Change in Cuba: How Citizens View Their Country's Future

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Civil Society Analysis

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Executive Summary

This report is based on in-depth interviews conducted in April 2008 with nearly 180 Cubans in five provinces. These interviews sought to assess how Cubans are coping with the recent transfer of presidential power and subsequent dynamics on the island.

The study indicates that recent reforms in Cuba have done little to improve the lives of ordinary citizens. Cubans still struggle to survive day to day—to feed their families and to find adequate housing. Moreover, recent reforms announced by Raúl Castro have generated little enthusiasm or hope for structural change in Cuba.

Cubans see little prospect for change, and even the prospect for change seems to give them more anxiety than hope. There is widespread fear that political change will bring crime and insecurity to Cuba. What little change Cubans have experienced, during the *Periodo Especial* in the 1990s, was for the worse. Despite Raúl Castro's launch of the *debate critico*, inviting open dialogue about the failures of the Revolution, many Cubans doubt that the government will effectively address public concerns.

Cubans say they feel incapable of organizing a popular response to government oppression. They are uninformed or misinformed about Cuba's democracy movement. The Catholic Church provides a small space for some cultural and social activities, but respondents did not see the Church stretching beyond this into a civil or political role. Young Cubans, while particularly disillusioned, are usually apathetic. The most common response to government injustice is to complain and conform.

The bleak outlook expressed by respondents has taken root over decades of government intimidation and propaganda. Despite the moribund environment, however, there is an indication that Cubans do desire deeper political freedoms. Respondents frequently named three reforms they say they want most, and two of those three are freedom of movement—not only outside the country but within the country as well—and freedom of expression. Still, most respondents in Freedom House's study expect that change—when it occurs—will come from within the Communist Party. Even then, Cubans anticipate that some officials may be reluctant to give up their current privileges by inviting further reform.

Even with the economic hardships and low expectations for positive change, not all Cubans are eager to leave the island. Many would like to travel abroad, but they are afraid that if they go away even for a short period of time, their homes will be taken away before they return. Though many plan to live in Cuba for the rest of their lives, the fear of change and the daily struggle to survive discourage most Cubans from trying to influence their country's future course.

To give Cubans greater confidence in political and economic change, they must see a compelling vision for Cuba's future, with opportunities for improvement in their daily lives. The findings of this study suggest a need for Cuba's democracy movement and other civil society actors to expand their outreach, to present a compelling vision for change, and to engage citizens to participate in civic life. Participation in civic activity can begin to give Cubans some sense of empowerment, to move them beyond their fatalistic attitudes, and to make them think of themselves as citizens, who can contribute to a better future for Cuba.

Introduction

Recent news has raised hopes for a transition from totalitarian rule to democracy in Cuba. The transfer of power from Fidel to Raúl Castro, and the government's decision to allow Cubans to purchase cell phones and enter tourist hotels, point to the possibility of significant economic and political change. Yet the pace and scope of change in Cuba remain uncertain, and little is known about the views of Cubans on the prospects for change.

Freedom House conducted extensive field research on the island in April 2008 to find out what Cubans think about the prospects for change in their country. This research explored three overarching questions:

1. Who do Cubans think is driving, or can drive, change in Cuba?
2. Do the reforms introduced by Raúl Castro's government amount to anything of consequence?
3. If these reforms fall short of their expectations, how will citizens respond?

The research was based on approximately 180 in-depth interviews conducted in five provinces. These interviews encompassed Cubans from a variety of backgrounds. They captured the range of opinion across Cuban society and identified common perceptions among citizens on the island. By publishing these findings, Freedom House hopes to provide a voice for ordinary Cubans whose opinions are seldom heard.[1]

Methodology

In April 2008,[2] Freedom House sent five field researchers to Cuba to conduct qualitative in-person interviews on topics related to Cuban society. The research took place during and immediately following small-scale changes introduced by Raúl Castro. Researchers were therefore able to explore immediate reactions to these changes from Cubans.

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[1] Very few independent surveys have been conducted in Cuba. A survey conducted by Solidaridad Española con Cuba in 2005 had 541 respondents in 13 of Cuba's 14 provinces. ("Primera encuesta de opinión pública en Cuba: 5 Diciembre 2005." http://www.solidaridadconcuba.com/noticias/encuesta.htm.) The Gallup Poll survey conducted in 2006 included 1,000 residents from Havana and Santiago. ("Just one in four urban Cubans satisfied with personal freedoms." December 18, 2006. http://www.gallup.com/poll/25915/Just-One-Four-Urban-Cubans-Satisfied-Personal-Freedoms.aspx.) A survey by the International Republican Institute in 2007 interviewed 584 respondents from all 14 provinces. ("Cuban Public Opinion Survey: September 5, 2007 - October 4, 2007." http://www.iri.org/lac/cuba/pdfs/2007-10-18-cuba.pdf.) IRI's follow-up survey in 2008 included 587 respondents from the 14 provinces. (Cuban Public Opinion Survey: March 14, 2008 - April 12, 2008. http://www.iri.org/lac/cuba/pdfs/2008%20June%205%20Survey%20of%20Cuban%20Public%20Opinion,%20March%2014-April%2012,%202008.pdf)

[2] Field research took place between March 28 and May 5, 2008.

Field research consisted of informal, semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire contained thirty-five, open-ended questions asked in a conversational style. The questions addressed broad themes covering different aspects of civic life in Cuba, including:

- expectations for change and views about the future;
- leadership in Cuba and the role of government actors;
- *debate critico;*[3]
- restrictions on Cuban society;
- the role of organized civil society groups and the Catholic Church.

Researchers visited five of Cuba's fourteen provinces: Ciudad de la Habana,[4] Villa Clara, Holguín, Camagüey, and Santiago de Cuba. Researchers travelled extensively within their respective provinces in order to capture views from a cross-section of respondents. These provinces span the diversity of the island's regions: east and west, coastal and interior, commercial and agricultural, urban and rural. (See Appendix 1 for more information on the provinces and interview locations.)

Researchers conducted approximately 180 interviews. Respondents were men and women between the ages of 18 to 75 with an average age of 37.[5] Approximately 32 percent of the interviewees were under 30 years old, 28 percent fell into the Guillermo Tell generation in their 30s,[6] 20 percent were age 40-49, and 19 percent were over 50. There were more male than female respondents,[7] but the sample was racially, socio-economically and geographically diverse.

The sample included white, mulatto and Afro-Cubans from diverse backgrounds. Respondents were married, single, divorced, widowed and celibate; some were gay and others were straight. Some were communist party loyalists, others were anti-regime, but most stood somewhere in between. Occupations included student, doctor, *cuentapropista*,[8] priest, artist, lawyer,

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[3] In his speech on July 26, 2007, Raúl Castro invited Cubans to enter into a dialogue with each other about the real problems in Cuba, known as the *debate critico*. (For information about the speeches referring to the *debate critico* look at http://www.granma.cubaweb.cu/2007/07/27/nacional/artic01.html, for the July 26 speech, and http://www.cubanews.ain.cu/2008/0224discursoraul.htm for the February 24 speech.)

[4] Cuba has two provinces containing the name "Habana." Ciudad de La Habana refers to the capital city and its surroundings. In this report we refer to it simply as "Havana." La Habana Province is a province south of the capital. When making the distinction between the two, this province is referred to as "Havana Province."

[5] The most recent census data available from Cuba (2002) puts the national average age at 35.1 years. Full results from the census can be found at: http://www.cubagob.cu/otras_info/censo/index.htm.

[6] The "Guillermo Tell" generation refers to Cubans age 30-40 who grew up with the severe hardships of the 1990s known as the Special Period. (See footnote on *Periodo Especial*.) The term comes from an album by singer-songwriter Carlos Varela called "Los Hijos de Guillermo Tell," or "The Children of William Tell." Varela's lyrics are often openly critical of the Cuban government.

[7] Freedom House researchers found it difficult to interview female respondents. This was the case with both male and female researchers. Researchers noted that many women they approached were more reluctant to talk than their male counterparts.

[8] *Cuentapropistas* is the term popularly used in Cuba to refer to the people active in the self-employed small-business sector legalized in the early 1990s. Despite their legalization, *cuentapropistas* have had to resort to both the formal and the informal economy to survive.

campesino,[9] administrator, teacher, party official, taxi driver, policeman, technician, street vendor, maid, pensioner and unemployed. Education levels varied: some respondents held doctorate degrees, some had no university education and still others had only minimal schooling. As is common in Cuba, many respondents participated in the informal economy. Some owned an illegal business, such as a *casa particular*.[10] Others had an official State-paid job—as a mechanic at a hospital, for instance—and made money "*a la izquierda"* (on the side, or literally "on the left") doing something else, like repairing cars.

Sampling presented a challenge for the researchers. Major factors affecting the sample included the availability of respondents and an appropriate location to conduct the interview. Since the interviews were conducted as conversations, researchers were careful to conduct interviews in locations conducive to private conversation, while maintaining an informal atmosphere. Researchers began the interview with questions about basic background information, such as where the respondent lived and worked, as well as information about family and interests. The conversation would then flow to other topics and the researcher would weave the questions from this study into the conversation, creating a natural flow from one topic to the next. As such, the questions were not always worded precisely the same way from one interview to the next. This approach nonetheless provided the most effective way to explore in depth the views of Cubans on a common set of questions (which are listed in Appendix 2).

Researchers took into account the challenges of obtaining truthful answers to questions about politics in a highly repressive environment. In a country full of *chivatos* (informants), Cubans are unaccustomed to expressing their views openly. Communist party members in particular are unlikely to admit any skepticism they may have about the government, while *jineteros* (hustlers) are apt to say anything they think will help them get money from a tourist. The researchers therefore did not take all the responses at face value but instead used their judgment to assess whether they were getting truthful answers.

Research Findings

Daily Concerns

Cubans say that they struggle to survive from day to day, so it is not surprising that their major concerns relate to bread-and-butter issues. "*Esto no es facil*," ("This is not easy") was a phrase heard repeatedly in interviews. Food, housing and the high cost of living were the biggest daily challenges named by respondents. Parents complained about healthcare for their children and students complained about the quality of their education, despite the fact that they are both provided by the government at no cost to citizens. Outside of economic concerns, few respondents named political issues as cause for concern. Only artists and intellectuals were concerned with the lack of civil and political rights. They cited their desire for freedom of

[9] *Campesino* means countryman, or peasant.
[10] A *casa particular* (literally, a private house) is a room in a family home. Cubans rent out extra rooms as either legally licensed or unlicensed *casas*. They offer tourists an alternative to the more expensive hotels and are often the only option in smaller towns and rural areas of the island.

movement, not just to and from Cuba, but within Cuba as well. Despite the daily struggles, many respondents said they were generally happy and few had a strong desire to leave the country.

When asked about problems and concerns, respondents were quick to talk about high costs and shortages—of food, transportation, electricity, housing, healthcare, education, and clothing. The most urgent concern for interviewees who have family and/or children is to provide them with food and clothing. Most interviewees complained that salaries are inadequate. Few respondents were able to meet their basic needs without supplementing their salary with economic activities and transactions in the informal economy. The dual currency system exacerbates the problem, said respondents, since Cubans are paid in *moneda nacional* but can only buy certain items in *pesos convertibles* at an exchange rate of roughly 28 to 1.

Respondents who have family members in need of special care underlined the need for medicines as the most urgent concern, along with proper nutrition, which would include meat and vitamins. However, vitamins and nutrient-rich foods are considered "luxury" items and are sold in stores that accept only *pesos convertibles*, making it difficult for ordinary Cubans to afford them, they said. A woman from Gibara (Holguín) said, "We never eat carrots or potatoes anymore…Health and education are free, but the rest is expensive." Beef is so scarce that it respondents said it is commonly referred to as *oro negro*, or black gold. Poor nutrition is contributing to poor health among Cubans, according to several respondents who were health professionals. The problem is particularly acute in the provinces where food shortages are widespread and "luxury" goods are even more expensive. Student doctors in Holguín mentioned the prevalence of anemia (caused by iron deficiency) in the province, and added that many are losing teeth from malnutrition.

Though healthcare is free, hospitals don't have most medicines. Many respondents said that the good doctors left the country as part of Fidel's army of doctors. While experienced doctors are sent abroad, hospitals in Cuba are staffed with recent graduates of medical school. This is especially true in rural areas and smaller provinces. "Bueno, no te mueres," ("Well, you won't die") replied one respondent. Care is usually better in the provincial capital, but one father from Holguín said he prefers to take his children all the way to Santiago when they have health problems. Getting to Santiago, however, is another challenge.

Transportation is another major issue on the minds of Cubans. Respondents said that transportation has improved since the *Periodo Especial,*[11] but that it is nevertheless terrible. Hitchhiking is the most common form of transportation in Cuba because public buses are extremely unreliable. Several respondents were actually found standing on the side of the road, waiting for a car to pass and pick them up. One respondent was a doctor found waiting outside of Camagüey; he travels 70km every day to get to the clinic where he works. He said he had no choice in where the government placed him, and as a result, he spends up to four hours each day commuting to work.

[11]With the fall of the USSR, Cuba's economy suffered tremendously. Fidel Castro announced that Cuba had entered a Special Period in a Time of Peace. *Periodo Especial* refers to these years in the 1990s during which Cubans experienced significant hardships from the sudden lack of Soviet subsidies and supplies.

For many respondents, housing is a serious concern. The lack of housing, combined with low purchasing power of ordinary Cubans, has created a serious housing crisis. Multiple families live in one apartment, often sharing one bathroom. "People have fewer children because of the economic stress," said one respondent in Holguín. According to several respondents, divorce rates are also high as a result of couples living in cramped quarters. One student in Santa Clara said that he had no hope of moving out of his parents' house. (See section below on Youth for more on this topic.) Still others live in poor-quality housing in crumbling structures or without access to proper sewage. A retired teacher living in Ranchuelo (Villa Clara) lives in a house where the roof barely serves as cover due to a gaping hole. She has been waiting six years to obtain permission and materials to repair the hole caused by a severe rainstorm.

Other basic needs are less urgent but also problematic. According to respondents, access to electricity improved in recent years; there are fewer *apagones* (black outs) since the *Periodo Especial*. However, it is still unavailable in many rural areas. For example, a farmer in Banes (Holguín province) has a refrigerator but no electricity. Land-line telephone service is also inadequate, especially in the rural parts of Cuba. Respondents complained that this hampers communication with family members now living abroad. In Holguín, for example, there are only seven new phone lines authorized this year for the district of Gibara. One interviewee, a local delegate for the Communist party, is struggling to get a public phone in her neighborhood outside Velasco. She has a car, but no telephone. The closest telephone line is nearly 6km away.

Students mentioned the lack of study materials—textbooks, manuals, professional periodicals and, above all, access to the Internet—as a primary concern. Medical students at the University of Camagüey complained that they often have no textbooks, and the books they do have are outdated and have to be shared with the entire class. Other respondents echoed the concern about lack of information and communication. Cubans are frustrated that they have access to only a few sources of information, restricted access to the Internet, and limited interaction with foreign visitors (They can be charged with "social harassment" just for speaking to foreigners).

As to concerns of a more political nature, very few respondents mentioned the lack of civil and political rights as a real concern for them. Those that did mention it included artists and intellectuals who worry about censorship and civil rights. Many of them are tired of the "Big Brother is watching you" feeling, especially when it comes to their artistic endeavors. One artist in Holguín explained that self-censorship is part of life as a Cuban artist, saying it is the only way to make a living and survive.

Freedom of movement, both within and outside Cuba, was another major concern. Many respondents expressed the desire to travel freely to and from Cuba, without fear of persecution if they want to return. One woman in Camagüey owns a house she inherited from her father. Though she wanted to visit family members living in Europe, she was afraid that the government would take possession of her home while she was away. She knew of others who had left and had this happen. Even though they received permission to go abroad for a short time, the government gave the house to another family who was already living comfortably in their new home.

Contrary to the widely-held impression that Cubans are eager to get out of Cuba, many respondents said they would never leave, even if they were given the opportunity. One interviewee, a *campesino* in Contramaestre (Camagüey), said he was completely satisfied with life because he ate better than most people and had more control over his decisions. It seems that Cubans who have a more comfortable lifestyle feel less inclined to leave. Leaving means losing

Migration, Housing and Social Tension in Holguín Province

A few years ago, the government closed many sugar factories in the eastern regions of the country. Several of the factories located in rural areas of Holguín were no longer making a profit. Workers who were laid-off had few professional alternatives, but the government took responsibility for them and placed many into education programs or early retirement. Academic institutions began opening in rural areas to train—or according to one respondent, keep busy—the many people laid-off.

Whether as students or retirees, the income of locals decreased significantly, triggering migration to urban centers. People move to the cities to escape the growing poverty of rural areas. A professor in Holguín declared, "People migrate because of economic stress, not because of political oppression. People leave to make a living." At Playa Blanca, for instance, one respondent and his wife are trying to migrate from their home in search of a better life in Holguín (city) where education and healthcare are better, and there are more work opportunities.

As a result of migration to urban areas, there is a growing "floating" population, without papers or housing, which places increased stress on housing infrastructure. Migrants often create new makeshift neighborhoods as a solution to the disorganized and illegal migration. One of these "illegal" neighborhoods was Nuevo Amanecer, a shanty town on the outskirts of Holguín inhabited mostly by people from the countryside. Around 2000 people, or 500 families, lived there.

The reaction from the provincial government was aggressive. It destroyed this makeshift neighborhood in the context of the *Proyecto Imagen*, a governmental program intended to beautify the city and attract tourism. Without warning, local authorities came in with bulldozers and razed all the houses. Officials did not provide compensation or offer to relocate the former residents of Nuevo Amanecer. What had been a temporary solution to the housing problem now left hundreds of families in the streets.

According to one young respondent, intolerance towards poor, rural, and marginalized populations always existed in Holguín, but racism is increasing as a direct result of rural to urban migration. There is a stark divide between the (mostly white) city dwellers and the (largely Afro-Cuban and mulatto) rural migrants, and city residents increasingly view rural workers as the source of problems in their city.

everything to start over in a new place and many Cubans, it appears, are not willing to take the risk.

When asked what they like most about life in Cuba, respondents mentioned the "*sensación de seguridad que se siente en las calles*" ("the sense of security you feel in the streets") and low crime rates. Despite the significant problems Cubans encounter on a daily basis, most respondents said they were generally happy. One person said that she was very happy and wouldn't change anything in Cuba. A party member, this woman strongly supports communism and Fidel Castro; she even divorced her husband when he threatened to leave the country.

Overall, Cubans are primarily concerned with being able to provide the basic goods required for their families to survive every day. Food, shelter, and clothing are primary concerns, with healthcare, transportation and other public services also cause for concern. The long list of challenges clearly illustrates the communist economic system's failure to address the day-to-day needs of Cuban people.

Restrictions on Society

The announcement of small-scale reforms in Cuba prompted international speculation that perhaps Raul would begin lifting some of the restrictions on Cuban society put in place by his brother Fidel. Most respondents said they did not feel freer under Raul than they did while Fidel was President. Despite the talk of reforms, no respondent felt the changes would lead to subsequent significant increases in the space for private businesses to operate. As for the possibility of increased tolerance of independent groups, such as political parties and business associations, respondents unanimously believed that Raúl would never permit them. Referring to political parties, a young Afro-Cuban from Centro Habana said, "The Castro brothers have a lot of experience creating a revolution, and they will do everything to prevent others from doing the same thing to them."

In Havana, Villa Clara and Holguín, most respondents said that tolerance of the *bolsa negra* (black market) and *cuentapropistas* has not increased under Raúl. Respondents running unlicensed businesses still operate in fear of severe fines or hefty bribes if detected by authorities. *Cuentapropistas* interviewed complained that the government continues to increase the taxes they must pay, regardless of the amount of profit they make. One woman in Santa Clara grumbled about not being allowed to run more than one business; as soon as she started renting out her extra bedroom, she was forced to shut down a popular cosmetics business she ran out of her home. A waiter at a *paladar*[12] in Havana said that if the government were more tolerant, the owner of the *paladar* would have permission to increase the number of tables in his restaurant.

Camagüey respondents differed, saying that Raúl had no choice but to accept greater leniency toward both entrepreneurs and the black market. One young man said, "Raúl Castro differs from

[12] *Paladares*—from the word meaning "palate"—are private restaurants, often run out of a Cuban's home. The government first permitted them in 1994 to help resolve the food crisis during the *Periodo Especial*.

his brother because he is tolerant of cockfights and has a stable of prize-winning *gallos*." Interviewees in Santiago distinguished between the black market and private enterprise. In their view, tolerance towards *cuentapropistas* has not increased, but that the *bolsa negra* enjoyed more flexibility. Respondents cited the sheer size of the informal economy and its vital function within Cuban society as potential reasons for the increased tolerance.

There are several restrictions that interviewees cited as unique to Cuba, and therefore, "normal human beings," as one respondent put it, "cannot understand them." These restrictions include bans on cultivating potatoes and slaughtering cattle. One respondent confirmed that, "In Cuba, you receive the same jail term for slaughtering a cow as you do for killing a man. But if you slaughter two cows, that will cost you more than committing homicide." A mechanic interviewed in Havana lamented, "The bans in Cuba are illogical and this frustrates people. The logic ends where Cuba begins." He added, "One has to be very strong psychologically to cope with life in Cuba."

Even with small economic reforms, some respondents felt there was no change between Fidel and Raul in tolerance within Cuban society. Respondents from different parts of Cuba disagreed as to whether there has been more opening for black market merchants and *cuentapropistas* since Raul was named President. Still, many restrictions continue to burden Cubans as they look for ways to provide for their families.

Debate Critico

Raul Castro made international headlines when he called for Cubans to enter into a dialogue with each other about the real problems in Cuba in his speech on July 26, 2007.[13] However, field research shows that the process of the *debate critico* was inconsistent and excluded many Cubans. Several respondents, mostly from the provinces, had not even heard of the initiative, and very few people knew it as the "*debate critico*." Those who participated said they were afraid to reveal their true frustrations. Others, who did not play a part, said they were glad they did not have to risk sharing their opinions.

In Havana, all interviewees knew about Raúl's initiative to discuss current problems in Cuban society, though most were not familiar with the term *debate critico*. Several people mentioned the incident where several university students challenged the Vice President of the National Assembly, Ricardo Alarcón, on government policies as the only public discussion of social and economic problems.[14] Two respondents mentioned that *reuniones* took place in other

[13] For information about the speech, log on to http://www.granma.cubaweb.cu/2007/07/27/nacional/artic01.html.
[14] This incident is known as the UCI students video, since it involved students from the University of Information Sciences (Universidad de Ciencias Informáticas) or UCI. Cubaencuentro. "Los estudiantes de la UCI aparecen en televisión." 13 Febrero 2008. http://www.cubaencuentro.com/es/cuba/noticias/los-estudiantes-de-la-uci-aparecen-en-la-television-68138/%28gnews%29/1202899320. Cubaencuentro. "Alarcón califica de 'pintoresco alboroto' la repercusión de su debate con estudiantes." 11 marzo 2008. http://www.cubaencuentro.com/es/cuba/noticias/alarcon-califica-de-pintoresco-alboroto-la-repercusion-de-su-debate-con-estudiantes-73306.

organizations as well, but participants in these discussions were warned that they could only ask questions previously vetted by their boss, or *responsable*.

In Camagüey and Villa Clara, the majority of respondents knew about Raúl's speech calling for a discussion of socialism's flaws, though no one seemed to know the details or when it took place. Most judged it to be a limited but positive opportunity to talk about their concerns. Many people had participated in such debates as part of group dialogues, some during *peñas deportivas* of dominoes, and other activities in the workplace and at universities. A few individuals from Camagüey recalled writing and sending in comments about what changes Cuba should undertake, but none had received a response. A worker at the state-owned electric company in Santa Clara recounted the recent survey conducted in her workplace. She said that all employees submitted a list of concerns, but the lack of anonymity contributed to self-censorship.

Responses from Holguín and Santiago varied greatly. Very few people in Holguín reacted to the question at all, and only some in Santiago remembered Raúl's speech. One intellectual in Holguín was optimistic about the call for debate, even if it was only an invitation for limited change within the Communist Party. Several artists in Santiago mentioned the annual meeting of the national artists union (*Unión Nacional de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba*, or UNEAC), citing open debates at a recent meeting as a sign of public criticism of economic and cultural issues.

According to reports from researchers, Cubans living in Havana were most familiar with Raul's speech, and those living in the provinces less so. While some respondents viewed the *debate critico* as a positive move by the government, others viewed it with skepticism. No one expected to see a direct response from Raúl based on the conversations and surveys conducted as part of it. Moreover, many respondents affirmed that it would not lead to any significant change.

Cuba's New Leadership

Respondents see Raúl as a "man of action," compared to Fidel. Cubans remember Raúl as the executioner—both literally and figuratively—during the early years of the Revolution. They say that while Fidel made prolific speeches to the Cuban public, Raúl worked quietly behind the scenes. The role of Fidel Castro now seems to be fading to the background. Respondents doubted that he plays much of an advisory role since they think Raúl is answering to his fellow military officers. One respondent from Havana said it plainly. "Fidel does not count," he declared. In fact, few respondents spoke of their former President.

At the time of this field research, the government announced several reforms allowing Cubans to purchase goods previously banned, and ending some austere policies, such as the prohibition of locals to enter tourist hotels. Researchers questioned interviewees about the credibility of the reform process initiated by Raúl, and the responses were split. Many respondents said Raúl implemented these changes in order to get support from the international community. However there were others who felt that Raúl was genuinely interested in improving their lives.

According to a *cuentapropista* in Santa Clara, "More Cubans are *fidelistas* than *comunistas*," suggesting that Raúl's political agenda does not have the same popular support as his brother did.

Researchers found that, among some respondents, there was a sense of unconditional faith in the benevolence of their leaders. Some interviewees honestly believed that Raúl and his fellow officials were actively looking for solutions to their suffering. If they had not found a solution, respondents took this to mean that a solution did not exist at the moment. These respondents said that as soon as the government finds a solution that will work, they would implement it.

It seems that Raul Castro is still building the image he wants Cubans—and the rest of the world—to have of him. Even if he is no longer head of Cuba's Armed Forces, Cubans still think of him as a decisive military man. Despite having a different style than his more charismatic brother, Cubans certainly acknowledged Raul as the new leading man.

Structural Changes

Though announcements of reforms made headlines in international newspapers, few interviewees responded positively when asked about them. Some Cubans—especially outside the capital—had not even heard about some of the reforms, particularly those related to agriculture. Interviewees in the provinces said they heard rumors of reforms but have not seen any changes in their town or province. Even if the rumors are true, they said, reforms announced at the national level will take at least six to twelve months to reach local communities. Some even mentioned the possibility that local bureaucrats may try to obstruct implementation of these changes, trying to reap all the benefits for themselves. Despite the recent announcements, Cubans are not getting the reforms they really want: freedom of movement, a single currency and freedom of expression. The oldest respondent, a man from Santiago, explained it as, "*Cambiar para que todo siga igual*." ("Change so that everything stays the same.")

Respondents frequently characterized the reforms as small, useless, meaningless, cosmetic, and are only a "*curita*," or band-aid. One respondent described the changes as "Communism Lite," saying that he in no way considered them structural. Though little time has passed since the first reforms were announced, many respondents said they have little or no trust that changes were a result of the government's genuine interest in improving people's lives. Most said they were skeptical because the reforms did not affect them personally. One young student said it didn't matter if she is now permitted to buy a mobile phone because she still cannot afford one.

A custodian in Havana put it plainly to one of the researchers; "Can you afford a Mercedes on your salary? Now just imagine that your government gives you the right to buy a Mercedes. The same is true with giving me permission to pay $80 for one night in a hotel, with my monthly salary of $14." In spite of this man's criticism, many respondents felt that lifting the prohibition on tourist hotels was the most significant of the recent reforms.

Interviewees familiar with agricultural reforms argued for the need to expand private agriculture, claiming that independent farms are more productive than the state-owned farms. A woman whose family owns a private farm near Remedios (Villa Clara) said the reforms are "a positive gesture towards a sector that the government must tolerate given the low productivity of state farms." However, in Camagüey, a province that relies heavily on agriculture, none of the respondents—including farmers—knew about the deregulation of farm tools. The

announcement of this particular reform touted that new stores would open in rural areas to sell the tools, but Camagüeyanos had not seen these new stores and did not expect to see any within the next six months.

What Cubans Really Want

When asked what kinds of reforms they most wanted, respondents frequently named three: freedom of movement, a single currency system, and freedom of expression. Although most respondents acknowledged they would not have the means to travel, even if allowed, they very much want this right. One young woman from Vedado (Havana) asserted, "It is better to have the right to do something than not to have it at all."

Several respondents stated that the dual currency accentuates inequalities and is an increasing source of social tension. Cubans are tired of getting paid in *moneda nacional* and paying for many necessities in *pesos convertibles*. A worker at the military farm in Holguín province complained about the inequality between ordinary Cubans and Cubans working in tourism because of their access to more goods and services. He and another man selling *guarapo*[15] on a dirt road said that taxi drivers and tour guides want to keep the tourists for themselves, limiting the interaction between foreigners (with convertible pesos) and locals (without). Many respondents feel that returning to a single currency would help resolve many of their daily struggles.

A Jehovah's Witness from Havana claimed that freedom of speech is important as well. "It is necessary for people to have freedom of opinion and freedom of expression," he said. Respondents said that, if implemented, these reforms would indicate serious structural change in Cuban society. "Giving freedom of expression would mean real change," declared a young student in Havana. Rumors of reforms, however, are not enough to convince the Cuban people that the government will be making significant changes in the near future.

Timeline

After discussing the kinds of reforms respondents desire, researchers asked them to indicate a timeline within which they anticipate significant changes will occur. Though responses varied slightly, none were optimistic about the near future. Reports from researchers suggest that present concerns are too critical for many Cubans to speculate or plan for the future. Only one respondent said he has a feeling that serious reforms are being planned. He said, however, that since the political process in Cuba is not transparent, he could not say what these reforms might be.

In Havana, Villa Clara, and Holguín, respondents thought that things would start to change two years from now. In Santiago, on the other hand, the majority of respondents did not have a timeline in mind. They said they were waiting for the next major speech on July 26, 2008 for the government to announce any future potential changes. According to several Santiagüeros,

[15] *Guarapo* is the term for the juice of a sugar cane. In Cuba, it is often served cold with a squeeze of lemon.

current reforms have appeared to Cubans in an arbitrary way which keeps them guessing as to what is next.

Respondents in Camagüey were more pessimistic, expecting major change to occur only for Cuba's next generation. Most stated that they would be waiting the rest of their lives for meaningful change to take place. When asked why, respondents said that allowing purchases of petty gadgets indicates a pace that would require a lifetime to generate significant transformation.

Throughout the island respondents cited additional reasons for the slow timeline, acknowledging that many people benefit from the current system. Ordinary Cubans and government officials alike, they said, would probably resist change in order to preserve the system and hold on to these benefits. Even after Raúl's death, some speculated that his successor and other government officials would hesitate to implement reforms for fear they would lose the privileges they now enjoy. These "privileges" range from access to good quality food and housing for local authorities, to living in nice villas and driving fancy cars for higher level officials.

When asked what respondents would do if reforms do not take place within the next few years, the answer was "nothing." As long as it was not more difficult than the *Periodo Especial*, they would simply conform. Those who could not conform any longer would leave. Some want to leave even if reforms take place. One young man from Holguín, who has already attempted three escapes, said, "There will always be more opportunities abroad than in Cuba."

State Institutions

According to respondents throughout the island, the *Comité de Defensa de la Revolución* (Committee for the Defense of the Revolution, or CDR) holds the most power in their local communities or provinces. Respondents confirmed that local agencies simply carry out the decisions made by national leaders. Interviewees also said their local governments are highly corrupt, and they do not trust their provincial representatives. A man from Holguín complained, *"Cada uno hace lo suyo y ya."* ("Each one does his own thing.")

The CDR has substantial power within the local community and, as a result, has a significant impact on the lives of Cubans, according to most respondents.[16] Access to many material goods and most opportunities for upward social mobility—matters of great concern to most Cubans—depend on good relations with the local CDR. One young man from Havana said he needed a recommendation from his CDR in order get a job as a tour guide. Although he says he is well-qualified and speaks fluent Italian, his ability to get this higher-paying job is entirely dependent on the opinion of the CDR officials in his neighborhood.

[16]Neighborhood watch groups called Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs) play an essential role in "maintaining the Revolution." CDRs keep an eye on the population, watching out for any signs of anti-revolutionary behavior or activity. They are pervasive with more than 15,000 CDRs in Havana and over 100,000 throughout the country.

The only exception to this view came from respondents in Villa Clara province. Several respondents discounted the importance of the CDRs, referring to their meetings merely as opportunities to gossip about neighbors. In Ranchuelo, a popular producer of *dulce de guayaba* (a sweet treat made from guava) is unlicensed but has avoided prosecution. According to several townspeople, even the local government officials do not want their children to go without the sweet paste.

In Villa Clara, respondents credited the *Partido Comunista de Cuba* (Cuban Communist Party or PCC) as the organization that holds real power. Many people in Villa Clara viewed as the center of local decision-making in the province. Interviewees said it was inconceivable that the municipal or provincial leadership would reject a proposal supported by the PCC, since party members are obliged to follow party directives. Respondents in Remedios, a small town in northern Villa Clara province, named the notary public as the most important local official, since she has the power to witness and certify all important documents, from marriages to wills.

Respondents throughout the island credited the Police with possessing significant authority. Others mentioned organizations created by the Communist Party, such as the women's organization, *Federación de Mujeres Cubanas* (FMC), the students federation, *Federación Estudiantil Universitaria* (FEU), and the youth arm of the PCC, *Unión Juveníl Comunista* (UJC). Though some respondents, including two members of the FMC, claimed that these organizations "do nothing," membership affords opportunities otherwise difficult to gain.

Apart from formal organizations created by the government, the network of informants also has a significant impact on the lives of Cubans. A physical education teacher in Havana said that "not only these organizations, but the people themselves" are a powerful group. Neighbors watch each other and report to authorities. He added, "Fidel has created such a [complex] system, that we cannot trust each other. For instance, State Security tells me that I am their *persona de confianza* and that I should watch my neighbor and report on him. At the same time they tell my neighbor that he is their *persona de confianza* and he should watch me and report to the police."

Based on the interviews, the CDRs generally remain the most powerful State institution at the local level. The police, the PCC, and especially the informal networks of neighborhood informants also possess significant influence in the minds of many Cubans. Through these institutions, the Cuban government continues to maintain a strong hold on the lives of its citizens.

Youth

Cuban youth are the most disillusioned segment of the population. Respondents under age 30 expressed a heightened sense of frustration citing persistent economic concerns and lack of opportunities for the future. Having grown up during the *Periodo Especial*, they feel the Revolution has failed to meet basic expectations and deliver an egalitarian society as promised. Many young Cubans are unmotivated to work or study, having seen that the benefits of their parents' hard work and higher education are minimal at best. Maintaining a social life can be difficult for Cuba's youth given crammed living quarters and few choices for free time activities.

Youth are also admittedly apathetic to political issues, and do not see themselves as capable of organizing a movement for change.

According to one respondent, the difficulties of growing up during the Special Period have had a grave impact on some Cuban youth. A priest in the provinces said that he noticed the high demand for prescription drugs like Valium and anti-depressants among youth in his community. A doctor working in a small town in Camagüey described extensive mental health problems among youth in her community, including suicide, excessive drinking and drug abuse. She said that a lot of teenage girls participate in sex tourism. She added that many sex workers are desperate to leave Cuba, either marrying foreign lovers or escaping as *balseros*, never mind the potential consequences.[17]

One respondent defended young Cubans, saying that they are simply unwilling to work in jobs with no incentives. He mentioned the many unfilled job openings in his state agency in Camagüey inspecting hotels, factories and firms. Twenty-somethings do not want these jobs since many young people cannot tolerate the older hard-line party members that would serve as their supervisors.

Youth and Education in Cuba

Young Cubans are admittedly less interested in attending school as well. Many said they watch their highly-educated parents earn less than store-clerks. In addition, access to education is based on contacts with State and Communist Party officials, not on merit, according to several students. As a result, students prefer to work in the tourist industry or try to leave Cuba.

Even though education in Cuba is free, many respondents said it comes at a social cost to many young people. Students of medicine at the University in Camagüey spoke at length about their requirement to work several years after finishing school as part of their social obligation to the government for paying for their education.

A young man in Villa Clara shared his experience. He studied industrial engineering but quickly tired of the low salary and long hours required during his two years of "social service." He quit before finishing his social service to establish his own business of repairing glasses, for which he needed to downplay his education in order to even get the business license. At the same time he runs an unauthorized taxi service with an illegally-purchased car. He said he has since surpassed the income of doctors in Cuba, who receive high salaries from the State.

Instead of working towards a degree, Cuban youth are more interested in doing things that would afford them a way out. A doctor in Camagüey suggested that young people have done a cost-benefit analysis of their future and decided not to invest time and energy in anything that might bind them to the island. With only one exception, all respondents under age 30 expressed a desire to leave the country. The exception was a young man from Villa Clara who declared his

[17] A *balsero* is a rafter. In the Cuban context it refers to someone who has left Cuba (successfully or unsuccessfully) using a raft or other similar floating device.

undying loyalty to the Communist Party. All others wished they had the means to pursue opportunities abroad.

Social Life for Young Cubans

The housing situation in Cuba impacts the social patterns of youth on the island. Several family members usually live together, so there is little to no privacy. As a result, young people often resort to having sex in public places. Many also marry at a young age as a way to get out of cramped living quarters. But since most young people—and in fact many Cubans in general—cannot afford a place of their own, couples are forced to stay or move in with their families. With an additional person sharing the space, living quarters are even more cramped and privacy is almost non-existent.

Lack of privacy, together with economic stress, accentuates strains in family relationships. According to many respondents, this is the main reason for the high divorce rate in Cuba. The problem is pervasive and will likely impact the next generation of Cubans who grow up largely in single-parent homes. One respondent recounted that she and her husband attended a parent-teacher meeting at her son's school. Of the 25 students, her son was the only one who lived in a household with both parents. She was also convinced that the Cuban census hides accurate statistics on the number of female heads of household or does not even collect such data due to the negative implications for the image of Cuban socialism.

Several young people interviewed mentioned a dearth of places to hang out with friends. There are some options, such as bars or nightclubs. In Santa Clara, for instance, respondents mentioned Club Mejunje, a nightclub where young people gather that also serves as a hub for the young artist community in the city. The club hosts nightly concerts, plays, and poetry readings, and offers the only official gay night on Saturdays. However, according to a young girl from Villa Clara, the entrance fee for Mejunje—like other similar venues in Cuba—must be paid in *pesos convertibles*, making it unaffordable for her and her friends. According to the girl, she and her friends look to the Church to provide a network for social activities, where they can attend social gatherings at little to no cost. (See section below on Catholic Church.) Still, there are few options and many respondents said they simply gather with their friends in the street or in a park.

Youth and Politics

Several young respondents declared that they share many of the Revolution's values, such as social justice, free education and healthcare, and social security. However, when asked whether they support other values, such as freedom of expression and freedom of movement, these respondents openly criticized the general lack of freedom afforded by the revolutionary government.

Most respondents, and all young people interviewed, knew about the video showing the debate between university students and Vice President Alarcón (known as the UCI students video). While they said they were encouraged by the students' ability to openly challenge a high-level government official, they did not believe that Cuban youth were capable of any organized movement against the regime.

One respondent in Havana offered an explanation saying that the government is quick to respond to any potential threat posed by a young person. "As soon as the authorities identify a student to be socially active, or someone that can cause problems in the long run, they offer him privileges, promote him in the University Students' Federation (FEU) and give him a chance to travel abroad. Then this student becomes a servant of the government. This is how [the government] incorporates smart and active young people in the elite and prevents the creation of dissident leaders."

Many young people complained about excessive surveillance through police monitoring and intimidation, and excessive bureaucratic processes. A young poet in Holguín said he experiences regular monitoring and repeated menacing by authorities. Another group of young people said they were harassed by police forces the night before the interview. Some speculated that Raúl increased the monitoring of young people in particular to keep anti-revolutionary sentiment at bay during his first few months as the new President.

All told, Cuban youth have few opportunities and even fewer incentives to work hard in school or in a career. Growing up during some of Cuba's toughest economic times has discouraged and depressed them. As a result, they say they see little potential for their future, and show few signs that they want to actively participate in changing the current situation in Cuba.

The Catholic Church

Many respondents viewed the Catholic Church as a symbol of contained, discrete and conservative dissent in Cuba. The Church expresses some difference in opinion to the government, but always within limits, said respondents. However, participants in the Freedom House study overwhelmingly stated that the Catholic Church does not play a role in building civil society, nor will it have any influence on the future path for Cuba. According to several respondents, religion helps many Cubans deal with the hardships of life on the island, and the Church's role is limited to social and cultural activities in local communities.

Cubans interviewed for this study have diverse religious beliefs. Although many are Catholic, there are followers of Santeria,[18] as well as Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, and a few self-proclaimed atheists. Many practice a mix of Catholicism and Santeria. This is typical of Cubans who, according to respondents, practice some aspects of Santeria to invoke fortune in their daily lives. Beliefs varied by province. Nearly half the respondents in Holguín, Villa Clara and Camagüey classified themselves as *creyentes*, or believers, while all but one respondent in Havana, and very few respondents in Santiago, said they practice some form of religion. The extent of their practice varied greatly. Some are devout and attend church regularly and include a priest in Santiago and a Protestant minister in Camagüey. Others rarely attend church services but practice at home as an extension of family traditions.

[18] *Santeria* (saint worship) is a mixture of Catholicism and the religion of African Yoruba tribes called *Lucumí*.

Nearly all respondents felt the Church's primary concern was to keep diplomatic relations with the government, which could be because gatherings of more than three people, even for religious purposes, must be approved by the authorities. Several interviewees affirmed that all churches in Cuba—Catholic, Methodist, Evangelical, Jehovah's Witness and Baptist—must maintain good relationships with local authorities in order to preserve their right to bring together large groups of people. One priest explained that, whenever a priest becomes a nuisance to authorities, he is press to move to another province.

Most people interviewed were supportive of the Church's presence and particularly appreciate its cultural and social role. Respondents in Holguín and Villa Clara acknowledged the importance of social work many churches perform in their communities. Santa Teresita in Santiago, for example, hosts meetings for recovering alcoholics and has a program for children with Down Syndrome.

For young people, the Church offers an opportunity to participate in organized activities independent of the government. A recent university graduate interviewed in Santa Clara regularly participates in church-sponsored social events and charity work. Most of these activities are funded by the Church and include an annual weekend trip. This represents the principal social outlet for this young woman living on a state salary and therefore unable to afford the 5 CUC entrance fee at the *discoteca* in downtown Santa Clara.

Churches also offer a spiritual message that is especially compelling when daily life presents great difficulties. One *casa particular* owner in Camagüey suggested that attending church helps him to achieve some acceptance of his difficult situation. This sentiment was echoed by others in provinces like Camagüey, Holguín and Villa Clara, where life for many is significantly more difficult than in the larger cities of Havana and Santiago.

Overall it appears that the Catholic Church as an institution does not play a major role in the lives of Cubans, neither politically nor religiously. Faith in Cuba, it seems, is either passed on as part of family traditions or is invoked in order for ordinary Cubans to deal with the hardships of daily life. Outside of community social work projects, none of the respondents felt that churches have the potential to effect change at a local or national level. Though it is not viewed as a center for opposition to the government, the Catholic Church commands respect as an autonomous actor.

Dissident and Human Rights Groups

Many people outside Cuba view dissidents and human rights activists on the island as the only hope for a future transition to democracy on the island. However, on the whole, respondents displayed very little familiarity with such groups. Based on the interviews, ordinary Cubans are not hearing from the democracy movement on the island, and often believe the government's propaganda about them. Though many were aware of their existence, only a few interviewees could name any of the groups or their initiatives, and no one viewed them as an alternative to the current regime.

Several people interviewed directly criticized dissident groups. A young man in Havana characterized these groups as "trumpets of Cubans exiled to Miami," and felt they were helping the exiles to return and take over the country. Many viewed dissidence as a form of business providing a source of income for people. A *casa particular* owner in Santa Clara argued that dissidents are motivated by economic advantages that foreign funding provides.

"Few use the term 'human rights' or 'dissidents,'" said one respondent in Santa Cruz del Sur. "Those in the know will not use [the terms] and those who do not know do not understand [the terms] and associate them with saboteurs and counterrevolutionaries." Most of the interviewees simply discounted their impact or admitted ignorance of their work. A few said it was impossible to organize any kind of group or association outside the regime and denied the existence of such groups. One respondent even claimed that Cuba has no political prisoners.

Only one respondent, an Afro-Cuban barman in Santa Clara, openly praised dissidents for "fighting for their rights." He acknowledged the considerable risk these dissidents face both for themselves and their families. However, he did not feel that their efforts provided Cuba with any opportunities for change at a local level.

Researchers also asked respondents what dissident groups need to do in order to receive their support. Few people had answers, since openly supporting a group not sanctioned by the government is illegal and dangerous. Others suggested that perhaps with more information about the groups' aims and activities, they might be able to decide whether to support them, albeit without participating themselves. According to two young men from Havana, this is near impossible, since dissidents and human rights groups do not have access to the media. Lack of access to media, they said, is a major obstacle for these groups in securing widespread popular support.

Dissident and human rights activists seem to be most active and visible in Havana, since respondents in the capital were more familiar with the topic than people in the provinces. One man in Alamar (Havana) recalled that there were some dissidents until the end of the 1990s or early 2000s, but that they were all imprisoned in a single police operation. Students interviewed in Havana were in fact the only respondents to refer to a group by name. Surprisingly, they even mentioned the sit-in of the *Damas de Blanco* in Havana on April 21, which happened only a few days before the interview.

According to reports from researchers, there may be some active human rights activists and dissident networks in a few of the provinces. Some respondents in Camagüey mentioned that there is a network of activists, although they said it was based partly on money from the U.S. Interests Section in Havana and was infiltrated by the State police. Respondents in Holguín admitted that dissidence in the province is smaller, less coordinated and less effective compared to that in Havana.

Based on the responses, dissident groups are little known or are misunderstood by ordinary Cubans. Most Cubans either do not know who the activists are or what they are doing, or they associate dissidents with U.S. government efforts to bring democracy to the island. Other

Cubans—though fewer in number—are familiar with and supportive of some dissident groups. Regardless, calls to join the democracy movement appear to fall on deaf ears, because, according to respondents, Cubans do not hear the calls, and they are not willing to participate.

Response to Abuses

Dissidents and human rights activists openly oppose the regime, but Freedom House wanted to gauge the potential for a popular response from ordinary Cubans. Researchers asked what respondents would do if they personally were a victim of a *desalojo* (eviction), *acto de repudio*,[19] or other government abuse. As if speaking for most respondents, one woman replied, "There is nothing you can do." Others named emigration as the ultimate form of protest.

"You can only complain," said respondents throughout the island. And even then, they said, you can only do so "within limits." According to respondents, this means you can only complain as far as it is acceptable to the party, the establishment and the institutions of communism in Cuba. A few people quoted a famous piece of government propaganda: "*Dentro del partido: todo. Contra: nada.*" ("Within the party: everything. Against: nothing.")

Several respondents shared stories of *desalojos*, or evictions, which are more common as authorities clear tenants from a building or an entire neighborhood to make room for something—or someone. One man's family was transferred from his home in Habana Vieja to Alamar, a poorer neighborhood in the *municipio* of Habana del Este. The authorities told all the tenants in his apartment complex that they would get new apartments in newly-built apartment blocks. The new apartments were poorly constructed. The old apartment, on the other hand, is likely to be renovated into a new tourist hotel. Instead of protesting, he and his neighbors complied with the directive because they did not want to make the situation worse. Waiting for an appeal to local authorities would have certainly meant eviction by force and, perhaps, no offer of new housing.

A few people in Camagüey province said they had personally suffered *actos de repudio*. When asked how they reacted to these acts, respondents simply answered with "*conformar*," meaning to conform. "Everyone has to conform…Conform is what we do here," declared a woman from Santa Cruz del Sur. Other than leaving Cuba, respondents overwhelmingly stated that they have few options to respond to perceived abuses. No one ever mentioned contacting a police officer, a lawyer or human rights activist if an event would occur.

Another option is quiet acceptance. A perfect illustration of this came from stories in Holguín where the government ordered the destruction of an entire neighborhood. People in Holguín were not able to prevent it, nor did they complain. Even years later, Cubans do not know how to respond. Instead, many people simply accept it without question.

[19] *Actos de repudio* are state-sponsored public attacks on citizens exhibiting counterrevolutionary behavior and are intended to counter civil disobedience. The State often assembles a group of neighbors or other community members to carry out the attacks, usually against dissidents.

When asked about the possibility of a public protest, many respondents were perplexed and did not know how to answer. One researcher was asked, in response, whether she understood how Cuba worked. A woman from Holguín said plainly that there is too much distrust for people to collaborate with each other in a meaningful way against authorities. Monitoring remains strong, making it difficult for people to diverge from or protest against the government. According to a young doctor in Camagüey, "Such [monitoring] networks mean that it is extremely unlikely that a social or political uprising will occur." Cubans view action against the authorities as ineffective and dangerous and discounted the possibility that a popular response could lead to political change.

Still, many individuals carry out informal acts of dissidence and disobedience in their private lives. Humor is employed as a subterfuge for political dissent. The covert circumvention of laws and approved activities is also prevalent. Most common are the operation of unlicensed economic activities and workplace absenteeism.

Welcome to Santa Cruz del Sur – Town of Balseros!

Santa Cruz del Sur (pop. 52,000) is a small town located on the southern coast of Camagüey province. Respondents openly identify the town as "*un pueblo balsero*," or a rafter's town. Without exception, every resident interviewed in Santa Cruz knew someone who had left Cuba as a *balsero*, or they themselves had attempted an escape. One young man admitted to making three attempts.

According to one respondent, it takes *balseros* 10 days to reach Central America from Santa Cruz. Starting from Cuba's southern coast, Santa Cruzeños aim for Honduras or hope to make it around the island heading north for the southern tip of Florida.

One friendly *casa particular* owner shared his story. He and two others paid $500 to prepare a boat from Nuevitas to Florida. Upon leaving, 11 other *balseros* joined the boat. Along the way, generous fishermen along the keys of the Bahamas gave them more water, gas and a navigating device. Their boat finally arrived in Hollywood, Florida, where they played cat-and-mouse with U.S. Coast Guard cutters trying to prevent them from making it ashore.

The respondent stood out from the rest of the *balseros* since he was carrying papers with him to prove he had a college education and no criminal record. All this was in vane, however, as their boat was finally captured and the men were returned to Havana.

Stories like this one are common in Santa Cruz del Sur. Here in this small town, the hardships of daily life in Cuba seem to be magnified. Many residents are tired of conforming to the system. Becoming a *balsero* is their only way out of the system and their only hope for a bright future.

Many respondents judged emigration to be the primary method to express extreme discontent. Indeed, Cubans who want to risk overstepping the limits leave the country and go to a place with fewer restrictions. The lack of options in general, whether in responding to government abuses or dealing with the severe hardship that is life in Cuba, instills this desire in many Cubans. Some even resort to desperate measures by hopping on a raft and hoping that the wind and the sea will take them to Honduras or the coasts of Florida.

The Future

For many respondents, Cuba's future seems to lie in one of two paths: (1) Cuba will remain a tightly controlled communist society with a few small changes; or (2) the government will implement large-scale political and economic reforms that will completely transform the daily lives of Cubans. The present uncertainty about Cuba's future has created a pervasive sense of anxiety among the population. Respondents said Cubans fear a transition to capitalism, because they grew up with socialism and are not ready to adjust their current lifestyles. Government propaganda seems to have instilled Cubans with the belief that any major reforms will transform the island into a crime-ridden nation like the United States or other Latin American neighbors. In addition, most respondents do not expect to feel freer in the near future, nor do they expect their families will be better off.

Due to their previous experience after the *Periodo Especial*, some respondents fear that things could still become worse. In the years of the Special Period, Fidel relaxed some areas of society which the government had previously controlled. He eased restrictions on private businesses, for example, issuing licenses to Cubans who wanted to open a *paladar* or a *casa particular*. However, after the worst of the economic hardships passed and the Cuban economy began to stabilize, Fidel quickly reversed this opening, refused to give out new licenses to interested entrepreneurs and cracking down other businesses already established. Some respondents worried that the same thing could happen again with the recent reforms as well.

Several respondents expressed anxiety over the future return of Cubans in exile. *"Correra la sangre!"* ("Blood will flow!") exclaimed one interviewee, referring to the conflict that will likely arise regarding housing between old and new owners. Though they are not against allowing exiles to return, they fear future differences between those who stayed and endured the Revolution and those who left. Regardless of their fear, respondents felt that Raúl would not allow any major influx of exiles as long as he is in power.

Only a handful of respondents said they did not fear the future. These respondents tended to be party loyalists (who perhaps did not wish to express their true fears). Others did not anticipate major reform on the island, and therefore said they have nothing to fear since it will be more of the same. A pensioner in Havana confirmed, "I do not have any fears about the future. Change will not happen until after I die."

None of the respondents had strong opinions regarding future leadership or key actors in a transition. Overwhelmingly, respondents said they firmly believe that change will come from within the Communist Party. They perceive civil society as thin and irrelevant. One man from

Camagüey said, "Meaningful change will only take place from the top down, from the national to the local and individual. It will never take place from the bottom up because each person is too caught up in the webs of family, friends, and kin networks and trapped in networks of the CDR, *chivatos*, and State police infiltrators."

Whichever path Cuba follows, Cubans face the future more with anxiety than with hope. They do not know what to expect, and they sometimes expect the worst. With the disappointment after a period of increased tolerance during the *Periodo Especial*, Cubans say they doubt that whatever improvements may come about will actually last.

Conclusions

Freedom House's interviews throughout Cuba indicate that Cubans generally have a bleak outlook regarding their country's short-term future. Cubans struggle just to survive, and they expect the country's new leadership to provide little if any improvement in their daily lives. They are conscious of the tight controls on society and preferences given to the politically connected; when Cubans suffer abuse, they see no way to respond.

While Cubans have a negative view of life in their country, they tend to fear that change may make matters worse. Given the option of continuing to live in their current circumstances or returning to the *Periodo Especial* (or worse), many Cubans seem inclined to accept the status quo. When researchers asked which reforms they would like to see happen in Cuba, respondents indicated that they share many of the values of a democratic society, such as freedom of movement and freedom of expression. At the same time, Cubans do not want the crime, violence, and insecurity that they associate with democratic or capitalist societies.

The bleak outlook of Cubans on their future should come as no surprise. They have lived for nearly five decades under the dictatorial rule of Fidel and Raúl Castro and know little if anything about alternative political and economic models. What little change they experienced, in the 1990s, was for the worse. Moreover, Cubans are not permitted to hear directly from the proponents of democracy in Cuba. They are subjected to constant government propaganda designed to stoke their fear of capitalism, which is presented as a source of crime and insecurity. As a result of intense repression, Cubans are also afraid to criticize the government openly. They feel powerless to respond to government abuses, and the pervasive presence of State Security informants fuels distrust between citizens, thus effectively preventing independent collective action.

To give Cubans greater confidence in political and economic change, there must be a compelling vision for Cuba's future. This vision must challenge the government's propaganda about capitalism and foreign influences, show how change will lead to improvement in the daily lives of ordinary citizens, and give Cubans hope. A truly compelling vision is needed to overcome the fear and disillusionment that pervades Cuban society.

The findings of this research suggest a need for Cuba's democracy movement to expand its outreach to the public, to present a compelling vision for change, and to empower citizens to take initiative within their communities. Because dissidents, human rights groups, and other advocates of democracy are unable to communicate directly to the public, they are often unknown or misunderstood. They need to expand their outreach, so they can better inform Cubans of the alternatives to Communist rule and begin to raise hopes for positive change.

In addition to increased outreach and a vision for Cuba's future, Cubans must find ways to initiate and encourage civic engagement by their fellow citizens. Democracy activists and other civil society actors—e.g. artists, musicians, religious groups, youth groups—have created a space, however small, within which to act with relative independence from the state. Encouraging these groups to continue creating space for civic activity and to expand their outreach may help ordinary citizens take the initial step of participating in small-scale, low-risk activity.

Participation in civic activity can begin to give Cubans some sense of empowerment, to move them beyond their fatalistic attitudes, and to make them think of themselves as citizens, who have a stake in the future of their community and their country. That sense of empowerment is critical to mobilize citizens to assert their rights and demand freedom for Cuba.

Appendix 1 – The Provinces

CIUDAD DE LA HABANA PROVINCE

Ciudad de la Habana, or Havana, is the capital of Cuba and home to 2.2 million Cubans. It is the most visited city on the island and serves as the cultural, political, and industrial center of the country. Interviews were conducted throughout the city covering most of Havana's 15 *municipios* (city districts). Several interviewees were located in the center of Havana, in Habana Vieja, Centro Habana, Plaza de la Revolución, Vedado and Miramar. Researchers also ventured to many of the city's suburbs, including Alamar, Cerro, Guanabacoa, La Punta, Lawton, Nuevo Vedado, Playa, Playas del Este, Santos Suarez, and Víbora.

VILLA CLARA PROVINCE

Just 300 miles east of Havana is Villa Clara province, home to many of the island's tobacco plantations. The capital city of Santa Clara is surrounded by low hills, called Las Alturas de Santa Clara. Many students come from all over the island to attend the Universidad Central de Las Villas in Santa Clara. In addition to Santa Clara, researchers found interviewees in the charming small town of Remedios, as well as Caibarién on the coast, and Ranchuelo near the border with Cienfuegos province.

HOLGUÍN PROVINCE

The province of Holguín is located in the north-eastern part of the country and is home to 1.5 million inhabitants. Its capital, also named Holguín, is the fourth largest city in Cuba and is home to the region's largest university. The beaches of Guardalavaca on the north coast of the province are a major tourist attraction. Interviews were conducted in the capital city of Holguín, the seafront town of Gibara, Banes (formerly run by the United Fruit Company), and Birán-Castro, birthplace of *El Comandante* himself. Other small towns included Floro Perez, Playa Blanca, Velasco, and Baguanes

CAMAGÜEY PROVINCE

Camagüey is the island's largest province, located in the eastern half of the island and stretching to include both the north and south coasts. Most of the interior of the province consists of vast plain making it a natural place for agriculture, the province's main industry. The capital, Camagüey, is Cuba's third largest city and carries the nicknames "City of Squares" and "Corinth of the Caribbean." It is also known as the City of Tinajones due to the continuing presence of large clay containers used to gather rain water. Interviews were conducted in Camagüey, Nuevitas on the northern coast, Santa Cruz del Sur on the province's southern tip as well as Santa Lucia, Minas and Contramaestre in the interior.

SANTIAGO DE CUBA PROVINCE

Known historically as the Cradle of the Revolution, Santiago de Cuba is a mountainous province located in southeastern Cuba. The namesake capital city is the island's second largest city with over 1 million residents. The country's highest concentration of Afro-Cubans is found here, making Santiago the vibrant center of Afro-Cuban culture and musical tradition in Cuba. Interviews were conducted in: the capital city, Santiago; Siboney and Chivirico on the coast; El Caney; Contramaestre; Mella in the north; Palma Soriano, the province's second largest city; San Luis; and Sevilla.

Appendix 2 – The Questionnaire

Concerns:

1) In what areas of your life are you most happy?
2) What are the most urgent problems in your daily life?
3) What are your most important concerns that could be resolved in your community? What are some things that should be resolved through action by the national government?

Restrictions:

4) Is there more tolerance from Raul Castro towards *la bolsa negra*, *cuentapropistas*, *paladares*, and other areas of the economy?
5) Do you think there will soon be more space to have private businesses? Do you think there will also be independent political associations permitted by the government?

Debate critico:

6) What is the *debate critico*, when was it, and are you satisfied with the process?
7) Do you think that it was a Cuban perestroika? Do you know what *perestroika* was and when and where it happened?[20]

Cuba's New Leadership:

8) Do you feel freer now than under Fidel Castro?
9) Do you think Raul Castro is honestly looking for improvements in the lives of all citizens? Is the process of reform credible?
10) If not, what would it take for you to trust this reform process?
11) What do you think of the changes to the *Consejo de Estado* and the *Poder Popular*?[21]

Structural Changes:

12) Are there reforms in the country that are already underway? If so, are there signs that these are being effective or ineffective?
13) Are agricultural reforms working? How?

Timeline:

14) How much time do you think it will take Raul to provide the changes you are expecting?
15) If the reforms do not come about, what do you think will happen? What would you personally do if they don't happen?

State Institutions:

16) Who really holds power in your town/province? The mayor, the party, the police, the CDR?
17) Are there differences between your local government and the national government? Is your local government more flexible than the national government?

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[20] Very few respondents knew what perestroika meant, therefore the report does not address this question.

[21] *Consejo de Estado* is the Council of State. Poder Popular refers to the *Asamblea Nacional del Poder Popular*, or the National Assembly of People's Power.

18) What about the mass organizations in your community? Are they hard line or are they more flexible?

Youth:

19) Do you think the youth are loyal to the Revolution? Why?
20) Are there youth groups in your city or province? How do they normally spend their time?
21) What is your opinion of the videos of the students' confrontation with Ricardo Alarcón? What do you think about the protests of foreign investment sector workers?[22]

Catholic Church:

22) How important is the Catholic Church in your community or province?
23) Does the Church have a say in what happens in your province?
24) Does the Church have good relations with the authorities?

Dissident and Human Rights Groups:

25) Are you familiar with dissident and/or human rights groups in Cuba?
26) Can you name any of the groups, persons, or initiatives?
27) Do you think they represent an alternative to the Raul Castro government?
28) Do you think they make any impact on the situation in your province, or in the country?
29) What would they need to do for you to support them or have contact with them?

Popular Response:

30) If the authorities do something to you that you do not like, like evicting you from your house, what can you do about it? What options do you have?
31) Have you heard about the *actos de repudio?* What do you think of them?

The Future:

32) Do you think you will be more or less free to do things you want in the next 12-18 months? Why?
33) Do you think you and your family will be better off in 12-18 months? In what ways?
34) Is there anything you fear about the future?
35) What role do you think the United States and Cubans in exile will have in the next 12 months?

[22] No respondents had heard of these protests.