

# Cuba on the Edge: Rejecting Big Brother and the Big Lie

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Something truly wondrous has just happened in Cuba. For the very first time in the 62 years since the Castro dynasty turned the island into a totalitarian dystopia, Cubans have taken to the streets from one end of the island to the other, denouncing their repressive government and calling for freedom. The protesters can be viewed on YouTube and social media, chanting “liberty,” “down with the dictatorship,” and “down with communism” rhythmically, much like prayers from resolute pilgrims. And they can also be heard shouting a challenge to their rulers: “We are not afraid.” That chant does not resemble a prayer at all. It’s a taunt, a war cry, a rebel yell. And it is coming mostly from young Cubans, the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the so-called Revolution.

Anyone who has lived in a free and open society, accustomed to frequent demonstrations of displeasure with the status quo, in which none of the participants are beaten or thrown into prison, cannot even begin to imagine the courage or desperation it takes to express dissent in a totalitarian dictatorship such as that of Cuba. No clue at all, really. You have to live in such a place — where an inordinate percentage of the country’s budget is dedicated to keeping Big Brother’s eye fixed on you — in order to appreciate the magnitude of the fearlessness and despair needed to loosen one’s tongue out on the street alongside one’s neighbors.

These protests are among the most dramatic proofs ever offered of the failure of the tropical dictatorship that has been calling itself a “Revolution” for six long decades and has driven 20 percent of its people into exile. Innumerable promises for a brighter future have been made during this time by the military junta that has ruled Cuba since the days when cars had tailfins and the top songs in the U.S. charts were Elvis Presley’s “Jailhouse Rock” and Domenico Modugno’s “Volare.” Well, surprise, surprise, the future is here, and the youngsters can clearly see that all of those promises have turned out to be lies. Now, those who were supposed to reap the benefits of decades of sacrifice, self-denial, and unquestioning obedience demanded by Big Brother are out on the streets, shouting at their aging masters — and the world — that they are tired of living a lie.

The response from Cuba’s oligarchs has been predictable. Immediately, Internet access was shut off — and is still off three days later. Soldiers, police, and mobs of thugs egged on by the country’s sullen, figurehead president, Miguel Díaz-Canel, descended on the protesters, firing bullets at them, beating them with clubs and rake handles, shoving as many as they could catch into vehicles that took them straight to prison or simply made them disappear. Díaz-Canel staged a counter-rally of his own surrounded by a squadron of bodyguards and portly members of the ruling class who had no choice but to accept their invitation to this event. He also appeared on television and called on all “revolutionaries and communists” to “combat the mercenaries paid by the American government,” take back the streets from them, and “protect” the sacred “Revolution.”

This sudden eruption of fearless dissent has been caused by a perfect storm of calamities, all of which have revealed the big lie of the so-called Revolution as no other crisis has ever done before. Lately, life in Cuba has become more unbearable than ever for just about every Cuban, except for those who rule the place. The crisis is due to a long string of blunders and catastrophes. There are too many to list in total, but here are a few: the loss of revenue from Venezuela, a collapsed economy, gargantuan foreign debt, a disastrous sugar harvest, uncontrolled inflation, a plague that is intensifying rather than abating, a collapsing health-care system, medication shortages, food shortages, water shortages, long lines and empty shelves at every store, electricity blackouts, and increased repression.

Never mind the sanctions by the United States or the so-called embargo that Cuba’s military junta and many of the world’s news outlets blame for the current crisis. These are inconsequential factors, a blame-shifting decoy skillfully manipulated by the oligarchs for far too long in order to draw attention away from their own abject

ineptitude and from the congenital defects of the communism they embraced and forced on all Cubans. When it comes to assigning blame, much more is truly deserved by the thousands of tourists invited back to Cuba's apartheid resorts prematurely and irresponsibly as new strains of COVID-19 were emerging. These foreign "dream holiday" seekers are a significant component of this year's perfect storm, but, thanks to the country's apartheid, most Cubans remain unaware of their presence on the island or of the infections they have passed on to employees at the resorts, who have then brought the virus to their homes and neighborhoods.

Another significant component of this year's perfect storm is the undeniable fact that the Castro dynasty has vanished. Fidel is dead, his ashes tucked away in a monolith that looks like a prop from the Flintstones movie. Raúl has slunk off stage at age 90, without any applause, much less a standing ovation. And after a great deal of minister-shuffling at the most recent Communist Party Congress, the man left in charge — ostensibly — is Miguel Díaz-Canel, a hulking figure without an ounce of charisma who seems to be incapable of saying anything halfway intelligent or inspiring. Assuming the persona of Big Brother and selling the Big Lie are challenges beyond his ken, so despite all the rhetoric he and his ministers spew about the "continuity" of the so-called Revolution, Cubans can see that he really hasn't inherited any mantle, but is really buck naked, so to speak, just like the main character in Hans Christian Andersen's tale, "The Emperor's New Clothes." One can only hope and pray at this moment that he will prove as inept at repression as he has at inspiring confidence.

These protests are not really about the pandemic or shortages falsely blamed on U.S. foreign policy. The bottom line is that these protesters know the ultimate cause of their distress is their lack of freedom in all spheres of life, which is nothing new. So, the young who feel they have the most to lose by remaining silent, with nothing but a bleak future on their horizon, have taken to the streets as no one has dared to do up until now on such a scale. As John Suarez, director of the Center for a Free Cuba said yesterday: "What's causing the troubles in Cuba is the internal blockade that the regime has placed on Cubans, and that's why the Cubans are protesting the regime. They're not out front of the U.S. Embassy protesting the U.S. embargo, they're protesting the government because they know who's responsible for what they're suffering. It's not an accident."

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