

Workshop Minutes (January 25, 2001)
Prospects for Succession and the Orderly Evolution of Political Power in Cuba

Fulton Armstrong opened the workshop by describing the assumptions the participants would make in analyzing the prospects for political succession in Cuba. First, they could assume that Fidel Castro wants a “legacy” whereby his own followers would be in charge after he abdicates. Second, Castro’s people want to stay in power afterwards and therefore need a “Plan” that is not widely known. Third, Castro is involved in this planning, but is not likely to hand over power in advance, as he would like to control the change. Fourth and last, as no one can fill Castro’s role precisely, how much change is likely and how fast will it come?

The key variables that the participants were asked to consider were level of violence (if any) upon regime change, military/state security support of transition, the credibility of the Cuban Communist Party (CCP) during transition, existence of an united opposition (i.e. with or without popular support), and the likely international reaction to these events.

Jorge Dominguez stated that several important indicators appear to point toward further regime stability rather than succession. However, he contended that a significant *transition* was underway from a totalitarian to an authoritarian regime. Dominguez was skeptical of a peaceful succession upon Fidel Castro’s death, but believed that such a possibility might occur. To bolster his argument that Cuban politics are in transition rather than moving through a succession process, Dominguez asserted that today’s situation in Cuba is similar to the 1970s. He argued that, in both cases, changes were evidence of regime stability rather than indications of a succession movement or process.

Dominguez described the transition as a three-fold process:

- Economic -- markets are a part of Cuba’s present and future.
- Military -- the Cuban military is being downsized.
- Ideological -- the revolutionary focus has been replaced by emphasis on economic progress.

To institutionalize these changes, Dominguez argued that wide delegation of authority to technocrats and regional Cuban Communist Party (CCP) First Secretaries is occurring. These members of the elite have increased power and occasionally break the rules without penalty. However, he believed these actions reflected the fact that Cuban Communist Party members were merely diversifying their portfolios to have a stronger power base when succession occurred; they were not intent on hastening succession.

Dominguez noted that Fidel Castro and his top leadership remained in control. The First Secretary of the Communist Party retained authority to overrule Senate laws and state-controlled economic austerity measures continued to be the order of the day. Raul Castro remained the most likely figure to succeed to the top leadership position upon Fidel’s death.

Randy Pherson observed that there are many potential indicators of change in Cuba, but the challenge is to look at the right ones (those pertaining to succession). He believed that the “positioning” of military leaders, mid-level bureaucrats, and others in preparation for transition is crucial in determining who is shoring up future political power. For

Pherson, rules may not matter at all, nor the current national political system, as there may be other leaders outside of Havana waiting to assume control.

Marifeli Perez-Stable noted the development of both a mobilizational and institutional model within Cuba during the 1990s. Mobilizational politics stress “values” such as Fidel Castro’s leadership, Cuba’s historic mission, honor, revolutionary ethics, and the need for sacrifice. Institutional politics emphasize collective leadership, strengthening institutions, less centralized economic control, and more attention to the needs of everyday life rather than the imperatives of history. Perez-Stable asserted that, by 1997, these two models combined to form the “Third Way,” which is characterized by economic reform, legalization of private enterprise, and an opening of the political system amidst the presence of mass mobilizations. She asserted that the Third Way has arisen because, during the 1990s, a significant number of people in leadership positions wanted reform, but the reformers lacked resources and were stopped by Castro and the conservatives.

Perez-Stable noted that the CCP has been reinvigorated during the 1990s. In particular, regional party cadre membership has increased over this time, with cadre representation as a percentage of the Central Committee now standing around 40%, a significant increase from the late 1980s. Since 1999, provincial parties have seen two rounds of Party Assemblies. The CCP is developing new methods and styles to make socialism more effective while emphasizing CCP leadership and credibility. Since 2000, more attention has been paid to mass organizations, e.g., roundtables, demonstrations, and public assemblies have been emphasized. However, Perez-Stable noted that, although the people continue to respond to these mobilizations, they are merely going through the motions. Socialist and revolutionary rhetoric no longer inspires them.

The military is also a changed institution from that of the early 1990s. It still prepares to resist possible aggression, but now has an expanded role in civic affairs, especially through manufacturing and construction. The military and state security organizations have also become the guardians of market economics, a role that Perez-Stable contended gives officers the opportunity to develop “golden parachutes” that strengthen their attachment to the communist regime.

Perez-Stable concluded that the Third Way will take Cuba through Castro’s passing, unless the people tire of mobilizational politics and stop even going through the motions. In either event, she asserted that the Third Way is not preparing the Cuban leadership for the post-Castro era. Although Cuba and its leadership are in a better position than during the 1990s, Cuban elites are resistant to change. However, she believed that the CCP would remain a part of any successor regime.

Mark Falcoff observed that the CCP’s survival throughout the economically austere decade of the 1990s must have convinced many mid-career professionals and bureaucrats that the Third Way would permit peaceful political succession under CCP rule. He acknowledged Cuba’s economic problems-- particularly the near exhaustion of its capital stock -- but considered that the infusion of youthful members into the CCP might work against “mobilization exhaustion.” Furthermore, even if mobilization resources became exhausted, he wondered if fear of the “Miami alternative” might keep emigration under control. He also felt that current elites might remain in power even if they proved

resistant to change because Cuba lacked alternatives to their continued rule.

Damian Fernandez presented his “Dynamic Model” of contemporary Cuba. He believes that the Cuban political leadership has sustained its power against a backdrop characterized by three phenomena:

- Destatization – The state’s hold over the every day life of its people has eased, principally through the rise of market economics, increased influence of the Catholic Church, and a general decay of enthusiasm for socialism.
- Informalization – Social relationships are becoming increasingly important compared to the people’s relationship with the state.
- Individualization – New social classes are emerging and becoming important in social and political relations. In this regard, Fernandez emphasized the potential importance of the rise of “civic activists,” government officials who use their positions to improve social welfare, but often stretch the rules in the process. He noted that scholars have not adequately studied this potentially important emerging group.

Fernandez contended that the state is slowly losing importance at the level of everyday life, although it is still perceived to be a strong source of upward mobility, particularly for the young. He further maintained that Cuba has entered a period of downward adjustment, as State control is reduced through the three processes described in his model. He described this changing relationship between the government and the people as a tacit *modus vivendi*: formal control by the state that allows a certain degree of informal resistance by the people(but no overt, organized opposition). This has manifested itself in the presence of a *doble moral* or dual morality among the people, who apply different standards of conduct when dealing with public and private matters. Fernandez concluded that the possibility of a softer succession is more likely now, given this arrangement.

Dan Fisk agreed that the Cuban government is downsizing and is aware of its relative decline. He therefore recommended looking at certain benchmarks within Cuban popular culture as indicators of how far change has progressed. These included developments in artisan theatres (engaging the state), among intellectuals (in their relationship with the state as alternative analysts), the state school system (as an indicator of Party discipline), the Armed forces and their role in the economy, dissident presence (and individual acts of protest), and the formation of a new dissident leadership. Given Fernandez’ comments and Perez-Stable’s remarks about how the Cuban people were just going through the motions of mobilizational politics, Fisk wondered if an examination of these factors might show that popular culture has already experienced a succession to a post-revolutionary/post-communist stage of political life.

Edward Gonzalez characterized external factors affecting succession by presenting two possible scenarios.

First, Gonzalez viewed Cuba “through a glass darkly.” He asserted that Cuba’s older generation (over 40 years of age) fears the consequences of change after Castro. This group wants their entitlement programs maintained, which may not occur if the economy continues to become more open to outside markets. This group views with concern changes that have occurred in Russia, the Baltic states, and other Eastern European states

following the fall of communism. The senior/mid-level ranks of the elite (the revolutionaries of the 1950-60s) share these concerns, but have more to lose if the Cuban Communist Party loses power.

Gonzalez next viewed Cuba “through a glass brightly.” Several groups view succession as a clearly desirable development. These include Cuba’s youth, the group that has had the most contact with the outside world. They view the present order as an obstacle, and embrace rapid change as necessary for themselves and Cuba. Members of this group may emigrate from Cuba if things do not develop along their preferred path. The Cuban intelligentsia and professional class have the most exposure to the West, and want normalized relations with the world. However, they may not necessarily be pro-West and in favor of open markets. Others who may work towards liberalizing Cuba include self-employed entrepreneurs who want more market access, and junior party leaders who do not have so much invested in the CCP.

Gonzalez contended that Afro-Cubans comprise 50 percent of the population and are ambivalent regarding succession. On the one hand, they feel they will become more important politically following succession, because they do not share many of the benefits of the current order and have suffered various forms of discrimination under its rule. On the other hand, they are aware of the uncertainties accompanying succession, and understand that succession might actually worsen their condition.

Julia Sweig remarked that there is an evolving coalition of domestic groups and a relationship between domestic reform and external factors within Cuba. External factors include: Cuban trade, foreign direct investment (FDI), migration, travel, foreign contacts, and diplomatic relations. In the last 10 years, domestic reform includes: increased religious freedom, dollarization of portions of the economy, dismantling of state farms, and civic activism at the local level. She contended that all of these developments have been driven by the regime’s need to respond to economic contraction following the discontinuation of Soviet subsidies. She does not believe that any reforms undertaken thus far are attributable to US policy towards Cuba. On the contrary, she asserted that Cubans have shown a uniformly negative response to US policies and actions toward Cuba.

A discussion period followed, in which participants were asked whether the forgoing presentations lent credence to the existence of a Cuban government plan to manage succession. Fernandez stated that the Catholic Church has become a popular cultural force, but does not represent an explicit political strategy to shape succession. Jerry Gallucci asked what would have happened if Castro had died earlier, before the transition period began? Who would have started the succession? Are there institutional mechanisms running that are independent of Castro’s death? Domiguez responded that there is no strategy in place, but there is a tool kit, with missing tools. There is a problem with the rules, which are still designed to concentrate power in Fidel Castro’s hands. The tools have been updated in the 1990s, but are not effective for transition.

Kenneth Flamm from the University of Texas remarked that a distinction should be drawn between a transition required by the withdrawal of Soviet support and true succession dynamics. There is nothing in place today like Deng Xiaoping’s plan for succession. There has been an effort to put new people in authority at lower levels,

which are not responsible to the Old Guard. There has also been an effort to anoint a young protégé for Castro, but without success thus far. Additionally, there is also a conscious effort to balance authority between economic technocrats and ideologues. Dominguez added that the personnel changes in the 1990s are not part of a succession plan, but are used as a de facto plan currently. He observed that the fact that many high-level ruling elite have only been in place since the 1990s means that the CCP has a group of individuals who are accustomed to ruling without Soviet subsidies. Such a group could facilitate Raul Castro's succession upon Fidel's death.

Bill LeoGrande kicked off the afternoon session, which dealt with mechanisms of succession, by presenting two scenarios: sudden succession (Fidel Castro dies within the next two years), or later succession (Castro dies in ten to fifteen years). In the first case, the Cuban elite will be very confused and distracted, which will disrupt their cohesion and degrade their ability to resolve conflict among themselves. Raul Castro can be expected to become the new leader and the elite would rally in his support. There would be no significant policy change, but a greater internal debate about long-run change.

Under the later succession scenario, the members of a successor regime would have controlled an increasingly large part of Cuban political life as the aging Fidel Castro reduced the areas over which he exercised direct control. As a result, internal conflicts within the elite would be less intense than in the first scenario because some of the larger issues would have already been resolved. The future direction of the economy would be more settled and golden parachutes would be more widely dispersed. Members of the younger generation will have filled elite positions as older members have retired or died, which should improve the elite's flexibility in responding effectively to increased popular demands for change. In all, a system will develop which is more receptive to political reform, as the post-Castro elite identifies with nationalist views that push for increased economic liberalization while attempting to remain independent from the United States.

Kenneth Flamm used structural changes in Cuba during the 1990s to argue that Cuban economic policy can only develop in one direction, i.e., toward increased liberalization and marketization, if the ruling elite were to continue to provide satisfactory economic conditions for their people. He noted that, following the withdrawal of Soviet subsidies, the Cuban regime had only two options to prevent popular discontent due to economic hardship:

- It must find a new sponsor to replace the Soviet Union or
- It must adopt an outward looking development strategy.

Flamm asserted that there were no other prospective patrons except for the United States, which was clearly unacceptable. Accordingly, the regime had to embrace some degree of economic liberalization. FDI was liberalized, as was tourism, a variable exchange rate was implemented, the agricultural system was quasi-privatized, and small-scale private enterprises were tolerated/legalized. While the state economy and sugar production declined, tourism, non-state employment, resource-based exports (nickel, cobalt), biotechnologies, and Internet activities increased.

Flamm reasoned that, since the key elements of Cuban economic liberalization involve tourism, resource-based exports, and high technology/services niches -- with the

key market being the United States, -- increasing Cuban integration with the rest of the world is inevitable. In fact, he noted that tourism is already vital to the economy, and it is becoming harder to control foreign contacts as many Cubans are already connected with the outside world.

Flamm maintained that the result so far has been the development of a dual economy, an outward looking one characterized by dollarization, trade, and tourism, and the other domestically-based. Flamm noted that the dual economy has been an increasing source of domestic tension.

Mark Falcoff remarked that Cuba is part of the Latin American “familia of revoluciones” (e.g. Nicaragua, Bolivia, Mexico), but with Eastern European touches. He argued therefore that one should expect the CCP to assimilate forty years of revolutionary experience as it continues public socialism and teaches revolution in its schools. For example, the Dominican Republic had a dictatorship, an island society, state employment, a strong state security structure, and was meddling with its neighbors (including the US). It had a succession under the existing political elite. There are similarities that could apply to Cuba.

The remainder of the workshop was comprised of a discussion about the internal and external implications of succession in Cuba:

Jerry Gallucci believed that Castro is trying to stir up revolutionary elites, keep them on their toes, and make small changes so that after his death his regime will survive. Andy Claster thought that a post-Castro regime possessed a number of levers to win popular support, such as privatizing sectors of the economy. Dominguez noted that Raul Castro still has weak political skills, and needs some breathing room to develop military, political, and economic policy if he is to successfully assume the leadership role after Fidel’s death. However, Howard Davis believed that Raul Castro is a good transition figure. He has credibility in the military, with the elite, and with old revolutionaries. He must use existing institutions to accommodate/channel protests and change.

Amy Rollins noted the importance of monitoring the pace of change as well as the kinds of changes that are occurring. Sweig and Flamm mentioned the effect of sanctions on regime transition in Cuba. Sweig believed that sanctions are allowing Castro to control the pace of change in Cuba.

Perez-Stable commented that Cuba is looking for ways to normalize relations with the US without repeating the past. She noted that Cuban women have a different set of issues to address. Jeff DeLaurentis added that Cuba would gauge normalization in relation to its national economic goals.

With regard to external factors, Falcoff believed that the successor regime’s foreign policy would include accepting aid from Europe and the US Cuban-American community. But such a move would require a change in rhetoric, further political liberalization (release of political prisoners), and freedom of the media (gradually). All are examples of reform. Flamm contended that drugs and migration would be problems after transition, as there are no controls on these phenomena within Cuba.

Kathy Degutis concluded that the first six months or year of the new government would be critical to understanding the regime.