

Cuba today: walking new roads?

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I

During the last few decades, Cuban society has changed dramatically. In recent years the government has made changes to certain institutions and has tried to adapt some structures to the needs and hopes of the people. The latter task has not been slow nor lacked the necessary substance. However, it does not satisfy the speed and comprehensiveness demanded by most Cubans.

It is difficult to overcome this contradiction. The precarious conditions in which large segments of the population live demands speed and comprehensiveness, but the economic, social and political circumstances in Cuba, and around Cuba, demand much consideration and gradual changes. A tightrope might be necessary to harmonize these two challenges.

However, there have been significant strides. I will cite some examples: micro and small business enterprises are allowed; it is possible to establish cooperatives for non-agricultural operations; cars and properties can be freely sold and bought; migratory policy has been relaxed; religious freedom is expanding, and free debate is respected in certain small public spaces. Yet this is not sufficient to say that we have done enough to change our social model and live normally.

It is essential that we continue to advance and create the conditions for greater speed and comprehensiveness. It is true that to achieve this, many Cubans, especially leaders and officials, will have to open their minds and take the risk of moving into uncharted and even dangerous territory. But it is also true that the opening of these minds will depend to a large extent on the results of the transit along such paths, to build wellness and balance, and not destabilization and risk.

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II

This has marked the positive experience of the establishment of a new private activity, named *cuenta-propismo* (self employment), on the Island. There had always been threats that once some kind of private activity were allowed, it would become a destabilizing social model that would challenge the so-called socialist model. Logically, this could have conditioned the boldness with which we have to assume the institutionalization of this form of economic activity.

However, practice has shown that has not been the case. It is clear that economic entrepreneurs can become important agents of development and that the key to attaining social justice is not in the abolition of private property, a necessary tool of economic endeavor, but in the distribution of wealth. This, of course, calls for a functioning democratic state and an active and organized civil society.

In the economic sphere it is necessary to go much further. This requires the acceleration of the decentralization of the state economy, intensification of cooperatives, the establishment of mid-size private enterprises, and the authorization to practice in independent professions.

The results and experiences from the so-called *cuenta-propismo* can provide support for this advancement. However, such confidence is not enough, because to do so also requires very costly infrastructure, and we do not have the funds. It is essential to develop strategies to achieve this. A new foreign investment policy can help in this regard. It can also help Cuba's economic integration in Latin America and the expansion of economic ties with other key players, such as Europe and the United States. Sure, the latter requires a degree of stability in political trust between the island and these powers, something for which we have to work hard. However, I think that Cuban leaders are willing to reshape the economic structure in a way that avoids threats to their strategic interests, and would open relations with the United States, Europe and other countries, so long as they perceive that such relations will be transparent.

III

As far as religious freedom, it has advanced significantly, although there is still a lot to do in this area. In Cuba, religious freedom is guaranteed by the Constitution, but we lack a legal framework for such guarantee. In that sense, I think that we should not attempt these changes through a law of beliefs that would establish a rigid and feeble equality, trying to establish a common denominator for all religions. It would be better to establish these conditions through legal covenants between the State and each church. Thus, regulations could highlight the institutional nature of each religion and they would participate directly in the design of their legal rights.

On the other hand, a greater role for religious institutions in the country's social life poses a challenge for them. Their success in Cuba will depend on their understanding of the country's present and future, and in finding ways to carry out their tasks.

In this regard, I would like to expand on the responsibility of the Catholic Church, of which I am a member, and of the current and future possibilities open to it. The Church, to achieve its catholicity (aspiration of universality) and become the mother of all Cubans, even of those who do not have faith, or who reject faith, should be increasingly open to the entire spectrum of the nation. To that end, the Church should provide spaces for everyone to express themselves, provided that the intention is to seek good through good, to discuss all matters, human and divine, even those that are hostile to Church doctrine. But also, it should embrace the positive from the full range of opinions and desires in society-at-large, frame it within evangelical values, and promote

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it. This would also require that the Church accompany, without desire of religious or moral hegemony, all Cubans, even those who have no faith, in their life, as this would help them to be more human and therefore achieve greater spiritual life. All this requires the Church to build and articulate, with great commitment, the spirituality emanating from its faith, because in order to offer much, one must possess much.

IV

Another major structural change that seems to be a priority for the country's leadership is the modification of the state's structure and functions. The intention is to achieve greater functionality for public institutions. In this regard, there has been a reduction and reorganization of what has been called the central state apparatus, and at the same time there has been experimentation in certain parts of the country of new modes of executive and administrative management supported through decentralization and autonomy. There has also been a reinforcing of mechanisms to control corruption, which can be reinforced by economic decentralization and the strengthening of private enterprise.

Furthermore, there is talk that the structure and operation of the National Assembly could be modified as well. There is speculation that the intention is to seek better relationships with citizens, better dynamics in links with other state institutions, as well as an increase participation and effectiveness in all state activities.

All this is positive, but it takes time, it requires analysis and consultation, and careful implementation. This, there is no doubt, is in the works. However, there is a need for more participation by citizens in this area. This would help deepen the enthusiasm of citizens, expand the sense of inclusion, accentuate the legitimacy of the state, and lead to better results and greater participation.

Not much has been heard about upgrading the exercise of judicial functions. However, there are academic analyses and proposals that should be taken into account and shared in order to allow their important and sensitive performance to evolve.

V

All this reveals a development path that strengthens the country's institutions and improves opportunities for every Cuban. Therefore, we must commit to contribute to its consolidation. However, the process is taking into consideration many of the criticisms of citizens, but without establishing the necessary proper dialogue. Some say they prefer to create better conditions for the future, and with greater assurance, to unleash later popular participation. Others claim that no dialogue with society takes place as it should because of the absence of new mechanisms to enforce the role of the people, and that the study of how to erect them has been relegated.

The postponement of this issue has some justification in Cuba, as it has often been reduced to a question of multiparty politics, and this is a tricky matter. On January 1st, 1959, the multiparty model lacked legitimacy in many social sectors, and has since been conceived as a means of confrontation. Therefore, it became relatively easy to replace it with a single party model. However, years have passed and this latest model is also increasingly exhausted.

Given this reality, relevant sectors are determined to find a system without political parties, or a network of relationships that makes political parties almost irrelevant. Others struggle to return to the multiparty model and grant democratic control to political parties. It is evident that an agreement is necessary. I think that

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political parties can exist and not be insignificant, but I also think that democracy's ultimate control must be in the exercise of sovereignty by the citizens, which can be expressed from outside political parties and beyond political parties. The study of these possibilities require a lot of effort if we want to direct our institutions to a social model at the service of every Cuban, especially the most disadvantaged, and erect a new benchmark for other peoples.

We must also remember that political parties, should they exist, should assume a culture of service to the common good. For this, each party must be willing to recognize the legitimacy of the other, be challenged by various criteria and integrate the best of them, help develop positive initiatives emanating from the opposition, and consider, in their proposals and projects, the wellbeing of all, without exclusions.

The issue of participation in, and through, civil society is an important and delicate subject. So we must study and analyze it and assume practices that perform in the best way possible. Perhaps the most favorable option is not to be satisfied with the mechanisms we already have, or to expect to achieve the most perfect and efficient design of new ways to do it. Perhaps the most effective option is to strengthen inclusive participation, with methodologies that lead to synthesis, through ways that could prove to be unusual, but positive. This could be the best way forward (through study and dialogue, but especially a renewed and creative practice thereof), capable of indicating how to shape the model of our democracy.

VI

Some foreigners, and even some Cubans, cannot get away from the temptation to expect changes in Cuba to occur as they did in Latin America, Eastern Europe, South Africa, in Spain, or in the so-called Arab Spring. It is healthy to accept the experience of world history and it may result in certain circumstances that occur similarly to other experiences. However, the generality of the Cuban people, when they think of changes to improve national life, look, above all, to themselves, to their particular anxieties and expectations of freedom and justice. This, of course, would make the process of change in Cuba which we all seek, although from different perspectives and positions, an unprecedented model of national renewal.

The real Cuba, that of the Cuban who suffers and waits, hopes for social readjustment, and economic, legal and political changes (peaceful and deep, gradual and also faster) that lead to a victory for everyone. The Cuban people reject social and political fractures, economic and human misery, the institutional difficulty to build a better country, and the triumph of some over the others. Cubans want a change marked by a process, peaceful and intelligent with increasing integration, which will empower all citizens.

But such changes, in order to be possible, demand goodwill and a spirit of openness, intelligence and serenity, from the vast majority of social actors. It also demands a lot of wisdom and boldness by the State. Therefore, the present moment challenges us all and calls to build the best Cuban socio-political climate needed to consolidate new roads.

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