

**Cuba's Communist Party Leadership:  
Between Change and Rigidity, Reform and Repression**

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*Can Cuba's ruling Communist Party undertake reforms?* A reform agenda may start with a slogan made popular elsewhere in Latin America (*¡Que se vayan todos!*) – out with everyone in national leadership posts. In fact, the April 2021 Party Congress approximated that goal. All members of the Party's national Secretariat were replaced, as were half of the members of the Political Bureau and half of the key provincial officials (the First Party Secretaries). Eleven of the thirteen active-duty Generals serving on the Central Committee also departed, as did three out of five of all Central Committee members.

Leaving the Party's Political Bureau were President Raúl Castro, former Interior Minister Ramiro Valdés, and long-time Party Organization Secretary José Ramón Machado, among other notables who had ruled for decades. More typical had been the outcome of the 2016 Party Congress, when none such notables left, only one in ten of the “political” Generals was new to the Central Committee, and the majority of the Secretariat held on.

A reform agenda would also require greater leadership pluralism to prevent a small clique from undertaking all decisions. This, too, has been happening. In 2016, about a quarter of the ministers had also served on the Council of State, hence approving their own proposals. The 2019 Constitution brought to zero the overlap between the Council of Ministers and the Council of State. The 2021 Party Congress also reduced the overlap between the two Councils, on the one hand, and, on the other, the Party's Political Bureau and Central Committee.

In this century, greater demographic inclusion has been the rule as well, doubling the proportion of Afrodescendants in Council of State posts and bringing their share and that of

women on this Council closer to their respective shares of the population. The median age in elite institutions has fallen; new Central Committee members must be below age sixty.

*So, why the unprecedented nationwide protests in July 2021 – thousands of people protesting on the streets of three dozen cities across the provinces – and what was new in 2021?* Cuba's economic stagnation, in effect near zero growth for a decade, does not explain the July protests. Nor do U.S. economic sanctions in place for decades, notwithstanding Trump administration enhancements. Nor does the equally long authoritarian regime. Nor do the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. If so, the protests would have occurred well before.

In 2021, much changed. The economy stopped stagnating: It nosedived. Access to food became a severe problem. In January, the top leadership adopted a dramatic monetary and exchange rate reform. Inadequate planning unleashed a remarkably high inflation rate, followed by frequent policy “fixes” for specific problems, which contributed to renewed and ongoing policy uncertainties. A frightening Covid-19 spike in June vaulted Cuba from one of the more successful pandemic managers to one of the world's worst-afflicted countries. As the very hot Caribbean summer approached, in late June the electric power system broke down, propelling people out of their homes. Too much time following the April 2021 Party Congress focused on building new relationships and bonds of authority between the top leaders – career veterans but new to being at the top – and intermediate Party and government ranks. Decision making processes, never speedy, slowed.

*How did the nation's leaders respond?* The top leaders were surprised by, and unprepared for, the July protests. Their initial response was confused and contradictory. Early steps of conciliation and police restraint were followed by Special Troops and police repression (beatings, about a thousand arrests, summary trials) across the nation. Following explanations of

practical problems, especially by the prime minister, the official blame for the protests soon fell on “outside agitators,” such as U.S. agencies and Cuban diaspora members.

Following the July protests, which made significant use of social media, the government also has enacted new rules to criminalize actions through the Internet that may have an adverse “impact on Cuba’s prestige,” criticize the content of the authoritarian Constitution, seek to “compel public authorities to act or to fail to act” while performing their duties, or “damage the reputation” of government officials. The 2019 Constitution promised improvements in its charter of rights, but their implementation has been deferred, as these responses to the July protests make clear.

Moreover, the government has failed to make effective use of its own noncompetitive national elections. For example, at the last national single-party election in 2018, three quarters of the members of the Council of State would have been ineligible to serve on the Council if the electoral law had required having been the top vote getter in a municipality; more than half would have been ineligible to serve on the Council if the electoral law had mandated having finished in the top half of vote receivers in their respective provinces. The government failed to make effective use of its own authoritarian-regime electoral law to promote its more popular politicians into key national posts.

*Thus, can Cuba’s Communist Party undertake reforms beyond renewing and widening its top leadership circles?* Its most positive response following the July 2021 protests has been the formal and final approval of reforms to permit the freer growth of small- and medium-sized private sector businesses and cooperatives. Such reforms had been under consideration since the Fall 2010! The leadership may need a “win” before it adopts wider reforms and does so more quickly. The government chose to develop Cuba’s own vaccines against Covid-19. It claims to

have succeeded with two, not yet approved by the World Health Organization and pending independent peer review. Success with these vaccines could permit the reactivation of international tourism, even if not from the United States yet, reactivating the economy while also addressing the public health crisis. With such new breathing room, the pace of economic reform may accelerate.

The near-term challenge is simpler. Do government and Party leaders believe their own propaganda that the causes of the protests all lie outside the nation's boundaries? Shakespeare's Cassius, in *Julius Caesar* (I:2, 145) provides good advice: "The fault, Dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves..." The fault, dear President Miguel Díaz-Canel, lies not in the U.S. government or in southern Florida but in a leadership and policy regime in Cuba, both in desperate need of bold and swifter change.