economy.html>.

⁹¹ PEDRAZA, *supra* note 61.

acceptance speech he let everyone know that Raúl Castro would still be making the major decisions.⁹²

The Generation of Disbelief consists of people who are now young adolescents or in their twenties, who were born after the “special period.” For them, the glory of the revolution is only a story their elders told them, a sign painted on one of the many billboards along the empty highways. All their lives they have known only poverty and want, as well as the wish to be free. Most of them seek to leave, as the island’s economic and social deterioration means they have lost hope, cannot see a better future, and have little sense of *la Patria*. Demographic change is inexorable, and it will not be long before the old guard disappears, necessarily giving way to the newer generations. Sad to say, some young Cubans are no longer willing to try to shape the island’s future. The revolution’s old age, coupled with the dismal economy that accompanies it, created a crisis that runs much deeper than the naked eye can see. Young Cubans who leave simply say, “There is no future in Cuba.”

Fidel Castro’s passing marked the end of an era in Latin America. Fidel Castro left power in 2006 due to his declining health and died on November 25, 2016, after the leadership transition was completed. Back in 1959, Fidel had departed Santiago de Cuba in a victorious caravan across his country, ending in Havana. Almost six decades later, his remains were carried on the same journey, in reverse. Commenting on his legacy, just as his remains arrived at Santiago de Cuba, Pedraza underscored that Castro’s most enduring legacy will inevitably be that of David vs. Goliath: “He was the young, bearded revolutionary from a small island who took on the enormous Goliath of US capitalism and American hegemony. That is the stuff of dreams.”⁹³

But it was not a dream for everyone, and real disagreements remain as to whether he was David or Goliath.⁹⁴ The image of Castro as David was first established during the victory of the government forces over the exiles’ American-sponsored invasion at Bay of Pigs. This image was reinforced repeatedly as Fidel lobbed verbal stones at his superpower neighbor as he relied on the support of first, the Soviet Union, and then, Venezuela. Over the next half century, Fidel repeatedly threw his sling at the United States. Each time he blamed all of Cuba’s economic ills on the U.S. embargo, rather than taking responsibility for his government’s policies that failed to deliver prosperity to Cuba. Each time he turned the massive exodus from a problem

⁹² Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermudez, President of the Republic of Cuba, Inaugural Speech at the Fourth Extraordinary Session of the IX Legislature of the National Assembly of People’s Power in the Havana Convention Center (Oct. 10, 2018).

⁹³ Silvia Pedraza, *Fidel Castro: Was He David or Goliath?*, CNN (Dec. 4, 2016, 10:05 AM), <https://www.cnn.com/2016/12/04/opinions/david-or-goliath-castro-pedraza/index.html>.

⁹⁴ *Id.*

for Cuba to a problem for the U.S. This is an image that some Cubans—those who succumbed to his charisma and passionate oratory which painted the suffering of the present as necessary steppingstones to a better future—bought into, at least for a time. This was particularly true for those who benefited from the initial advances of the revolution and who lived through Cuba's early phase of civic glory when they fought against Fulgencio Batista's dictatorship in the 1950s. They risked their lives in that undertaking and staked themselves on the revolution. They almost invariably remain attached to the revolution. They lived through Cuba's civic joy at the end of the dictatorship, and they followed Fidel when he veered from a revolution originally fought to restore political democracy to a different revolution that sought to bring communism and socialism to the island.

To many of those who benefited from the expansion of education and public health services, Fidel Castro remained an admirably defiant figure even after his death. And these advances cannot and should not be overlooked, especially as they were the product of the tangible sacrifices the Cuban people made day in and day out. Many previously illiterate Cubans learned to read during a literacy campaign launched at the beginning of the revolution. Many poorer Cubans in rural areas, and those from working class backgrounds in the cities, experienced a remarkable social jump due to the improved education and health.

However, to many Cubans, the David long ago morphed into an ugly Goliath. As Castro continued to blame all of Cuba's economic ills on the U.S. embargo rather than taking responsibility for his own policies, many Cubans sought a new life in the United States.

Ultimately, Cubans paid dearly for the social advances under the Castro regime. Their meager salaries have plunged the vast majority of the population, including professionals, into poverty. Even the well-educated are left struggling to put food on the table, to *resolver*—to make ends meet, legally or illegally. Cubans also paid for Castro's achievements with a lack of liberty that constrained both their efforts and their souls, stunting the economic development of the island. Families were torn apart when the lack of economic growth and lack of liberty pushed so many to leave their homeland.

To most Cubans that today live in the United States—as well as the many scattered all over the globe—Fidel was no David. But this was also true for many in the dissident movement inside Cuba who valiantly risked their lives in the decades-long struggle to restore electoral democracy to Cuba, even in the face of government crackdowns.

The new dissident movement in Cuba began to develop among young people in the mid-1980s, many of whom had studied in the Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries. It grew out of their firsthand knowledge of

communism and their attempts at *glasnost* and *perestroika* to reform communism from within. Today, the dissident movement includes numerous groups. All of them espouse non-violence as means and as ends. Some of them have religious roots. Dagoberto Valdés-Hernández's efforts have taken the shape of two magazines: first, *Vitral* (the image of a stained glass window that refracts many colors as the light passes through) and now *Convivencia* (to live together with tolerance).⁹⁵ The *Movimiento Cristiano Liberación* (Christian Liberation Movement), part of the Christian Democrats movement worldwide, gained the largest following on the island under the leadership of Oswaldo Payá and their *Proyecto Varela*.⁹⁶ Likewise, four leading dissidents together wrote *La Patria es de Todos* (The Nation Belongs to All), representing the full gamut of race and gender in Cuba.⁹⁷ All of them called for a plebiscite in Cuba so that Cubans can freely elect their government. As Payá expressed it, "Let no one else speak for Cubans. Let their own voices be heard in a referendum."⁹⁸ He was confident that change could be achieved in Cuba from within and that the dark of night would not last forever—the title of his last book.⁹⁹ Also part of the dissident movement are the *UNPACU* (Patriotic Union of Cuba), a major social movement with one of its leaders, Guillermo Fariñas, who engaged in numerous hunger strikes in Santa Clara. Another one of its leaders in Santiago de Cuba, José Daniel Ferrer, was imprisoned years ago and is now an Amnesty International "prisoner of conscience."¹⁰⁰ *Somos Más* (We are Many More) issued from young students who debated the premises of the government. Together with the independent journalists, such as Yoani Sánchez's and Reinaldo Escobar's *14yMedio*, they are now a voice inside Cuba. All are marginalized, derided, insulted, and isolated. Yet they have remained steady and defiant. Their presence, as well

⁹⁵ See generally DAGOBERTO VALDÉS-HERNÁNDEZ ET AL., *ÉTICA Y CÍVICA: APRENDIENDO A SER PERSONA Y A VIVIR EN SOCIEDAD* [ETHICS AND CIVICS: LEARNING TO BE A PERSON AND TO LIVE IN SOCIETY] (Ediciones Convivencia 2014); DAGOBERTO VALDÉS-HERNÁNDEZ, *RECONSTRUIR LA SOCIEDAD CIVIL: UN PROYECTO DE EDUCACIÓN CÍVICA, PLURALISMO, Y PARTICIPACIÓN PARA CUBA* [REBUILDING CIVIL SOCIETY: A CIVIC EDUCATION, PLURALISM, AND PARTICIPATION PROJECT FOR CUBA] (Konrad Adenauer Foundation 1997).

⁹⁶ OSWALDO PAYÁ, *LA NOCHE NO SERÁ ETERNA: PELIGROS Y ESPERANZAS PARA CUBA* [THE NIGHT WILL NOT BE ETERNAL: DANGERS AND HOPE FOR CUBA] 9, 19–20 (Editorial Hypermedia 2018) [hereinafter PAYÁ, *THE NIGHT WILL NOT BE ETERNAL*]; OSWALDO PAYÁ, *PROYECTO VARELA* [VARELA PROJECT] (Movimiento Cristiano Liberación 2001) [hereinafter PAYÁ, *VARELA PROJECT*].

⁹⁷ VLADIMIRO ROCA, RENÉ GÓMEZ-MANZANO, FÉLIX BONNE-CARCASÉS, & MARTA BEATRIZ ROQUE, *LA PATRIA ES DE TODOS* [THE COUNTRY BELONGS TO EVERYONE] (1997).

⁹⁸ PAYÁ, *VARELA PROJECT*, *supra* note 96.

⁹⁹ See generally PAYÁ, *THE NIGHT WILL NOT BE ETERNAL*, *supra* note 96 (referencing the title of the book).

¹⁰⁰ *Cuba: Prisoner of Conscience at Risk*, AMNESTY INT'L (Oct. 19, 2022), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr25/6130/2022/en/>.

as the recent demands from artists and intellectuals, continue to push the regime to enact serious reforms.¹⁰¹

Just a couple of weeks after the *Movimiento San Isidro* erupted, in their Christmas 2020 greeting to all Cubans, Cuba's new Cardinal—Juan de la Caridad García-Rodríguez—together with the two other Archbishops and nine Catholic bishops highlighted the suffering of the island's people. They underscored the suffering was due to an economic crisis, the pandemic of the COVID-19, and natural disasters—leading people to be fearful and anxious. At the same time, they stressed, this crisis gave everyone the opportunity to practice compassion and charity towards one another.¹⁰² The Cardinal and the bishops also underscored the need for a dialogue among all Cubans. As Christ's nativity is seen as the harbinger of good news, not mincing words, they itemized what would constitute the good news of the season for Cubans. Among these were: “Good news for Cubans would be that we should not have to search outside of our country for what we should be able to find inside; that we should not have to wait for those above us to give us what we could and should create ourselves from below”¹⁰³ and “Good news for Cubans would be that all blockades should cease—external and internal both—but, instead, to set free our people's creative initiative, to set free the productive forces and the laws that support our people's creative initiative, so they can play a leading role in their own life.”¹⁰⁴ Their call for a national dialogue and for both the domestic embargo of the government as well as the external embargo of the U.S. to end is a remarkably political statement on the part of the Catholic Church that was quite uninvolved in politics in the past. The present crisis has now turned the Church into a major political actor.

In our view, Cuba deserves to have a system of free elections, more than one political party, the expression of parliamentary conflicts and disagreements that we understand constitute the practice of democracy, and a civil society that is independent of government, as Vaclav Havel stressed—the power of the powerless.¹⁰⁵ To many Cubans, in his haste to restore relations between Cuba and the U.S., Obama did not ask enough from Raúl. Trump may have asked for too much. As always, the Cuban people are caught in the middle. They continue to suffer from the system and government under which they live, despite the efforts and the courage of so many dissidents and

¹⁰¹ See generally DIMAS CASTELLANOS, LA REVOLUCIÓN FRACASADA [THE FAILED REVOLUTION] (2017).

¹⁰² Conferencia de los Obispos Católicos de Cuba [Conference of Catholic Bishops of Cuba], Mensaje de Navidad de los Obispos de Cuba [Christmas Message from Cuba's Bishops] (Dec. 12, 2020).

¹⁰³ *Id.*

¹⁰⁴ *Id.*

¹⁰⁵ Vaclav Havel, *The Power of the Powerless*, in OPEN LETTERS: SELECTED WRITINGS 1965–1990, at 125 (Paul Wilson ed., 1991).

political prisoners. They also suffer from American sanctions, despite their wish to live as good neighbors. At present, the deep economic, political, and social crisis in the island, as well as the passage of several generations, have issued new political actors. In this new setting, the Church and the social protests of the artists and the youth may be able to issue an effective challenge as well as to open up a new road.