

# Another “Special Period” in Cuba? How Citizens View Their Country’s Future

March 20, 2009

Special Report



## **Another “Special Period” in Cuba? How Citizens View Their Country’s Future**

### **Contents**

Executive Summary .....	2
Introduction .....	5
Methodology .....	6
Research Findings .....	7
Daily Concerns .....	7
Restrictions on Society .....	9
<i>Debate Crítico</i> .....	11
Cuba’s New Leadership .....	12
Structural Changes .....	13
Timeline .....	14
State Institutions .....	15
Youth .....	16
The Catholic Church .....	18
Dissident and Human Rights Groups .....	19
Response to Abuses .....	20
The Future .....	21
Conclusions .....	22
Appendix 1 – The Provinces .....	24
Appendix 2 – The Questionnaire .....	27

## Executive Summary

Cubans are gearing up for what they fear will be another “Special Period” of economic hardship, following two hurricanes in 2008 that increased food shortages and intensified their struggle to survive. Despite promises of reform by the government, they see little improvement in their daily lives. While many Cubans expect the communist system to collapse eventually, they view change in Cuba as a distant prospect, and have difficulty envisioning a better future for their country. Some look to a new U.S. president to introduce changes in policy toward Cuba that will advance social and economic improvements on the island.

Freedom House conducted interviews with 160 Cubans on the island in September and October 2008. These interviews sought to determine how the transfer of power from Fidel to Raúl Castro and subsequent announcements of various economic and agricultural reforms have affected ordinary Cubans.

The interviews suggest that the announced reforms have had little effect on most Cubans. Some of these reforms, such as the government’s decision to allow the purchase of cell phones, have had little impact on the daily lives of ordinary Cubans since most Cubans still cannot afford the phones and the usage charges. Other reforms, including various agricultural initiatives, had been announced but were not yet implemented by October.

Cubans struggle to survive from day to day, and their struggle has intensified following a severe hurricane season. They are particularly concerned about food shortages and rising prices, and worry that hurricane damage and the global financial crisis will make their situation worse. Many respondents fear that Cuba might be entering another “Special Period,” a sharp economic decline similar to the one Cuba experienced during the 1990s after Soviet subsidies ended.

At a time of increased food shortages, agricultural reform was a topic of discussion in nearly all interviews. However, few of the Cubans interviewed knew of the changes in agricultural policies, though they had been officially announced. When asked about the government’s initiative to give out small plots of land to individual farmers, a handful of respondents wondered why the government had waited so long, since large tracts of land are now overrun with *marabú*, a thorny shrub that is difficult to eradicate.

In the wake of the hurricanes, the government introduced a ban on street vending. The ban was intended to prevent price gouging but instead had immediate adverse effects, eliminating an important source of income for many Cubans and making food harder to find.

While food shortages and prices were Cubans’ overriding concerns, respondents also expressed discontent with the country’s education and healthcare systems. As evidenced by some of the responses, Cuba’s vaunted healthcare system appears to be highly overrated. A professor of cardiology said that many of his students graduate without being able to read an electrocardiogram (EKG). “I am not training doctors,” he exclaimed. “I am cranking out white coats!”

Lack of progress on announced reforms, combined with damage from the hurricanes, has made Cubans even more pessimistic about the prospects for change on the island. Some Cubans see Fidel Castro's presence as an obstacle to reforms that Raúl might initiate. Others believe that they will have to wait until both brothers are gone to see major social and economic changes. A man in his early thirties said of the prospects for change, "I'll probably be old, but I hope to see it to know my kid will be okay."

Cubans say they still feel unable to organize popular responses to government abuses, though there is some evidence that people are less willing to put up with aggressive government authorities than they were a few years ago. One researcher, for example, watched a young man in Havana knock down a policeman after the policeman hassled him about his identification card.

Citizens nonetheless remain fearful of retaliation against public expressions of opposition to the government. One woman warned that "if you walk outside with a sign against Fidel, you will never see the light of day again." The government's neighborhood watch organizations, the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs), continue to have a stronghold on power at the local level. While fear of reprisal prevents open criticism of CDR leaders, some respondents expressed clear dislike of them, calling them "morons" and "government lapdogs."

The interviews indicated that most Cubans have little confidence that change will come from within Cuba. Respondents know little about opposition groups on the island, and Cuban youth are apathetic and seem uninterested in participating in a future transition. Few interviewees expect the Catholic Church to contribute to political change. While the Catholic Church plays a significant role in providing social services, it is not seen as a locus of political dissent.

Many Cubans are resigned to the current situation and continue to live day to day. A doctor from Santiago, for example, said that no ordinary Cuban could do much to change the system. *"Que puedo hacer? Resignarme. Resignarme y tratar de vivir mejor."* (What can I do? Be resigned and try to live better.) He said most Cubans want more money and a better economic situation; they are not thinking about freedom. Two young students, when asked about life in Cuba, responded sarcastically, "We have to like it. It's our country and we can't leave."

The findings of this survey point to the need for Cuban democracy activists to present a compelling vision for change, to expand their outreach to the public, and to empower citizens to take initiative within their communities. Dissidents, human rights activists, and other democracy advocates remain largely unknown or misunderstood in Cuba, because they are unable to communicate directly with the public. If they are to succeed, they must find ways to expand their outreach, so that they can better inform Cubans of the alternatives to Communist rule and inspire citizens to participate in civic activities.

In recent years, democracy activists and other civil society actors, such as artistic, religious, and youth groups, have created some space for citizens to act with relative independence from the state. Post-hurricane relief and reconstruction efforts offer new opportunities for citizens to organize independently. Participation in civic activity, even if not overtly political, will be



critical if change is to come to Cuba, because it empowers citizens and helps them to feel that they have a stake in the future of their community and their country. That sense of empowerment could drive citizens to assert their rights and mobilize in demanding freedom for Cuba. At present, however, there is little evidence that ordinary Cubans feel so empowered.

## Introduction

After two years of being debilitated by illness, Fidel Castro announced his resignation as President of Cuba in February 2008. Since then, expectations for change on the island have run high. Raúl Castro officially took over as President of the Republic, and soon after announced a series of reforms that signaled the potential for significant change to Cuba's economic and political landscape.

Based on field research conducted in April 2008, Freedom House released a report showing that the lives of ordinary Cubans were little affected by the announced reforms.<sup>1</sup>

Later in the year, the Cuban government announced additional reforms that raised hopes that change on the island was finally occurring. Given the dearth of information about the implementation of reforms on the island, Freedom House again set out to determine Cubans' perspectives on the prospects for change in their country. Research explored the views of ordinary Cubans and identified changes in Cuban society over time.

Field research took place from September 8 to October 28, 2008. It explored three overarching questions:

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

Opinions taken from 160 in-person interviews during September and October 2008 are presented in this report. The interviews solicited the views of Cubans from various backgrounds and explored them in greater depth than previous surveys.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The Freedom House report, "Change in Cuba: How Citizens View Their Country's Future," is available at: <http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/ChangeinCuba.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Only a handful of 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>). Freedom House's qualitative interviews in April and September/October 2008 can now be added to this list.

## Methodology

Freedom House sent five field researchers to Cuba to conduct qualitative in-person interviews in September and October 2008. Several researchers were in Cuba as Hurricane Ike made landfall, and others witnessed the damage afterwards. They were thus able to explore Cubans' immediate reactions to the hurricane's damage and the government's response.

The methodology centered on informal, semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire contained 33 open-ended questions presented in a conversational style. Questions addressed broad themes covering different aspects of civic life in Cuba, including:

- Reforms recently announced by the government;
- Leadership in Cuba and the role of government actors;
- The role of organized civil society groups and the Catholic Church;
- The *debate crítico*;<sup>3</sup>
- Cuban youth;
- Expectations for change and views about the future.

Freedom House sent researchers to five of Cuba's fourteen provinces: Ciudad de la Habana,<sup>4</sup> Villa Clara, Holguín, Camagüey, and Santiago de Cuba. These provinces represent several of the island's different regions. Though Hurricane Ike created transportation challenges, researchers attempted to visit as many rural locations as possible. (See Appendix 1 for more information on the provinces and interview locations.)

Researchers conducted approximately 160 interviews throughout the island. Respondents included men and women between the ages of 16 and 90; the average age was 40.<sup>5</sup> Approximately 27 percent of the interviewees were under 30 years old; 21 percent were in their 30s, falling into the Guillermo Tell generation;<sup>6</sup> 24 percent were 40-49; and 28 percent were over the age of 50. The sample was racially diverse, though more males were interviewed than females.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> 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; this was known as the *debate crítico*. (For information about the speeches referring to the *debate crítico* visit <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.)

<sup>4</sup> 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 distinct province south of the capital.

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

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> Freedom House researchers in both rounds of the research found it more 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.



Within each age group, the sample included Cubans from different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. Respondents included dancers, nurses, bank employees, teachers, taxi drivers, doctors, students, *cuentapropistas*,<sup>8</sup> artists, *campesinos*,<sup>9</sup> tour guides, party officials, engineers, cooks, former military officers, bartenders, retired professors and the unemployed. Education levels varied as well, with some respondents holding doctoral degrees and others with no university education. Many respondents said they participated in the informal economy in order to make money “*a la izquierda*” (on the side, or literally “on the left”). Some did so by owning an illegal private business, such as a *casa particular*,<sup>10</sup> while others have official state-paid jobs while conducting other *negocios*, or business, on the side.

Sampling for the interviews was affected by the availability of respondents and locations conducive to private conversation. Cubans are aware that *chivatos* (informants) might report on anyone who is deemed counterrevolutionary, and as a result, they are unaccustomed to expressing their opinions in public. For this reason, researchers engaged in private, informal conversations with respondents and interspersed the interview questions within these conversations.<sup>11</sup> In this way, the researchers asked the respondents a common set of questions (which are listed in Appendix 2).

## Research Findings

### Daily Concerns

The overwhelming concern of most Cubans is economic survival. Most respondents struggle to meet basic daily needs. Growing food shortages are on everyone’s mind. Hurricanes Gustav and Ike caused significant damage to crops in much of the country, intensifying food shortages across the country and sparking fears that Cuba may be entering another Special Period.<sup>12</sup>

Food shortages that had been reported by respondents in April intensified in the wake of hurricanes Gustav and Ike, which made landfall in August and September. The government issued a ban on street vending in the aftermath of the hurricanes. Although the intention of the ban was to eliminate price-gouging in the wake of the hurricanes, the sudden disappearance of many vendors further complicated Cubans’ ability to obtain food for their families. Interviewees

<sup>8</sup> *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.

<sup>9</sup> *Campesino* means countryman or peasant.

<sup>10</sup> A *casa particular* (literally, a private house) refers to family home that has a room available for rent to tourists. 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.

<sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup> 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.



emphasized that the government-issued ration card only provided food for the first 10 to 14 days of each month; after that, everything else must be purchased in *pesos convertibles*, or CUCs, a currency worth 28 times the *moneda nacional* in which the government pays workers.

Respondents said the dual currency system exacerbated their economic problems, stating that Cubans must find other ways to earn money—legal or otherwise—and preferably in CUCs. Even with CUCs in hand, many respondents described an additional hurdle of dealing with widespread shortages of goods, which compounds the stress of making ends meet. A licensed pilot working at a hotel in Havana believed that the Cuban government managed two currencies “so that the people would be so poor that they can only focus on survival.”

With the dual currency already presenting a challenge for Cubans to make ends meet, the post-hurricane ban on street vending only made it more difficult for citizens to participate in money-making activities. One 42-year old male in Santiago compared life on the island to the process of turning sugar cane into *guarapo*:<sup>13</sup> “*trituración spiritual*,” he called it, or a spiritual shredding that grinds people down.

In addition to the food shortages, respondents cited other economic concerns, including the recent doubling of the domestic price of gas. Most respondents said they did not understand how this could occur, given that Venezuela subsidizes all the oil it provides to Cuba. Similarly, electricity prices tripled in the months before the interviews. Again, respondents were puzzled that prices skyrocketed given the government’s recent campaign to install energy-efficient light-bulbs in every home and workplace. A man from Camagüey said he simply had to *resignarse*, or resign himself. “We cannot live like this...Cubans are strong workers and fighters. We have good things, but like this we cannot make it.”

Respondents disclosed stories of survival to interviewers. Some Cubans survive by making and selling products from their homes—for example, lowering bags of food from apartment windows to buyers, who then place payment in the bag. According to a tour guide at the *Partagas* cigar factory, many of the cigars sold on the street have been stolen from factories. Cigar factory employees illegally sell cigars to people on tours in the factory, or to other foreigners they come into contact with in the city.

A few Havana respondents said they were concerned about the justice system, which one respondent described as “barely functioning—mostly in name only.” They said they knew little about how the justice system functions or what rights they had if accused of crimes. Several respondents expressed concern that government inspectors charge people with breaking the law in order to intimidate or obtain a bribe. One man, an information technology worker and owner of a *casa particular* in Santiago, said that the justice system was stacked against citizens. “Where you are from, someone is innocent until proven guilty; here, you are guilty until your innocence is proven.”

---

<sup>13</sup> *Guarapo* is the term for sugar cane juice. In Cuba, it is often served cold, with a squeeze of lemon.



There were few regional differences in responses to questions about daily concerns. Respondents in the provinces remarked that they have been suffering from housing shortages for several years. The situation doesn't look as though it will improve, they said, given the damage from the hurricanes. Other concerns mentioned by provincial respondents were the lack of reliable transportation and the difficulty of traveling within Cuba. However, these concerns seemed to be only of secondary importance, given the immense physical damage and social disruptions caused by the hurricanes. Across all regions and sectors of society, the overwhelming concern was the economic situation, and many respondents feared that Cuba may be entering another Special Period.

When asked about sources of happiness in their lives, most respondents mentioned free education and health services, and low crime rates. A 60-year old female owner of a *casa particular* in Santiago described what made her happy about life: "Good education, medicine, and freedom." She clarified that she used the term "freedom" to mean working less than in other countries and living without many responsibilities or obligations to others. When asked about the best reason to live in Cuba, a Havana cab driver responded, "Education, healthcare, low taxes, cheap telephone costs (except cell phones) and safety." However, he also qualified his remark by saying that it was right that the government supplied these things, or else it would be even more difficult to survive on the island.

Even though healthcare and education are free, other respondents expressed concern about the country's health and education systems. Two students in Holguín said that the quality of education and health care had fallen greatly in recent years. They pointed out that classrooms lacked good teachers, since few young people want to become teachers in Cuba due to the mandatory years of service required of them after finishing school.

A cardiologist from one of the eastern provinces criticized the myth of Cuba's medical prowess, explaining said that hospitals have few supplies and patient care is poor. A professor of cardiology, this doctor said that many of his students in their third of four years of medical school still could not read an electrocardiogram, or EKG, a basic skill for cardiologists. He said educators tolerate such shortcomings because of the political sensitivity over medicine in Cuba, and the importance of producing high numbers of doctors who can be trumpeted internationally and used as political capital. The cardiologist felt that if he failed any of his students, he would be questioned by government representatives. The professor said, "Cuba does not have  $x$  number of doctors, we have  $x$  number of white coats. I am not training doctors; I am cranking out white coats!"

## **Restrictions on Society**

For the past 50 years, Cuba has maintained restrictions on all aspects of social, economic and political life. In the months between April and October 2008, the government announced reforms that seemed to indicate a loosening of private business regulations, including new opportunities for small-scale farming. However, in the aftermath of the two devastating hurricanes, the government put a clamp on private businesses and informal economic activities.



According to almost all respondents, one of the most notable changes in the last few months was the prohibition on street vending, a government initiative that resulted in a significant decrease in private business operations. This prohibition was intended to stop price gouging on all goods, which occurred in the aftermath of the hurricane. In one case, a group of Cubans bought bread at government-run bakeries for three *pesos (moneda nacional)* each and then sold the bread for 25 *pesos* in hurricane-affected areas—almost a tenth of the average monthly salary.

In response to this and similar occurrences, Raúl Castro prohibited all street vending in order to stem profiteering. According to respondents, the ban had immediate and sweeping effects, eliminating an important source of income for many Cubans. Before the hurricane, most respondents sold a variety of goods and services—bread, produce, music CDs, repairs—at a small markup and often including home delivery, in order to survive. However, after the hurricanes in September, the thriving *bolsa negra* (black market) weakened considerably, as fear of repercussions—including up to three years in prison and large fines, often higher than decades' worth of wages—caused many respondents to halt their *negocios* (money-making activities). The result has been fewer goods, services, and information available for sale, and further belt-tightening for families that had depended on the underground economy to supplement their meager salaries.

Limitations imposed by the government—combined with the difficulties caused by the dual currency system—severely restrict Cubans' ability to cover their families' daily needs. Even before the hurricanes, the government had severely restricted private business and imposed a number of limitations, making it extremely difficult for existing businesses to operate.

Many interviewees complained about these limitations. For example, until a few years ago, the government had allowed people to open *paladares*<sup>14</sup> and *casas particulares*. A waiter in Havana was quick to point out that the government no longer did so and seemed to create more obstacles for the existing businesses to survive, by taxing them heavily—whether or not they had clients—and forcing them to stay open all year long.

Even if Cubans had money to invest in a business, he said, they could not, since the government is not issuing new licenses. Those with a license to engage in one sort of private business are forbidden from operating a second business. For example, a *casa particular* owner cannot simultaneously own a *paladar*. The waiter described the government's tendency to “squeeze” small-business owners and doubted that the government would soon become more tolerant.

Several *casa particular* owners shared stories of how they survive despite the odds against them. One owner was legally permitted to rent two rooms in her home. She rented a third, risking authorities' discovery of her scheme, potential harassment, and possibly even the closure of her business. She had already been warned by authorities once, but continued to operate outside of her license. Another couple that owned a *casa* owned a second house they could not afford to renovate. The government would not allow them to rent or sell the house and, as a result, it was

---

<sup>14</sup> *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*.



“filling up with thousands of cockroaches” and falling apart. In another interview, a fifty-year old Havana man described Cubans as hardworking and willing to invest time and energy in their own businesses if given the opportunity. However, he did not expect the government to permit more *cuentapropistas* in the near future.

Government surveillance of all aspects of Cuban society does not appear to have waned in the months since the research was done in April. A young Havana woman said that she knew her agency monitored emails for “strange things,” adding that she assumed all countries must monitor emails for national security purposes. Several respondents looked over their shoulders before talking about political restrictions or lowered their voices. The pervasive system of surveillance is considered an effective defense mechanism for the government. “No weapon is more effective than fear and terror,” said one 40-year old man from the provinces.

### ***Debate Crítico***

In July 2007, Raúl Castro gave a speech in which he encouraged open and public debate about the failures of the revolution; this has come to be known as the *debate crítico*.<sup>15</sup> Most respondents in Havana knew about the *debate crítico*, but denied that it permits them to speak freely about their concerns. Several expressed frustration, saying they want to speak more openly about politics, but are fearful of doing so.

Several respondents in Villa Clara suggested that Raúl Castro’s call for a *debate crítico* probably resulted in discussions among students at the local university. However, they did not elaborate on the kinds of topics that students might have discussed, how open these discussions were, or whether such open discussion actually occurs. Others pointed to the government’s continued manipulation and filtering of information as evidence that the *debate crítico* has produced little change in the way information and opinions are publicly presented.

The *debate crítico* seems little known among people living outside of Havana, especially those in rural areas. None of the respondents in Santiago and Camagüey provinces mentioned the *debate crítico*. Some, however, explained that friends, relatives, and neighbors had become a little bolder in expressing discontent, but only when it came to certain topics. For example, the poor economic situation is widely recognized in Santiago as appropriate for criticism, and respondents felt comfortable discussing it with fellow citizens. Respondents in these provinces reported hearing more of such criticisms on the radio and in public—something they said was unimaginable in the recent past.

Most respondents seemed to know instinctively the boundaries of public criticism. Many tempered their remarks with token appreciation for the “good things” about the system when they felt that their criticisms were too strong. Certain names were unmentionable, and respondents used creative terms for Fidel and Raúl. Some preferred the classic hand gesture to show a beard, while another man referred to Fidel as “this gentleman.” Another respondent

---

<sup>15</sup> For information about the speech, log on to <http://www.granma.cubaweb.cu/2007/07/27/nacional/artic01.html>.



referred to him as “*El Otro Compay*” when the interviewer mentioned Compay Segundo’s longevity, saying that Fidel’s life may last as long as that of the storied Segundo.<sup>16</sup>

Overall, Cubans seemed willing to express discontent on certain limited issues. But this did not appear to be a result of Raúl Castro’s *debate crítico* initiative. Only students in some university settings were reported to be holding more open discussions in response to Raúl’s call for debate. Some respondents commented that Raúl might be allowing this low-level discussion of discontent to allow Cubans to vent frustrations without presenting a real threat to the government.

## Cuba’s New Leadership

Most respondents described Raúl Castro as a pragmatic leader who, unlike Fidel, does not make policy decisions based on ideological convictions. They described him as more ruthless than Fidel, and many felt that their quality of life could become worse once his grip on power is complete. Respondents’ fundamental loyalty is to Fidel; they described themselves not as communists or socialists but “*Fidelistas*,” and are skeptical that Raúl will inspire a following of “*Raúlistas*” or that he will overcome the Cuban people’s emotional support for his brother. While Raúl is seen as running the day-to-day operations, Fidel is considered to be still very much “in charge.” A 40-year old baseball coach “worries about Raúl,” suggesting that Cubans see him as less measured than Fidel and more likely to fall apart under pressure.

In Villa Clara, respondents see Fidel as the one who brought Cubans together, due to his strong moral and ethical standing among his peers. They believe that he is unaware of the extent of corruption and the people’s daily struggles.

Several Cubans commented on Raúl’s leadership style, saying that he is very “shrewd.” Some also mentioned Raúl’s response to price gouging after the hurricane as reflective of his blunt leadership style. Though interviewees acknowledged Raúl stopped an unsavory practice in hurricane-affected regions, the effort severely harmed countless families throughout the island. A few respondents also remembered that Fidel always traveled to hard-hit areas after a natural disaster occurred. They remarked that they had not seen Raúl visiting hurricane victims as Fidel often had.

Other interviewees questioned Raúl’s decision to choose people from his inner circle to serve in important government positions. For example, he passed over members of the younger generation of government leaders in favor of *históricos* who fought with him in the *Sierra Maestra*. Some of the younger respondents supported Felipe Pérez Roque, then the Minister of Foreign Affairs, as a future leader because he was not part of traditional politics of the older generation and understood how to manage necessary changes. Respondents interpret Raúl’s selection of the older generation to mean that loyalty is valued more than competence, and that

---

<sup>16</sup> Born in 1918, Compay Segundo was a Cuban musician and songwriter best known for his song “Chan Chan.” At a party, Segundo played for Fidel Castro. Fidel took Segundo’s pulse and remarked at his many years. He lived to be 95 years old before his death in 2003.

the future holds more of the same nepotism. Several young people in Holguín said that if they wanted a political career, they had to become part of the status quo.

A few interviewees described Raúl's leadership as the same as Fidel's, except for the few "cosmetic" changes. A 38-year old man said that Fidel and Raúl are "different dogs with the same collar," adding that he did not expect much from the younger brother. Another man said that recent reforms seem to have made the system more tolerant of Cubans' criticism. He described hearing radio shows featuring callers complaining about the political system, something he said was unthinkable a few years ago.

### **Structural Changes**

Interviewees provided mixed views about the effectiveness of recent reforms. Some believe that the Communist system will never change, and that there is no future for Cubans in Cuba. Others felt that reforms may occur quickly and decisively. However, the majority were a bit more measured, saying that change was inevitable, but they were unsure about when it would occur and worried that they would not live to see it themselves.

Respondents throughout the island are more concerned with surviving from one day to the next than with debating how to change the island's political model. Few Cubans trust that Raúl will implement significant changes in the near future. Even after Fidel's death, respondents doubted that Raúl's policies would diverge significantly from those of his brother. Most respondents in Havana, for example, doubted that reforms would continue, and believe that recent announcements are insignificant because the reforms have no impact on their daily lives. Several respondents in Holguín said that reforms authorizing the purchase of cell phones and computers are merely a legal recognition of something that occurred illegally for years.

Agricultural reforms were discussed in nearly all the interviews, given the recent hurricanes and increasing food shortages. However, few Cubans knew of the government's changes in agricultural policies. Instead, respondents pointed to agriculture as a key area where reform was necessary in order for Cuba to produce enough food to feed its population. Several *Habaneros* described the lack of food and its high cost as a "shame," because of the abundance of unused land in Cuba. They suggested addressing the issue by allowing private ownership of land and farms, not knowing that the government had announced such an initiative in March. In Havana, only a few respondents were aware of the recent agricultural reforms, which came up in discussions of milk shortages. Outside of Havana, respondents in the provinces—including rural areas—also knew little about agricultural reforms. When asked about the government's initiative to give out small plots of land, some respondents laughed. They wondered why the government had waited so long to give *campesinos* land that was now overrun with *marabú*, a thorny shrub that is difficult to eradicate.

As for the types of reforms that Cubans want to see, the priority for most is economic. Most interviewees who expressed a desire for change want more opportunities to improve their financial situation. They hope for a chance to conduct private economic activities without restrictions and prohibitions. This means an end to the omnipotent state apparatus with its "army



of bureaucrat inspectors” imposing heavy fines on owners of private businesses. Young respondents want changes that are more than “*un simple maquillaje*” (simple cosmetic makeover). Two Holguín respondents in particular said they want to see a radical change whereby Cuba abandons the socialist model of economic planning altogether.

In general, respondents throughout the island expressed little desire for political reforms. Only a few respondents from Holguín specifically expressed a desire for democracy and reform of the legislature. These respondents were under the impression that if representatives to the government were elected fairly, many of their country’s problems will be solved. Villa Clara respondents also wanted to see reforms to Cuba’s educational system. They were hoping for urgent improvements in educational policy, so that Cuba can continue to be one of the world’s leaders in education. In both Holguín and Villa Clara, respondents also described a need for reforms that will stem corruption by government officials, many of whom are using the system to intimidate the population while obtaining bribes or information.

## Timeline

According to the interviews, Cubans envision meaningful change unfolding over the next few decades, not the next several years. Those in their 30s and 40s hope to be alive when change finally occurs, suggesting that it will take more than a generation to transform Cuban society. Most respondents believe that the Communist system will eventually collapse and that change is inevitable. However, respondents had a difficult time estimating how long it might take for such collapse to occur and a transition to take place. Some of the long-term social effects of the totalitarian system—an increase in self-interest, lack of solidarity, overwhelming distrust and anemic work ethic among youth—will take generations to overcome, according to Cuban respondents.

Many believe that little will change until Fidel dies, suggesting that Raúl is unable to make significant changes while his brother is alive. Some feel this is merely a way for him to show respect to the *Comandante*, while others feel it is a fundamental lack of courage. Most Cubans do not see Raúl’s rise to power as a catalyst for change, with the vast majority of respondents stating that few large-scale changes will occur until both brothers are dead. A 31-year old *moto-taxi* driver asserted that Fidel still had complete influence over the government. “The government here is like a family,” he said. “As long as your dad is around the house—even if he’s old—he still runs the show.” He suspects that no major changes will occur in the next few years. “I’ll probably be old, but I hope to see it to know my kid will be okay.”

Most respondents felt resigned, saying that change would come from elsewhere—perhaps from top government officials, or even from outside Cuba. They spoke of change as a top-down phenomenon that depends on the decisions or whims of their leaders. Several respondents in Havana suggested that change depends on a shift in U.S. policy towards Cuba. One student believes that change will occur only once the United States reestablishes diplomatic relations with Cuba, ends the trade embargo, and lifts the travel ban.

Many respondents expressed the hope that a presidential administration led by Barack Obama will set a new direction for U.S. policy. One Holguín resident described the U.S. embargo as “stupid”; he declared that Cuba is so poor and weak that it poses no threat to U.S. interests anywhere in the hemisphere. A retired medical doctor said he believes Raúl is ready to talk to the United States, but that the United States is uninterested.

Respondents had markedly different expectations of how long change might take. Some argued that the precarious economy made change urgent. Others were skeptical. A 40-year old Havana man, for example, expected to see no changes to the system in his lifetime, echoing sentiments from other *Habaneros* that life will remain difficult for them for many more years.

Younger respondents differed from older ones regarding the pace and depth of changes they desired. Some—mostly older respondents above the age of 40—hoped for slow, steady changes that would start with limited opportunities for independent economic activity. They did not want to risk any traumatic structural changes to the socialist system that could destroy some of its achievements. Others—mostly students and respondents in their 20s—wanted quicker and more sweeping changes to Cuban society.

## State Institutions

The majority of respondents affirmed that the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution<sup>17</sup> (CDR) hold most of the power in local communities, while the *Partido Comunista de Cuba* (Cuban Communist Party, or PCC) exerts power over the CDRs and other mass organizations on the island. The CDRs continue to function as watchdogs for the government, but their ability to inspire revolutionary loyalty among the population has faded. Most respondents treat the CDRs as a necessary nuisance, yet they still lowered their voices when discussing them for fear of reprisals.

Throughout the island, respondents expressed negative feelings about the CDR. This was particularly the case in Santiago. Several respondents referred to CDR leaders and members as *chivatos*, morons or “government lapdogs.” One older woman actually barked like a dog when pointing at the house of the CDR President in her neighborhood. Another woman, a *cuentapropista*, became emotional when discussing the CDR. She revealed that she had an elderly relative living in her home who had served as the head of the neighborhood CDR for more than 20 years. She scorned the former CDR leader, using strong foul language. Apparently, her relative was an enthusiastic *chivato*, informing the police on many neighbors. The *cuentapropista* recounted that her relative’s family members—as with those of other CDR leaders—live in the largest and nicest houses simply because of their willingness to betray fellow citizens. She confided, “It is very hard not to hate people like CDR activists and other

---

<sup>17</sup>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.



revolutionary informants. I am not religious, but I have even gone to church to try to rid myself of this hatred I feel.”

Almost without exception, respondents expressed negative sentiments about the power and influence the CDR has in their daily lives. Only a few gave positive feedback, crediting the CDR with keeping crime at a minimum, because there is a CDR on every block “watching everyone.” The deep disdain results from the visible benefits that some CDR leaders enjoy as part of their post. Cubans said that it was obvious which house belongs to the local CDR President, since it would be the only one on the block that is freshly painted. Some respondents in Santiago said that they do not care for the CDR because they are fed up with fiery revolutionary rhetoric that carries no value 50 years after the beginning of the revolution.

Respondents seemed to both respect and fear the police. For example, *jineteros*<sup>18</sup> said they rarely approach tourists when the police are near. According to the researchers, the police presence was plainly visible in all provinces, particularly in the center of Havana and other provincial capitals. Researchers reported seeing various residents—mostly young people—stopped by police, who requested their identification cards. Police also stopped the taxi drivers of two researchers, who reported watching as the driver talked with the police for a few minutes and then paid a bribe in order to continue driving. The drivers explained that this was simply part of their job. If they wanted to continue transporting tourists, they must comply with police demands, which include frequent bribes.

## Youth

Respondents under the age of 30 are the most apolitical demographic group. Most expressly avoided discussing politics or were completely uninterested in the subject. More than older generations, young Cubans’ priorities are primarily economic; they are concerned with opportunities for personal and professional advancement and fulfillment.

Young respondents viewed their elders as people who have worked extremely hard with little or nothing to show for their efforts. Many have highly educated parents who struggled to provide for their families, and said that they want to avoid a similar fate. Growing up during the Special Period, Cubans in their 20s have known tough economic times. As a result, many young respondents had few concrete plans for their future. One young man who helped his parents run a *casa particular* admitted that he left his home only to go to the gym. He said that he has no future goals other than perhaps becoming a Jehovah’s Witness—if only he could give up alcohol and reggaeton music. Several others said their only future plans were to leave the country.

---

<sup>18</sup>A *jinetero* refers to a hustler who often tries to earn tips from tourists by giving them directions or showing them to a *paladar*, for instance. At the same time, a *jinetera* is a female prostitute. The distinction in the Cuban context is important since both *jinetero* and *jinetera* translate as sex workers in Spanish.



For many, any hope of improving their situation is synonymous with escaping as *balseros*,<sup>19</sup> or marrying a foreigner. Sexual tourism is popular in Cuba, since women who participate gain access to precious CUCs from foreign men and the possibility of a one-way ticket to another country. A researcher described the main *Plaza de los Trabajadores* in Camagüey a few days after hurricane Ike as “busy” with many *jineteras* in their 20s. Many were offering sexual services for 10-30 CUCs, while others walked hand-in-hand with foreign men in their 60s. Most of the young respondents in this province no longer want, as one put it, “to continue living like beggars.” They said that life in Cuba is only good if you are married to a foreigner, or are a well-known musician or a highly ranked athlete—and even then, most of these Cubans leave the country.

A group of young intellectuals from Holguín was particularly cynical about the future, and said they feel that youth are the most vulnerable social group in Cuba. Researchers reported a more pessimistic outlook from young people with higher levels of education. Two female students at the *Universidad de Habana* described life in Cuba. “Yes, we have to like it,” they said with irony. “It’s our country and we can’t leave.”

Several young respondents mentioned that they studied a profession but do not practice it because the pay is so low. Instead of pursuing university degrees or professional careers, many have weighed the costs and benefits and decided to pursue other avenues. Big cities, such as Santiago, have earned a reputation as a hotbed for young men dedicated to hustling tourists for dollars. According to numerous interviewees, this was reflective of a national trend of apathetic youth who do not want to study nor work traditional jobs. A telecommunications engineer working as a taxi driver said he sympathized with young people, “Cuba is a prison where you can’t work in your field and survive, but you can’t leave either.”

Older respondents tended to express concern about the work ethic and morals of Cuban youth. They accused the young people of laziness, noting that many of them spend their days wandering the streets instead of working or studying. Many described young people as amoral, and expressed concern about their fixation with material possessions and money. Some older Cubans also mentioned computers and the Internet as one cause of the undisciplined behavior they saw in young Cubans.

Despite the government’s *Pioneros* (Pioneers) program and other early childhood campaigns promoting the revolution’s ideas to young Cubans, Cuban youth expressed little loyalty to the revolution.<sup>20</sup> They seemed to be tired of the revolutionary rhetoric that pervades society and

---

<sup>19</sup> 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.

<sup>20</sup> The Jose Martí Pioneer Organization (Pioneers) is an organization for children run by the Cuban Communist Party. It started in Cuba in 1961 and was modeled after pioneer movements in other communist countries, such as the Soviet Union. Cubans are exposed to revolutionary rhetoric at a young age through the pioneers program, as well as other propaganda. For example, one researcher saw a children’s television program called “*Hola Amiguitos*” (Hello Little Friends). It consisted of six-year-olds discussing the “evils of the embargo” and “imperialist machinations,” and included political cartoons about U.S. President Bush and former U.S. Interests Section Chief James Cason.

were not interested in discussing any topics they saw as political. One young Habanero even said he “detested politics,” adding that none of his friends aspired to become government leaders.

Youth in Havana mentioned that they have limited opportunities to engage with other young people. Those who attend university said any organized youth activities were government-sponsored and behavior was closely monitored. Those who worked said that most of their time was consumed with making a living, and they lacked the extra money to spend on fun activities. Four young Habaneros in particular said they spend a lot of time at home because going out was expensive if you do not earn money in CUCs.

## The Catholic Church

Many respondents see the Catholic Church playing a small but positive role in developing civil society in Cuba. They cited as an example the church’s efforts in distributing aid after the hurricanes. Others said that the church has an exclusively non-political role in Cuban society and must maintain this status in order to be viewed favorably by the regime.

Interviewees practiced a variety of religious faiths. Many were Catholic, but there were Protestants, Jehovah’s Witnesses and followers of *Santeria*.<sup>21</sup> Most practiced a mix of Catholicism and *Santeria*, as is common in Cuba. There were also quite a few respondents, often younger Cubans in their 20s, who claimed to be agnostic.

Despite the mix of beliefs practiced by respondents, most spoke favorably about the Catholic Church as a provider of social services to local communities. They spoke with measured optimism regarding the resurgence of the church and its importance to the future of civil society. Many mentioned that the church has increased its influence in recent years partially through the distribution of humanitarian aid. They said this is a rare case where the church now plays a role in something that was traditionally controlled by the state.

As for whether the Catholic Church will play a political role in Cuba, some respondents felt that politics and religion were not deeply intertwined. A Protestant from Havana said that religion is a guiding moral rather than political force. Others admitted that, at a minimum, the church has to appease government leaders in order to continue the practice of convening large groups of people. According to one woman, Catholic priests are obliged to say positive things about the political system.

Others said that the mere existence of the church undercuts principles of communism and is therefore anti-regime by nature. One woman cited an instance where church officials stood up to a government effort to take money that had been donated to the church. Several respondents in Santiago recalled speeches by the Archbishop who introduced the Pope during his 1998 visit to Cuba. They described other priests who use the pulpit to decry the injustices of the system.

---

<sup>21</sup> *Santeria* (saint worship) is a mixture of Catholicism and the religion of African Yoruba tribes called *Lucumí*.



According to one respondent, the homily in one of the recent masses at *El Cobre*<sup>22</sup>—considered one of the holiest sites in Cuba—included warnings to the congregation that “we should not hold one man as a god, nor uphold a system as a false idol.”

One researcher who attended a mass reported that the priest directly addressed the struggles faced by the exile community and those who have an overwhelming desire to leave Cuba. “Everyone is born with love of their country,” said the priest. “But there comes a time when it conflicts with your beliefs, your ability to provide for your children, and your ability to better yourself.” The priest seemed to hint at the revolution’s successes while implying that its shortcomings included less freedom. Another man mentioned that at *El Cobre*, where many people leave offerings for the *Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre*, people had placed large posters with hundreds of signatures asking for the release of political prisoners, along with buttons featuring pictures and names of the prisoners.

Only one man suggested that the church was directly involved in opposition to the government. A middle-aged Catholic from Santiago, he said he knew of opposition groups organized by church members. He believed that they existed in part through “reading the Ten Commandments and realizing that this system violates almost all of them.” Perhaps this man was involved in such groups, but he would not give further details. No other respondents mentioned any similar groups organized by the church.

### Dissident and Human Rights Groups

Several respondents expressed familiarity with opposition groups, but respondents generally had little to say about dissidents. The most common reaction was a vague recognition, or perhaps an anecdote about someone standing up for their rights. Respondents also never used the term “dissident.” Some interviewees mentioned the *Damas de Blanco* by name, but no one discussed individuals or groups known as democracy and human rights activists.<sup>23</sup>

The majority of respondents said little in response to questions about dissidents and human rights groups, either because they knew nothing about such groups or because they were too nervous to discuss the topic. There were a few, mostly in Havana, who identified the *Damas de Blanco*, but denied any affiliation with them or any other groups. Only one person, an intellectual in Holguín, admitted she knew several people considered to be part of the opposition. Other respondents demonstrated little knowledge about dissident groups. According to two respondents in Holguín, the *Damas* were supported by church groups that oppose the government.

---

<sup>22</sup> “*El Cobre*” refers to the *Basilica de Nuestra Señora del Cobre*, considered to be Cuba’s most sacred pilgrimage site. The Basilica lies 20km northwest of the city of Santiago de Cuba, and is home to the patron saint of Cuba, the *Virgen de la Caridad*.

<sup>23</sup> The *Damas de Blanco* (Women in White) is a group of women whose family members are jailed dissidents. Every Sunday they march along Fifth Avenue in Vedado (a neighborhood of Havana) to protest the imprisonment of their relatives. They consider themselves a non-political group. As a result, some observers do not consider them to be part of the democratic opposition movement in Cuba.



Several people in Holguín expressed the view that anti-Fidel groups in the United States lack support on the island. Many *Habaneros*, despite their general lack of support for the government, still support the original ideas behind the 1959 revolution and resent U.S. infringement on their sovereignty. In Villa Clara, respondents believe that dissidents might be active in Havana, but said they are nothing more than hidden groups of conspirators. A doctor in the eastern part of Cuba poked fun at the country's limited civil society, stating that "...the only organizations on the island are government ones," which in his estimation were nothing more than "a bunch of mongoloids talking nonsense." He said that all Cuban non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are completely infiltrated, and have more government surveillance personnel than actual members. He felt that there were very few "dissidents"—a term he said was virtually unused in Cuba. "No one could talk about them," he added.

One man, whose brother had been imprisoned for defying the government's orders, spoke candidly about his opposition to the government. He summed up his experience of the revolution. "This place is a prison," he said, and compared the system and its effect on the people to a "virus" that had to be combated. When asked why more Cubans are not involved in opposing government abuses, he said that people are afraid and are not willing to risk retribution. He felt that many Cubans do not support the system and are tired of it, but their fear severely limits the effectiveness of what little organized opposition might exist.

### **Response to Abuses**

The daily struggle to survive appears to monopolize citizens' time and energy. Most interviewees said that the appropriate response to government abuse is to try to "finagle their way through their economic hardships" without making waves. A 50-year old Havana cab driver said that Cubans did not protest: "It is as if we are trained not to protest; no one wants to risk it." One woman warned that even today, "If you walk outside with a sign against Fidel, you will never see the light of day again."

Researchers asked interviewees what they would do if they were a victim of a *desalojo* (eviction), *acto de repudio*,<sup>24</sup> or other government abuse. Only one man, a 49-year old engineer, admitted that he had been a victim of harassment by government officials and informants who identified him as a *contrarevolucionario* (counterrevolutionary). He said government repression took place and he had personally been the victim of mob attacks. He described how government informants tried to entrap him. For instance, one would approach and ask if he wanted to buy some black market beef, to which he replied, "No, thank you." Another time, someone asked him how much it would cost to obtain fake documents to leave the country. A third person offered to pay him to put up an anti-government sign.

Most Cubans asserted that these acts are immoral. Some respondents in Santiago participated in *actos de repudio* and expressed sincere regret and remorse. A 60-year old retired woman from

---

<sup>24</sup> *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.

Santiago de Cuba said these acts were common in the 1980s after the Mariel Boatlift and that participation was forced. “We did it, but it was very difficult and done with a lot of pain.” Respondents reported that *actos de repudio* no longer occur, mostly because people keep quiet, so there is no reason for them. One man suggested that the Cuban government is trying to create a good image for the international community and does not want news of such acts to get into the international press.

Respondents in Habana and Holguín described being less willing to put up with aggressive government authorities than they were a few years ago. For example, one researcher described watching a 20-year old male in Habana hit and knock down a policeman. The policeman had stopped the young man and ordered him to come to him. The young man walked over to the officer, reached in his pocket to pull out his identification card, and presented it to the officer. The officer yelled at the man, “Did I ask for your ID?” Confused, the young man put away his card. The officer shouted in his face, “Now, show me your ID card.” Furious, the man hit the officer in the face with such a blow that it knocked him down. He turned and walked away quickly without running. This occurred in the middle of the day with many people watching.

Absenteeism at work and coded popular music are other ways that people participate in a limited form of protest. One young woman said, “If you know they will pay you the same amount—whether you show up or not, whether you get angry at work or not—then you will always prefer to do nothing and not go to work.” Many Cubans also rely on humor as a veiled way to denounce the system.

## The Future

Despite their aversion to discussing politics, respondents viewed questions about future reforms as less threatening than conversations about current political realities. Young people—those who were most likely to see change—discussed the future the least. Those under 30 were least concerned with political reforms, preferring to focus their energy on ways to better their individual situation, whether in Cuba or elsewhere. Most respondents age 30 and older seemed sure that the system would not last indefinitely, but were worried that they would not live to see or enjoy the benefits of large-scale reforms.

Many respondents seemed to live day to day. They think it is a luxury to imagine what life might be like in 12-18 months, much less think about whether they could be freer or better off. For example, a 37-year old doctor from Santiago said that he believes no ordinary Cuban could do much to change the system. “What can I do? *Resignarme. Resignarme y tratar de vivir mejor.*” (Be resigned and try to live better.) He said that most people want more money and a better economic situation; they are not thinking about freedom. Some of the most pessimistic are the youth, who are curious about the outside world and scheming about how to escape the island. None of the respondents expressed strong opinions regarding future leadership or key actors in a transition.

While many Cubans had opinions about the future of the system and the inevitability of change, no one presenting a vision of the future linked their personal plans to political change. Most



respondents compartmentalized the two issues and rarely discussed personal future plans. For example, a 61-year old retired woman from eastern Cuba felt that “there is no future, and the past isn’t worth remembering. You can only live in the present.” A few—such as one or two owners of *casa particulares*—talked about perhaps saving to improve their businesses or about their plans to leave the country. But many expressly stated that they have no future and lack opportunities to improve themselves. The combination of scrambling to meet basic needs and the presence of little opportunity for advancement seems to make planning for the future difficult.

Few respondents had much to say about exiles in the United States or Europe. One woman in her 30s said she understood the position that many exiles have regarding confiscated property, and thought that they should get it back. “I would feel the same way if I were them.” However, she was clear that they should only have a secondary role in the island’s future. “If they come over here bossing us around, telling us what we should and shouldn’t do, there will be problems. I understand their position, but our opinions must come first.”

## Conclusions

The interviews conducted by Freedom House in 2008 indicate that the reforms announced between March and September are having little impact on the lives of ordinary Cubans, who still seem to live day to day. They struggle to provide for their families, and the struggle to survive has intensified in the wake of the hurricanes.

Respondents are particularly concerned about food shortages and the possibility that the global financial crisis may hinder Cuba’s ability to “return to normalcy.” Many respondents worry that Cuba is entering another Special Period. Raúl alluded to “belt-tightening” in a speech in July, even before Hurricanes Gustav and Ike caused major damages to the agricultural sector.<sup>25</sup>

Lack of progress on the announced reforms, combined with damage from the hurricanes and news of a world economic crisis, appears to have made Cubans even more pessimistic about the prospects for change on the island. Although various economic and agricultural reforms were announced throughout the year, Cubans reported that they had not seen those reforms being implemented. The government blamed the hurricanes for delays in implementing reforms, but respondents did not expect implementation to begin anytime soon.

Respondents generally felt incapable of asserting their rights and working independently of the government to address concerns. While some observers expect the Catholic Church to play a role in a future transition, respondents stated that the church expressed dissent in only a limited fashion. Cubans spoke positively about the church’s role in distributing assistance in the aftermath of the hurricanes, indicating the potential for a greater social, as opposed to political, role for the church.

---

<sup>25</sup> “Cuba’s Castro warns world economy may slow reform,” *Reuters*, Jul 12, 2008. Available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/GCA-Cuba/idUSN1129429720080712>.



Fidel's presence is generally seen as a major obstacle to reforms that Raúl might initiate. Though many respondents do not expect Raúl's policies to be much different from Fidel's, they have noticed a difference in leadership style. They had not seen Raúl visiting hurricane victims, whereas Fidel always traveled to hard-hit areas after a natural disaster occurred. Differences in leadership style and questionable appointments to important government positions contributed to the lack of credibility many respondents associated with Raúl as a leader.

The interviews also revealed that most Cubans are unable to think about the future in concrete terms. Many said that the future would eventually bring major changes to the island, but they did not know how long it would take for Cuban society to transform. Some believe Cuba's fate depends on a change in U.S. policy, including reestablishing diplomatic relations with Cuba, ending the trade embargo and lifting the travel ban. They hope that Barack Obama's message of "change" will spell improvements in their own lives. Others said they are resigned to accept that their lives will not change for the better.

After living for five decades under the severe repression of Communist Party rule, most Cubans appear to know little about different societies or alternative forms of government. They have difficulty envisioning a better future for their country.

The findings of this survey point to the need for Cuban democracy activists to present a compelling vision for change, to expand their outreach to the public, and to empower citizens to take initiative within their communities. Dissidents, human rights activists, and other democracy advocates remain largely unknown or misunderstood in Cuba, because they are unable to communicate directly with the public. If they are to succeed, they need to find ways to expand their outreach, so that they can better inform Cubans of the alternatives to Communist rule and inspire citizens to participate in civic activities.

In recent years, democracy activists and other civil society actors, such as artistic, religious, and youth groups, have created some space for citizens to act with relative independence from the state. Post-hurricane relief and reconstruction efforts offer new opportunities for citizens to organize independently. Participation in civic activity, even if not overtly political, will be critical if change is to come to Cuba, because it begins to empower citizens and helps them feel that they have a stake in the future of their community and their country. That sense of empowerment could drive citizens to assert their rights and mobilize in demanding freedom for Cuba. At present, however, there is little evidence that ordinary Cubans feel so empowered.

## 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). Researchers spoke with *Habaneros* in Habana Vieja, Centro Habana, Playa, Plaza de la Revolución, Regla, Guanabacoa, Miramar, San Miguel del Padrón, and Habana del Este.

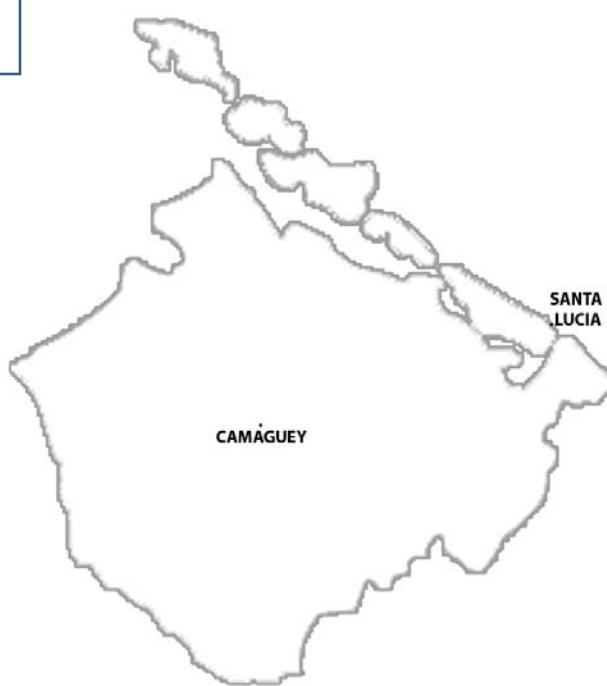


Just 300 miles east of Havana is Villa Clara province, home to many sugar and tobacco plantations. The capital city of Santa Clara is surrounded by low hills, called Las Alturas de Santa Clara. Many students come from all over the island to attend the Universidad Central de Las Villas in Santa Clara. In addition to Santa Clara, researchers found interviewees in the charming small town of Remedios, as well as Caibarién on the coast, Sagua La Grande, Isabela de Sagua, Sifuentes, Elguea, Camajuaní, Cayo La Brujas and Cayo Santa María.



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 Guardalavaca, and the nickel mining city of Moa.

**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 a 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 rainwater. Interviews were conducted in the capital city of Camagüey as well as Santa Lucia in the northern *cayos* (keys).

**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 of Santiago, Siboney and El Cobre.

## 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 on the part of Raúl Castro towards *la bolsa negra*, *cuentapropistas*, *paladares*, and other areas of the economy?
- 5) Do you think there will soon be more space for private businesses? Do you think there will also be independent political associations permitted by the government?

### *Debate crítico:*

- 6) What is the *debate crítico*, when was it, and are you satisfied with the process?

### *Cuba's New Leadership:*

- 7) Do you feel freer now than under Fidel Castro?
- 8) Do you think Raúl Castro is honestly looking for improvements in the lives of all citizens? Is the process of reform credible?
- 9) If not, what would it take for you to trust this reform process?

### *Structural Changes:*

- 10) Are there reforms in the country that are already underway? If so, are there signs that these are effective or ineffective?
- 11) Are agricultural reforms working? How?

### *Timeline:*

- 12) How much time do you think it will take Raúl to provide the changes you are expecting?
- 13) 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:*

- 14) Who really holds power in your town/province? The mayor, the party, the police, the CDR?
- 15) Are there differences between your local government and the national government? Is your local government more flexible than the national government?
- 16) What about the mass organizations in your community? Are they hard line or are they more flexible?

### *Youth:*

- 17) Do you think the youth are loyal to the revolution? Why?
- 18) Are there youth groups in your city or province? How do they normally spend their time?



19) 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?<sup>26</sup>

*Catholic Church:*

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

*Dissident and Human Rights Groups:*

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

*Popular Response:*

28) 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?  
29) Have you heard about the *actos de repudio*? What do you think of them?

*The Future:*

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

---

<sup>26</sup> No respondents had heard of these protests.