

A PROPOSAL FOR DEMOCRATIC CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM IN CUBA

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I) Introduction

First let me emphasize that I am a socialist, that I support the Cuban revolution, and that though I focus on a critical evaluation of Cuban democracy, I am well aware of the vast accomplishments of the Cuban revolutionary process. My critique emerges out of a deep desire to see the socialist revolution in Cuba **succeed** and **prosper** as an example for democratic socialists everywhere.

We all know that Cuba stands at a unique point in history as a society in transition between a form of Soviet style State Socialism and something else. We do not know what else, but we do know that it will include a very large tourist industry which will regularly bring millions of foreign nationals to Cuba. These conditions form the background to my remarks below.

In the following I will outline a strategic political program for institutionalizing democratic socialism in Cuba. This approach is based on an assumption that socialism can be embodied in a set of constitutional rules which would allow for a true democracy which would not be dependent on a particular party or set of leaders. My proposal is as follows.

II) The Proposal

The current leadership of the State and Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) would hold a national plebiscite on a democratic socialist constitution which would include necessary socialist

principles such as:

1) **Socialist Property Rights** establishing collective democratic ownership and control of large income-earning (or commercial) property, and democratic-political control, including final jurisdiction, over major social choices in the economy including social choices over: investment, technological change, income distribution, the social division of labor, prices, taxes, and subsidies, which affect large groups of people in society and not just the lives of individuals. Individual choice (as opposed to social choice) would be made accountable through competitive markets.

2) **Socialist Free Speech Rights** would establish collective democratic ownership and control of media with strong guaranties for the rights of minority and dissenting view points to be given access to media (perhaps by offering grants to fund anti-establishment media outlets).

3) **Socialist Free and Fair Election Rights** which would set up public financing of all elections to public office, with a strict prohibition on private (domestic or foreign) intervention in the political process.

4) **Socialist Rights to Equal Economic and Social Opportunity** which would include work, education, health care, child care, elder care, housing, and other basic already provided in Cuba.

5) **Socialist Right to an Independent and Non-Commercial Cultural Environment** which would establish principles for control

and use of culture including democratically elected and politically independent commissions of artists and non-artists to provide grants, and allocate media exposure, public venues, and space, for cultural production.

6) **Socialist Right to a Sustainable and Life Supporting Natural Environment** which would establish principles for communal environmental protection and stewardship.

These kinds of socialist principles would have to be complemented by an array of liberal political rights designed to restrict state power and despotism and ensure the rights of minorities and the continuation of democratic debate. These should include rights to free speech, free association (which may or may not lead to the formation of alternative political parties), strict separation of executive, legislative, and juridical, powers, etc. The traditional liberal right to own, or invest in, large scale social property would not be included in this democratic socialist constitution.

A democratic socialist constitution might also attempt to radically extend these traditional liberal democratic political rights to democratic rights of participation and accountability of all large hierarchical "public" and "private" bureaucracies. In many of these areas Cuban democracy is already more advanced than most democratic capitalist countries. The English political scientist, David Held, has called for such a process of radically

increased "double democracy" of "state" and "civil society".¹ This constitution would be made very difficult to amend. For example, it might require 2/3 or 3/4 majorities of Assemblies at both national and provincial levels. The military would be charged with defending the constitutionally structured state and government of Cuba.

One of the major affects of the new constitution would be that the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) would cease to be a branch of the state and would become instead one possible political party formed by free association in civil society. Existing party members would chose whether to remain in the party or not. The CP would cease to be effectively an arm of the state, but would receive a proportionate share of public financing for elections, just like any other voluntary association in civil society which chose to run candidates for public office. Initially some "affirmative action" for less powerful and hegemonic parties would be necessary significantly reducing current PCC funding. The PCC, like any other party, could set its' own criteria for membership. However membership in the PCC would cease to be confused with general concepts of "civic virtue", and instead would be dependent on the voluntary endorsement of the PCC political vision and program by its' members. No party would be viewed as having a "monopoly on virtue" as a key element of democracy is respect for alternative

¹ Models of Democracy, by David Held (Cambridge: 1987, Polity). See also Socialism After Communism, by Christopher Pierson (University Park, PA: 1995, Penn State), Chap. 7, for additional references.

viewpoints which are assumed to reflect the thinking of equally patriotic and well-meaning citizens. Arrogant and self-righteous Leninist notions of "vanguardism" have no place in a political democracy.

III) The Dangers

The referendum or plebiscite for the constitution could loose. This would amount to a rejection of democratic socialism which, thanks to the achievements of the revolution, would be incompatible with the current dominant political culture of the country. It would seem that, particularly if the current leadership mobilized the people around this constitutional reform as a national project which truly reflected the best aspirations of the goals of the revolution, now embodied in this constitution, rather than in the power or personalities of particular parties or leaders, the Cuban people would support this constitutional project.

After ratification of the constitution, major efforts would be made by U.S. operatives (CIA or other) and by anti-Castro Cubans to influence the elections. It would appear however that constitutional rules prohibiting any private support for candidates or parties, and democratic public rather than private control of all media outlets, would severely limit the extent and scope of this kind of subversion of fair democratic process in Cuba. Moreover, as the Cuban people are well aware of this possibility, they would presumably vigorously reject any party or candidate which appeared to represent a foreign or exile community agenda.

It is unclear that this process would dramatically increase subversion or destabilizing opportunities beyond what they already are, because of the massive influx of millions of foreign tourists every year into Cuba, and the current broadcasting assault on the island by the U.S. and right-wing Cubans.

IV) The Benefits

The benefits of such a political transformation would include the opening up of free unconstrained public debate currently severely constrained by social pressure or legal prohibitions on free assembly, and free dissemination of dissenting political views. The development of democratic institutions, practices, and culture now possible because of the achievements of the revolution in the fields of education, health care, and income distribution. A vast reduction of unnecessary and arbitrary state repression of Cuban citizens with regard to participation in public debate, membership in political parties, etc. This would all serve to open up channels for the people to openly voice their frustration, and critiques of government policies, without being stigmatized as traitors to the Cuban revolution and reduce the possibility of ultimate reversal of the gains of the revolution because of increasing frustration and alienation from a leadership, party, and state, seen as exercising power over the people rather than serving the people. As the goals of the revolution would become institutionally embedded rather than dependent on political leaders or homogeneous (democratic centralist) political ideologies. This

would prevent **personal frustration** or weariness of the same personalities in power from becoming **political disillusionment** with the goals of the revolution. Elected leaders and parties in multi-party democracies are often replaced by alternative leaders and parties simply because the people want to "try something new" - new people and different political programs and emphasis.

This would be of great benefit to Cuba's international relations as the U.S. could no longer pretend to be opposed to the Cuban regime because of its violations of human rights and democratic freedom. The public relations battle with the U.S. would focus on the issue of **socialism** or the social control and ownership of commercial property and democratic planning. This would become a debate between capitalism and socialism rather than between democracy and oligarchy (or Communist dictatorship).

Cuba would be in a much stronger moral and political position and, I believe, would receive much stronger support from democratic socialist governments in Europe and elsewhere who would now have no reason to oppose Cuba but quite the opposite. Cuba would be seen by democratic socialists world-wide as a country in which the most progressive, most advanced ideals, of radical socialist democracy had been institutionalized. Much as the U.S. was seen in the 18th and 19th centuries even by Marx as its' constitution embodied the most progressive ideals of bourgeois liberal democracy of the time. This would also be of tremendous importance to the socialist struggle world-wide, and especially in the U.S., as it would set an example and standard of democracy, to which the lesser bourgeois-

democracies of the capitalists countries would be compared to.

V) Timing

On the issue of the best timing for democratic reforms, it would appear that these fundamental political reforms should come sooner rather than later as their endorsement by the father of the revolution, Fidel Castro, would serve to greatly legitimate, and enhance the identification of the goals of revolution and of the nation-state with the new constitution. The postponement of these reforms on the other hand would appear to have the effect of reducing support for socialism as increasing numbers of people are alienated from the existing party and leadership - now wholly identified with the revolution, because of economic hardship and increased dependency on the tourist and joint-enterprize economy, seen as a sort of "capitalist sector" in Cuba. Of course, such a constitutional referendum would require mass mobilization and therefore would need to be carefully planned so that it could be implemented in the least burdensome way possible. This however is a management problem which is separable from the principled need to implement this program of fundamental political reform as soon as possible.

VI) Conclusion

Finally, the fact that this proposal itself, cannot be freely debated, disseminated, publicized, in Cuba is itself symptomatic of the seriousness of the political problem in Cuba today. In my view

a clear break with the inherited and residual Leninist and Soviet political structures in Cuban society be made and made soon, if the Cuban revolution is to survive.

The key question is whether the hold on power by the current leadership and party is objectively necessary to preserve and further the revolution or whether it reflects the natural tendency of those in power to cling to power even if it is objectively destructive of the ultimate survival and progress of the revolution. Vinceremos!