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**The Survival of a Revolutionary Regime:  
Politics and Economics in Post-Soviet Cuba**

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## **Abstract**

The dissolution of the Soviet Union triggered a crisis within Cuba commonly referred to as the *Special Period*. Economic constraints forced the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) to carefully adjust their market approach without compromising their political agenda. Fidel Castro passed away in 2016, yet his regime is still in power and the U.S. embargo against Cuba remains in place. This paper will analyze the strategies that the PCC adopted to enable its political survival. Cuba has largely been a one-party state since the 1960s with the PCC effectuating a combination of four different survival mechanisms to prolong their rule. I will discuss how the party has implemented these techniques into their policy while identifying how their medical diplomacy has been an outlier separating Cuba from other autocracies. The decision making by Cuban leadership in the post-Soviet era has contributed to the government's persistence despite internal and external threats. Castro's PCC has weathered decades of opposition movements, but recurring economic crisis has cast doubt on the party's ability to withstand further sociopolitical pressures.

## **I. Introduction**

When the Berlin wall came crashing down signaling the end of the U.S.S.R.'s control over much of central and eastern Europe, political scientist Francis Fukuyama famously quipped that the world had reached the "end of history".<sup>1</sup> Communism would soon become a political artifact of the past and the age of western liberal democracy would sweep the globe. Fukuyama's predictions have since been a topic of debate among academics and they continue to be called into question, but it was clear that the unraveling of the Soviet Bloc was a crushing blow in the power struggle between western neoliberalism and their socialist adversaries in the east.

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<sup>1</sup> Fukuyama, "The End of History?", p.4

As Soviet hegemony in Europe ended in the late 1980s, one of the few remaining socialist governments lingered just a few miles off the coast of Florida. Cuba, a longtime agitator of the United States, was about to go through the worst economic downturn the PCC had experienced since coming to power. Despite a barrage of conspiracies instigated by U.S. intelligence officials to unseat Fidel Castro and an unforgiving blockade, he came out of Cuba's *Special Period* still clinging to the presidency.

How has Castro's PCC withstood decades of economic turbulence, crippling sanctions, and U.S.-backed plots of insurgency and assassination without succumbing to the incessant efforts of destabilization? This study finds that the longevity of Castro's PCC is a result of economic adjustments, arousal of nationalist sympathies, the suppression of political nonconformists, and the investment in a healthy body politic.<sup>2</sup> These four factors have been essential in ensuring the staying power of the revolutionary party.

Beginning with Cuba's economic shortcomings of the 1990s, this paper explores the integration of Cuba's market reforms and how they proved to be crucial to their economic recovery.<sup>3</sup> The PCC's acceptance of increased foreign direct investment (FDI) facilitated their transition into a globalized economy after the dismantling of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON). Cuba's vulnerability during this period was aggravated by intensified economic warfare from the U.S. government.

The next section will observe Castro's ability to conjure up a patriotic fervor that has been enmeshed in the culture since the 19th century.<sup>4</sup> His charisma and gravitas amongst the

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<sup>2</sup> Kreiger, "A Century of Census Tracts: Health & the Body Politic", p.355

<sup>3</sup> Enriquez, "The Cuban alternative to neoliberalism: Linkages between local production and tourism after 1990", p. 106

<sup>4</sup> Hennessy, "The Roots of Cuban Nationalism", p. 345

people of Cuba were instrumental in redirecting the ire of Cubans away from the crisis and towards the United States.

Social scientists have found that autocratic regimes have appealed to the public through nationalist rhetoric to raise their own popularity.<sup>5</sup> Fidel's cunning deployment of nationalism relied heavily on the reputation of larger-than-life figures like that of Cuban poet and activist Jose Marti and Argentinian guerilla, Ernesto "Che" Guevarra. Che's and Marti's respective legacies helped to buoy Castro's public approval during Cuba's "rectification process".<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, I will discuss how the consequences of U.S. interference has manifested into a communal surveillance organization that has become the eyes and ears of the PCC. The Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR) have collaborated with the PCC since the 1960s to assure that the party's unbridled power remains intact by silencing any voices deemed antithetical to their ideological homogeneity.<sup>7</sup> The CDR's tasks range from intimidating anti-state actors, serving the candidacy commissions for political leadership, and engaging the population at the grassroots level during election season. Their responsibilities have been paramount to the PCC's political durability.

Censorship and persecution of political expression continue to be an issue within the island's social and political conditions, but the government's role is also defined by their provisions for free medical care, education, and subsidized housing. The country's commitment to the health and wellbeing of not just Cubans, but the global population has helped to strengthen their trade portfolio and financial prospects. Cuba's medical program benefits Cubans and citizens of the world alike. Their renowned physicians are assigned to countries in times of

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<sup>5</sup> Maerz, "The Many Faces of Authoritarian Persistence: A Set-Theory Perspective on the Survival Strategies of Authoritarian Regimes", p.67

<sup>6</sup> Tablada, "Che Guevara: Economics and Politics in the Transition to Socialism", p.26

<sup>7</sup> Colomer, "Watching Neighbors: The Cuban Model of Social Control", p. 121

duress while also acting as a trade-chip in exchange for materials that the island is lacking.<sup>8</sup> By capitalizing on the skill and innovation of their medical professionals, they have been able to form new alliances and pathways towards economic development.

Before covering the four factors highlighted in reference to the PCC's survival, I first give background information to provide better understanding of Cuba's political and economic trajectory into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I have included data and analysis published by scholars utilizing a review of primary and secondary sources including government documents, speeches, World Bank data, and existing literature that examines the political and economic approach Cuba pursued after the Soviet Union's downfall. I will then go over my four explanatory variables that have empowered the socialist party's protracted rule over Cuba. Starting with the government's economic reforms, I assess the PCC's tolerance for heightened inputs of FDI and tourism to aid fiscal recovery. The next section forays into the roots of Cuban nationalism and its relevance to the public's confidence in the party. My third variable explains the multipurposed value of Cuba's CDR as an instrument to foster civic engagement but also government protection. Lastly, I point to Cuba's investment in health and medicine which functions as both a driver for international solidarity and a profitable export good.

## **II. Background**

After Fidel Castro and his 26<sup>th</sup> of July Movement (M-26-7) emerged victorious from the revolution and successfully deposed of Fulgencio Batista, the U.S.'s dominion over Cuban sugar quickly came to a halt. Castro began to nationalize their industrial and commercial sectors and issued a sweeping land reform that stripped U.S. businesses of their assets and placed control over their sugar supply into the hands of the state. Expropriation of land away from private

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<sup>8</sup> Feinsilver, "Oil-for-doctors: Cuban Medical Diplomacy Gets a Little Help From a Venezuelan Friend", p.105

interests and wealthy landowners did not come without incurring costs to Cuba's economic and political stability. Eisenhower reacted to Castro's agrarian reform by drastically reducing the U.S.'s sugar quota.<sup>9</sup>

This response marked the beginning stages of an embargo that would severely inhibit Cuba's import and export opportunities. Cuba would quickly need to find a trade partner as their dwindling options for economic development was not ideal for the newly minted revolutionary party. Castro's burgeoning relationship with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev forged a trade partnership and a landing spot for their sugar in exchange for much needed raw and finished goods. Their alliance would place Cuba directly in the international spotlight at the height of the Cold War adding to the tension between the two global superpowers.

Cuba benefited from dependence on Soviet imports until the Eastern Bloc and COMECON was formally dissolved in 1991.<sup>10</sup> COMECON's disbandment compounded with the blockade overwhelmed Cuba's economy which precipitated a societal panic throughout the island. With the breakdown of the Soviet Union and sustained U.S. sanctions sending the country into an economic depression, Castro was forced to implement austerity and privatization rollouts to resuscitate their cash-strapped economy. Cuba's budgetary stagnation from the early to late 1990s, dubbed the *Special Period*, had major implications for the PCC and informed the differing tactics they pursued to remain in power.

Atop of the PCC's agenda were measures to gradually decentralize their economy to induce desperately needed financial stimulation. A steady flow of increased FDI was a welcome sign for some but questioned by party fundamentalists concerned that increased liberalization meant abandoning their socialist principles. Cuba used the revenue from FDI to uphold their

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<sup>9</sup> Dye and Sicotte, "The U.S. Sugar Production and the Cuban Revolution.", p.698

<sup>10</sup> Bideleux and Jeffries, "A History of Eastern Europe: Crisis and Change." P.582

commitments to government subsidies exemplifying a neostructuralist approach within a socialist framework.<sup>11</sup> By positioning Cuba's revised economic policy within a neostructuralist model we can see how government regulation is required for the integration of a protectionist state within a globalized economy.<sup>12</sup> Building off of structuralism advanced by economists and academics in the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), neostructuralism pushes further the conversation of accruing pecuniary gains in a global trade network without embracing the *Washington Consensus*.<sup>13</sup> Chilean economists Ricardo Ffrench-Davis and Miguel Torres claim that neostructuralism is an alternative approach to the spread of neoliberalism that swept through Latin America during the 1980s.<sup>14</sup> Neostructuralism encourages participation in a globalized markets, but instead of laissez-faire capitalist modifications it requires state-monitored safeguards to cultivate equitable growth.<sup>15</sup> While increased FDI alleviated stress felt by many Cubans, they were somewhat incremental and have in no way propelled Cuba into a semi-peripheral status with a robust industrial capacity.<sup>16</sup>

The economic reforms gave the party some respite, but Castro also tapped into the Cuban people's love of country to divert public anger towards the U.S. and keep up his public appearance. Cuba's political persona is birthed from the philosophical underpinnings of revolutionaries dating back to the colonial era all the way up to the M-26-7. Their partisan identity has resulted in a unique brand of nationalism that has afforded Castro an ability to

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<sup>11</sup> Enriquez, "The Cuban alternative to neoliberalism: Linkages between local production and tourism after 1990", p. 106

<sup>12</sup> Ffrench-Davis and Torres, "Neo-Structuralism", p.2

<sup>13</sup> Ffrench-Davis and Torres, p.2

<sup>14</sup> Ffrench-Davis and Torres, p.2

<sup>15</sup> Ffrench-Davis and Torres, p.3

<sup>16</sup> Wallerstein, "The Rise and Future Demise of the World Capitalist System: Concepts for Comparative Analysis", p.401

mobilize an impassioned populace to gain support.<sup>17</sup> Cuban nationalism has its roots in anti-imperialism and anti-Americanism. Sustained economic warfare waged by the U.S. State Department provided Castro and the PCC a “David vs Goliath” representation that they have leaned into in order to spur a “rally-around-the-flag effect”.<sup>18</sup>

Cuba’s portrayal of the U.S. government has come from a legacy of foreign policy summarized by attempts of Cuban regime toppling since the Cold War era<sup>19</sup>. Plans to undermine the PCC were used as a justification for Castro to establish a “revolutionary surveillance” wing of the party laying the foundation of what would later become the CDR.<sup>2021</sup>

CDR representatives are key actors to the political process in Cuba. While they do contribute to a police-state environment by harassing citizens who voice their displeasure with the PCC, they also serve as a conduit between their communities and the government by relaying grievances or requests. Their versatility as agents of both neighborhood surveillance and support has materialized into a circumstance in which people feel like their voices are heard but only insofar as they do not deviate from the government’s platform. The CDR’s pervasive community presence has aided in reinforcing the loyalty to the PCC at a grassroots level, albeit often by fear.

Castro and Che’s investment in the medical and intellectual wellbeing of every Cuban stretches back to the nascent stages of their revolutionary vision. This has translated into Cuba having a literacy and life expectancy rate comparable to or even exceeding countries in the Global North.<sup>2223</sup> Raising the living standards of the population by ensuring they are adequately

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<sup>17</sup> Hennessy, “The Roots of Cuban Nationalism”, p. 345

<sup>18</sup> Galtung, “On the Effects of International Economic Sanctions, with Examples from the Case of Rhodesia,”, p.395

<sup>19</sup> Escalante, “CIA Targets Fidel: Secret 1967 CIA Inspector General’s Report on Plots to Assassinate Fidel Castro” p. 24

<sup>20</sup> Castro, “Speech”, September 28, 1960

<sup>21</sup> August, “Cuba and its Neighbors: Democracy in Motion”, p.109

<sup>22</sup> World Bank, “Literacy rate, adult total (% of people ages 15 and above)”, Cuba

<sup>23</sup> World Bank, “Life expectancy at birth, total (years)”, Cuba



cared for and that their educational pursuits are covered by the state has helped to shape a positive perception of the PCC.

Cuba's determination to heal and educate the proletarian masses is not refined to just their own borders. They have transported their revolutionary mission through medical internationalism by offering their educational program to students from impoverished communities in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the United States.<sup>24</sup> The PCC's eagerness in dispensing humanitarian relief has helped fortify the legitimacy of the government.<sup>25</sup> Medical diplomacy has expanded Cuba's trade network and global respectability due to their investment in human capital and global solidarity, but erratic socioeconomic conditions continue to threaten the regime.<sup>26</sup>

### **III. Literature Review**

Political leaders employ a variety of schemes that can strengthen the resolve of their regime. The following section will review political maneuvers one party-states have pursued and how the PCC has programmed them into their political brand to retain leadership. Lastly, I will unpack an overlooked factor into the Cuban regime's political subsistence, the evolution into their medical diplomacy.

Cuba's one-party arrangement has been able to co-opt the political elites on the island which has resulted in ideological alignment amongst the PCC's leadership. Even though elections and vote counting in Cuba are transparent and there is no evidence of manipulation and

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<sup>24</sup> Huish and Kirk, "Cuban medical internationalism and the development of the Latin American School of Medicine", p.77

<sup>25</sup> Harris, "Cuban Internationalism, Che Guevara, and the Survival of Cuba's Socialist Regime", p.27

<sup>26</sup> Huish and Kirk, "Cuban medical internationalism and the development of the Latin America School of Medicine", p.77

clientelism, candidates for the National Assembly are ultimately decided upon by party leadership instead of a direct vote by the citizens.<sup>27</sup><sup>28</sup>

Cuba's political leadership claims a multi-party process and pluralism has been decriminalized following the *Special Period*, however the parties are broadly in lockstep with the PCC and lack any clout to challenge the regime in any cases of divergence in policymaking.<sup>29</sup> The state's centralized power permits them to certify that a collectivization of actors considered to be "counterrevolutionary" meets the criteria for censorship, punishment, and in some cases imprisonment.<sup>30</sup> Deterrence of players in their political landscape who differ from the PCC's ideals has been critical in expanding the regime's capability to repel subversion efforts coming from within and outside of the island.

Protecting the political blueprint of the socialist party shields the PCC from threats by any political elites attempting to challenge the party's authority. Cuba's transition from a single-party to dominant-party regime communicates to the voters that they have welcomed efforts towards democratization without conceding any substantial room for political multiplicity.<sup>31</sup> Scholars allege that constitutional reforms have allowed other actors to organize but the new measures are superficial in that they do not offer feasible pathways for candidates and parties who oppose the PCC's objectives to have any chance of getting nominated or elected.

Magaloni and Kricheli state that one-party regimes have displayed higher likelihoods of long-term survival in comparison to other forms of authoritarian rule due to their ability to stave

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<sup>27</sup> Galvis and Superti, "Who wins the most when everybody wins? Predicting candidate performance in an authoritarian election", p.1292

<sup>28</sup> Pertierra, "Cuba Without the Castros", p.43

<sup>29</sup> Paz, "Cuba in the Special Period: From Equality to Equity", p.114

<sup>30</sup> AP News, "Human rights groups criticize Cuba's new criminal code", March 24, 2023

<sup>31</sup> Magaloni and Kricheli, "Political Order and One-Party Rule", p.124

off attempts by exterior threats trying to destabilize the regime.<sup>32</sup> The PCC has remained in power by introducing stringent public policy that minimizes any liabilities presenting a risk to regime survival. Two common characteristics of one-party regimes that scholars have underlined is the tendency to use bargaining tactics with political elites to reinforce their stability, and the other being the operationalization of the “party machine” to unite the population.<sup>33</sup>

A factor that Magaloni and Kricheli have not accounted for in their analysis are the effects of global politics that have molded the dynamics of Cuba’s current political and economic circumstances. The past sixty-four years cannot be looked at in a vacuum which ignores policy made in reaction to U.S. aggression. They also assert that autocracies use voter fraud or coercion to guarantee electoral success. This is not applicable in Cuba’s case. There is a component of social pressure for citizens to engage civically but there have been no findings of coercion or fraud in Cuba’s elections.<sup>34</sup>

Cuba historically experiences high voter turnout in comparison to their democratized counterparts in the Global North, and the PCC has not had intimidate voters or skew elections to guarantee victory for candidates or pass constitutional reforms. Voting in Cuba is not compulsory and those who abstain are not punished for refusing to participate.<sup>35</sup> While autocratic governments have manipulated elections to remain in power, many studies have shown that electoral authoritarian regimes do not need to resort to fraud to win elections.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Magaloni and Kricheli, “Political Order and One-Party Rule”, p.124

<sup>33</sup> Magaloni and Kricheli, p.125

<sup>34</sup> Galvis and Superti, “Who wins the most when everybody wins? Predicting candidate performance in an authoritarian election”, p.1292

<sup>35</sup> Pineda, “Cuba’s Electoral System and the Dilemmas of the Twenty-First Century: Between the Liberal-Democratic Tradition and True Participation”, p.96

<sup>36</sup> Reuter, “Civic Duty and Voting under Autocracy”, p.1603

Johannes Gerschewski proposes his theory of autocratic stability by which regime persistence is lengthened through legitimation, repression, and co-optation.<sup>37</sup> Gerschewski notes that regimes incorporate these three approaches to prevent sedition and intra-elite conflict.<sup>38</sup> Legitimizing the party, repressing political expression, and co-opting elites have contributed to the PCC's ability to endure financial crisis like the *Special Period*.

Resistance to U.S. imperialism and a nationalist identity built from anti-Americanism has created a "spillover effect" intensifying the people's allegiance to the PCC.<sup>39</sup> However, Reuter proposes that reliance on accomplishments from past decades is not sufficient in explaining why one-party regimes have been able to last for extended periods of time. Gerschewski underscores the tendency for scholars to believe that the Castro regime legitimized power through the forces of indoctrination turning their citizens into "true believers".<sup>40</sup> He states that propagandizing the public is limited and cannot shield the public from external pressures in the long term.<sup>41</sup>

Cuba's uprisings have come primarily because of monetary struggles due to some governmental mismanagement, but the economic strangulation levied by the United States is arguably the biggest culprit of the country's misfortune. The PCC underwent intense scrutiny during the *Special Period*, frustrations in 1994 led to the biggest protest that the Castro-led government had witnessed up to that point, commonly referred to as the *Maleconazo*.<sup>42</sup> Their severed dependence on the Soviet Union forced the PCC to recalibrate their economy. Reform efforts on the island were driven by desperation, not a shift in political philosophy. The

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<sup>37</sup> Gerschewski, "The three pillars of stability: legitimation, repression, and co-optation in autocratic regimes", p.13

<sup>38</sup> Gerschewski, p.14

<sup>39</sup> Reuter, "Civic Duty and Voting under Autocracy", p.1608

<sup>40</sup> Gerschewski, "The three pillars of stability: legitimation, repression, and co-optation in autocratic regimes", p.19

<sup>41</sup> Gerschewski, p.19

<sup>42</sup> Gershman and Gutierrez, "Can Cuba change? Ferment in Civil Society?", p.37

economic reforms of the *Special Period* proved to be necessary in polishing the image of Cuba's socialist government as the new influx of capital accelerated their revival.

Gerschewski's theory on the *Three Pillars of Stability* provides an analytical lens on how regimes can enhance their public approval through co-optation by way of what David Easton calls *diffuse support* and *specific support*.<sup>43</sup><sup>44</sup> *Specific support* is gathered through performance outputs, not exclusive to but commonly associated with improving economic conditions.<sup>45</sup> *Diffuse support* is acquired by the regime's ideological forces that can be fomented by patriotism and charismatic leadership, especially and in response to perceived external threats.<sup>46</sup>

The PCC has utilized several of the listed elements of specific and diffuse support through repeated stages in the regime's tenure. While diffuse support is difficult to evaluate, Gerschewski lists measurements to gauge the intensity of specific support to be levels social inequality, the country's literacy rate, and doctors per capita.<sup>47</sup> Castro's revolution specifically addressed these issues through land reform, literacy campaigns, and innovation in their health and biotech programs.

One-party states throughout history have been known to repress the rights of citizens as a method of regime survival. Repression can take different forms ranging from physical violence to harassment. Gerschewski builds on Levitsky and Way's concept of repression and qualifies them as *high intensity* or *low intensity* depending on the if they are overt or subtle.<sup>48</sup><sup>49</sup> Low intensity repression in Cuba is exerted through surveillance, censorship, and fear of persecution

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<sup>43</sup> Gerschewski, "The three pillars of stability: legitimation, repression, and co-optation in autocratic regimes", p.20

<sup>44</sup> Easton, "A Re-Assessment of the Concept of Political Support", p.437

<sup>45</sup> Gerschewski, "The three pillars of stability: legitimation, repression, and co-optation in autocratic regimes", p.20

<sup>46</sup> Gerschewski, p.20

<sup>47</sup> Gerschewski, p.20

<sup>48</sup> Gerschewski, "The three pillars of stability: legitimation, repression, and co-optation in autocratic regimes", p.21

<sup>49</sup> Levitsky and Way, "Elections without Democracy: the Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism", p.58

if someone's political expression challenges the PCC. Gerschewski's theory on autocratic co-optation as an explanatory factor for regime survival boils down to their ability to tether important political actors to the elites of the party.<sup>50</sup>

Gerschewski's, Levitsky's, and Way's classification of co-optation does overlap with the role of the CDR in Cuba but Seraphine Mearz builds on Gerschewski's definition through her own theoretical synthesis which offers a more nuanced perspective on the CDR.<sup>51</sup>

Gerschewski's model assumes that formal and informal actors are mutually exclusive in his definition of specific and diffuse support while Maerz argues that formal and informal actors often intertwine and reinforce one another.<sup>52</sup> The CDR resembles the formal and informal bodies of co-optation in that they have no official relation to the PCC but have been empowered by the state to be the watchdogs of the party. They operate on behalf of the party's political interests and have been appointed as the reconnaissance committee for the government. It is in this way that the regime has suffused the state through community-based organizations that can do the party's bidding at the local level.<sup>53</sup>

Scholars on autocracies have established numerous typologies that have categorized Cuba as an authoritarian "performance-dependent regime", autocratic ideocracy, to now in transition to "post-totalitarianism".<sup>545556</sup> Regime classification regarding Cuba is hardly unanimous and various writers, academics, and activists have differing opinions to how they identify the regime.

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<sup>50</sup> Gerschewski, "The three pillars of stability: legitimation, repression, and co-optation in autocratic regimes", p.22

<sup>51</sup> Maerz, "The many faces of authoritarian persistence: a Set-Theory Perspective on the Survival Strategies of Authoritarian Regimes", p.67

<sup>52</sup> Maerz, p.67

<sup>53</sup> Reuter, "Civic Duty and Voting under Autocracy", p.1602

<sup>54</sup> Maerz, "The many faces of authoritarian persistence: a Set-Theory Perspective on the Survival Strategies of Authoritarian Regimes", p.80

<sup>55</sup> Gerschewski, "The three pillars of stability: legitimation, repression, and co-optation in autocratic regimes", p.19

<sup>56</sup> Wong, "Rethinking the Cuban Regime: Implications for Transition Paths and Comparative Cases", p.145

Aimel Rios Wong claims that Cuba is currently in a post-totalitarian period that can hypothetically open pathways towards democratization but believes the more likely future for Cuba is not a transition to democracy but instead a steady expansion of market reforms while continuing to consolidate state control akin to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).<sup>57</sup>

Debates over what are considered democratic and autocratic electoral protocol are commonplace in academia regarding countries in both the developed and developing world. Wong acknowledges that there is increased political pluralism in today's Cuba but by no means has it suggested a shift to democracy.<sup>58</sup> He declares that Cuba's process of "detotalitarianism" in the 1990s was not born out of a tolerance for political diversity, but instead of forced adaptation.<sup>59</sup> His position is that the financial crisis drove the Cuban government to loosen the reigns on their economy which allowed for more market-friendly policy to be accepted.

Wong, Gerschewski, and Maerz agree that Cuba's one-party system embodies an autocratic state and have illustrated the ways in which autocracies have weaponized policies to extend their rule. Their collective position on Cuba's regime typology has been challenged by Latin Americanists and Cuban scholars. Peter Roman, Alexander Gray, Antoni Kapcia, and Arnold August would advise that the way Cuba is characterized, whether it be as an autocracy or a democracy, requires more context. Roman notes the differences in Cuba's practice of democracy in comparison to the U.S. as the former prioritizing higher levels participation, prohibition of money in elections, and community presence to be at the forefront each process.<sup>60</sup> Candidates for the municipal, provincial, and the National Assembly have to be vetted and

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<sup>57</sup> Wong, p.145

<sup>58</sup> Wong, p.140

<sup>59</sup> Wong, p.145

<sup>60</sup> Roman, "Electing Cuba's National Assembly Deputies: Proposals, Selections, Nominations, and Campaigns", p.69

passed at plenary sessions composed of community-based organizations and workers unions.<sup>61</sup>

Because of the participatory nature of elections and high voter turnout in Cuba at the grassroots and national levels, Roman states that the electoral system Cuba is in many ways democratic.<sup>62</sup>

Antoni Kapcia and Alexander Gray assess how democracy is understood in different terms between countries in the Global North and Global South<sup>63</sup>:

“*democracia* is, in common Cuban parlance, a wide definition of participation, involvement and representation, while ‘democracy’ tends increasingly, to the North, to mean pluralism, contested elections and, above all, a free market. Put simply, language is part of the ideological battleground over Cuba, part of the inherent difficulty in understanding alternative perspectives”<sup>64</sup>

Kapcia goes on to discuss the process of democratization regarding Cuba and their Latin American counterparts by claiming the former stresses “citizenship” over “democratic contestation”.<sup>65</sup> The implication of this regarding Cuban regime endurance is how an ethos of high participation combined with the guarantee of government provisions through the “benefits of citizenship” has strengthened the credibility of the regime through their own archetype of democracy.<sup>66</sup>

August adds to the conversation of the PCC’s version of democracy in his interpretation of Cuba’s political adaptation and strategies for survival as being a “Democracy in Motion”.<sup>67</sup> He compares Cuba’s political system to the United States’ and claims that western neoliberalism presents itself as a beacon of democracy while Cuba remains trapped in an authoritarian relic languishing after the fall of the U.S.S.R.<sup>68</sup> August challenges this narrative by pointing out that

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<sup>61</sup> Roman, p.69

<sup>62</sup> Roman, p.84

<sup>63</sup> Roman, p.69

<sup>64</sup> Gray and Kapcia, “The Changing Dynamic of Cuban Civil Society”, p.39

<sup>65</sup> Kapcia, “Political Change in Cuba: Before and After the Exodus”, p.8

<sup>66</sup> Kapcia, “Political Change in Cuba: Before and After the Exodus”, p.8

<sup>67</sup> August, “Cuba and its Neighbors: Democracy in Motion”, p.119

<sup>68</sup> August, p.118



the U.S.'s "competitive" two-party system is corrupted by corporate donors and is more of an illusion of choice that has resulted in a "lesser of two evils" paradigm.<sup>69</sup> He underscores the significantly lower voter turnout in the U.S. compared to Cuba as an indication that the American political structure is not as democratic due to significantly less input and involvement from the masses.<sup>70</sup>

Scholars of authoritarianism and Latin American politics who pose that Cuba has raised their esteem through reform measures, whether they be out of democratic intentions or autocratic objectives, have not accounted for the PCC using their health institutions as an instrument for regime survival. Academic analysis pertaining to the survival of Cuba's one-party system often emphasizes the island's political repression as a device to bolster the government's authority. What this ignores is Cuba's unwavering obligation to their health and educational bodies that not only Cuba, but several countries have benefited from. Kapcia and August do raise the issue of the government's ability to provide their citizens with comprehensive state-funded health coverage, but they broadly focus on this matter within the island and not internationally. Cuba's medical diplomacy has permitted the regime to extend solidarity with governments not just in Latin America but around the world.

Fidel and Che's efforts to build coalitions and offer aid to underdeveloped countries began before their missions of medical internationalism were initiated. Shortly after Castro assumed leadership, he supported revolutionary and decolonial movements in Africa and Latin America.<sup>71</sup> Sending weapons to Algeria in their war of independence, helping liberate Guinea-Bissau from their Portuguese colonial oppressors, and fighting alongside the MPLA in Angola

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<sup>69</sup> August, p.229

<sup>70</sup> August, p.229

<sup>71</sup> Harris, "Cuban Internationalism, Che Guevara, and the Survival of Cuba's Socialist Regime" p.32

against the apartheid government of South Africa are just a few of the examples that cement Cuba's devotion in the fight against global imperialism.<sup>72</sup>

These gestures of solidarity laid the groundwork for Castro and the PCC to form alliances and garner the respect of the international community, especially with fellow socialist and revolutionary parties. Castro and Guevarra would form bonds with Pan-Africanist leaders like Kwame Nkrumah, Abdel Nasser, Amilcar Cabral, and Nelson Mandela.<sup>73</sup> At the South Africa-Cuba Solidarity Conference in 1995, Mandela paid tribute to Cuba stating<sup>74</sup>:

“Cubans came to our region as doctors, teachers, soldiers, agricultural experts, but never as colonizers. They share the same trenches with us in the struggle against colonialism, underdevelopment, and apartheid. Hundreds of Cubans have given their lives, literally, in a struggle that was, first and foremost, not theirs but ours. As Southern Africans we salute them. We vow never to forget this unparalleled example of selfless internationalism.”<sup>75</sup>

Cuba's pledge to fight side by side with those engaging in their own liberation throughout the Global South planted the seeds for their worldwide humanitarian missions. Gaining the admiration of leftist leaders and governments has awarded Cuba several allies based on mutual solidarity. Their desire to help those suffering worldwide has raised the government's standing in the eyes of the international community. Richard Harris claims that the PCC's survival is enabled by their resistance to imperial pressures, internationalism, and fidelity to their domestic socialist principles that they have exported across the globe.<sup>76</sup>

Backing the colonized and oppressed in their liberatory movements during the 1960s and 1970s paved the way for the medical diplomacy that Cuba has adopted as part of their foreign policy program at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Their acts of humanitarianism helped to establish

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<sup>72</sup> Harris, p.32

<sup>73</sup> Harris, p.33

<sup>74</sup> Harris, p.37

<sup>75</sup> Mandela, “Internationalism contributed to victory: South African president Nelson Mandela addresses Cuba Solidarity conference”, 1995

<sup>76</sup> Harris, “Cuban Internationalism, Che Guevara, and the Survival of Cuba's Socialist Regime” p.37

the assemblance of the *Bolivarian Alternative for the People of Our America* in 2004 (ALBA).<sup>77</sup>

The Bolivarian alliance (ALBA) was conceived as an alternative for Latin American and Caribbean countries in opposition to global capitalism. Originally founded by Castro and Venezuela's former president Hugo Chavez, ALBA has now grown to 10 countries and offers their members a development plan outside of the neoliberal standard.

The initiation of ALBA was particularly important for Cuba in that they could now negotiate with several countries using their celebrated physicians as a trade asset. Cata Backer and Molina speak to the significance of ALBA noting that it serves as a unified front against neoliberal free-market conservatism.<sup>78</sup> The formation of ALBA and the reforms of the 1990s were crucial to Cuba's resurgence after the economic crisis. Their transition to capitalist-style reforms during the *Special Period* did not signal a desertion of socialism but more of a transformation into an economy needing to acclimate to globalized markets.<sup>79</sup> This economic alteration reflects the neostructuralist paradigm forwarded by ECLAC. Cuba required inflows of transnational capital and remittances to keep their lauded healthcare system functional and eventually modify it into a tradeable asset.<sup>80</sup> Former head of the Cuban Chamber of Commerce Julio A. Garcia Olivares expressed the logic behind this transition by claiming: "We have to think like capitalists but continue being socialists".<sup>81</sup><sup>82</sup>

However, relying on larger inputs of foreign capital and the newly created ALBA is hardly a bulletproof plan for long-term growth. Firstly, a tumultuous petroleum market has

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<sup>77</sup> Cata Backer and Molina, "Cuba and the Construction of Alternative Global Trade Systems: ALBA and Free Trade in the Americas", p.698

<sup>78</sup> Cata Backer and Molina, p.682

<sup>79</sup> Brotherton, "We have to think like capitalists but continue being socialists", p.261

<sup>80</sup> Brotherton, p.269

<sup>81</sup> Brotherton, p.269

<sup>82</sup> Eckstein, "Back from the Future: Cuba under Castro", p.103

constrained Cuba's access to Venezuelan oil due to a collapse in prices which has in turn crumbled the stability for Chavez's successor Nicolas Maduro.<sup>83</sup> Additionally, a swinging pendulum of political trends in Latin America saw a rise in recent years of the reactionary conservative parties like Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, Bolivia's Jeanine Anez, and Venezuela's Juan Guaido temporarily reversing the Latin American *Pink Tide*.<sup>84</sup> Leftist parties have regained a foothold in the region but political volatility could see a reignition of the right-wing *Brown Wave* and further destabilize Cuba's influence in Latin America.<sup>85</sup>

#### **IV. Economic Reforms**

Cuts in spending and rationing of public goods were rolled out by the PCC in the early 1990s due to the limitations posed by the *Special Period*. The inability for Cuba to access materials that they formerly imported through their membership in COMECON prompted the government to loosen the screws on the economy and encourage more FDI. More foreign investment attracted flows of much needed capital necessary for the energy sector, market expansion, and their burgeoning tourist industry as it generated more revenue for the sputtering economy.<sup>86</sup>

Dependence on the Soviet Union granted Cuba the ability to operate under a state-led top-down style of socialism but once that relation was cut, Castro was forced to step away from his strict adherence to central planning.<sup>87</sup> Raised rates of FDI was an indicator to the public, potential investors, party-supporters, and critics that Cuba was opening their arms to private business.

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<sup>83</sup> Bull and Rosales, "The Crisis in Venezuela", p.8

<sup>84</sup> Rojas, "The Ebbing "Pink Tide": An Autopsy of Left-Wing Regimes in Latin America", p.71

<sup>85</sup> Antunes de Oliveira, "The rise of the Latin American far right explained: Dependency theory meets uneven and combined development", p.1145

<sup>86</sup> Spadoni, "Foreign Investment in Cuba: Recent Developments and role in the economy", p.159

<sup>87</sup> Spadoni, "The current situation of foreign investment in Cuba", p.116

During the *Special Period*, one of the most obvious resources that Castro knew he would be able to pull profit from was the island's natural beauty. Caribbean beaches, Havana's nightlife, and a tropical climate were easy sells for Canadian and European tourists. Cuba turned their attention towards upgrading their tourist infrastructure to address short term woes but to also build sustainable routes for future industrial expansion.

Having been closed off to international firms and investors decades prior, their tourist boom saw a rapid expansion of involvement by foreign actors. This new phenomenon of liberalized market reforms and increased access to Cuba's economy did worry critics and government officials. Orthodox party-members were concerned as to what extent Cuba would remain open to private business, but the restrictions placed on private actors communicated that the PCC by no means opened the flood gates to foreign capital.

The role of foreign partners operating within these revamped tourist ventures had been relegated to administrative services, technological consultation, and marketing campaigns.<sup>88</sup> Any construction or renovation of hotels were under the auspices of the state or cooperative oversight.<sup>89</sup> A major apprehension of Cuban policymakers was how to mitigate against the multiplier effects, specifically *leakages*, which came because of increased tourism. Under-industrialized countries are prone to *leakages*, the loss of revenue from imports, if they choose to adopt a more tourist-friendly approach.<sup>90</sup> In order to combat against the possibility of lost earnings as a byproduct of *leakages*, the PCC lumped a hefty 30% income tax on their overseas trade partners.<sup>91</sup> Foreign exchange profits rose from \$243 million to \$1.9 billion in a 10 year

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<sup>88</sup> Enriquez, "The Cuban alternative to neoliberalism: Linkages between local production and tourism after 1990", p. 96

<sup>89</sup> Enriquez, p. 96

<sup>90</sup> Baumol and Peston, "More on the Multiplier Effects of a Balanced Budget", p. 144

<sup>91</sup> Enriquez, "The Cuban alternative to neoliberalism: Linkages between local production and tourism after 1990", p. 102

window.<sup>92</sup> This massive jump in private earnings was injected into the state to promote better coverage on inputs needed for their growing tourist sector as well as their subsidized programs.<sup>93</sup>

By reorienting the cashflow gained from private enterprise into the public pot, Cuban officials integrated a neostructuralist approach within their socialist state. Enriquez notes the new reforms were not a transition to unfettered capitalism, but instead a fusion of socialism and neostructuralism in which the government and private actors collaborated to upgrade their industrial faculties.<sup>94</sup>

Cuba's hybrid model was born out of necessity into an increasingly globalized economy. Complete financial autonomy would be an impossibility for any country within a global economy dominated by western-led neoliberalism. Their position as a historically underdeveloped and exploited sugar colony in the world-system rendered their status to be an obligatory player in international trade. If Cuba's goal was to modernize and diversify their industrial production, then decentralization was non-negotiable.

The reforms in Cuba were vital to the PCC's resilience, but they alone could not explain the unrivaled power that the party has enjoyed for the past six decades. Before their eventual downfall, the Soviet government had implemented their own set of reforms as a last-ditch effort before their collapse. Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's attempt to relax their centralized control through economic and political reforms, *Perestroika and Glasnost*, were ultimately a failure as the Eastern Bloc continued to fragment leading to the country's demise.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Enriquez, p. 99

<sup>93</sup> Enriquez, p. 95

<sup>94</sup> Enriquez, p. 93

<sup>95</sup> Mason, "Glasnost, Perestroika, and Eastern Europe", p. 431

Javier Corrales notes that as Cuba was going through their own period of decentralization, they had simultaneously rigidified their political system.<sup>96</sup> Castro started to purge government officials who were pushing for electoral reforms. The *gorbachevistas* were quickly replaced with technocratic party-loyalists who were more adept in navigating economic obstacles plaguing the country at the time.<sup>97</sup> While the adjustments helped to assuage the country's frustration for a short period, they have not been sufficient in preventing recurring trends of crisis and political outbursts.

## **V. Cuban Nationalism**

Throughout their revolutionary struggles, Castro and the M-26-7 appealed to the Cuban people by promising a political project that included land redistribution and to eliminate illiteracy.<sup>98</sup> As soon as Batista fled the country, Castro issued a series of agrarian acts and nationalization measures within months of taking over. Despite the support of these policies on the island, they were met with much more displeasure by their American neighbors. When Castro passed his first land reform bill in 1959 and stripped U.S. businesses of their assets in Cuba, the hostility from the U.S. State Department would increase considerably.

For the last 60 years, the United States has waged economic warfare and destabilization campaigns against Castro and the PCC. The U.S. government has engaged in covert and overt operations like the training of dissidents in the well-documented Bay of Pigs invasion, planned attempts to poison Castro, and an onslaught of sanctions that has culminated in the placement of Cuba on the U.S.'s state sponsor of terrorism list.<sup>99</sup><sup>100</sup> While this sustained aggression has had a

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<sup>96</sup> Corrales, "The Gatekeeper State: Limited Reforms and Regime Survival in Cuba, 1989-2002", p.42

<sup>97</sup> Corrales, p.42

<sup>98</sup> Ferrer, "Cuba: An American History", p.307

<sup>99</sup> Escalante, "CIA Targets Fidel: Secret 1967 CIA Inspector General's Report on Plots to Assassinate Fidel Castro" p. 24

<sup>100</sup> U.S. Embassy Havana, "U.S. Announces Designation of Cuba as a State Sponsor of Terrorism"

devastating effect on the island-nation causing repeated trials economic calamity, it does arm the PCC with the rhetorical ammunition to depict Cuba as an admirable and defiant obstruction to U.S. domination. Cuba has played this dynamic to their advantage by mobilizing the masses and ingraining an identity of nationalist pride based on challenging American exceptionalism.<sup>101</sup>

The PCC has been able to frame the narrative of U.S. subversion into a political tool to fortify their popularity amongst the island's citizens. Sanctions spanning several decades have succeeded in impoverishing the Cuban people while failing to overthrow the government. According to U.N. estimates, the blockade has cost Cuba over \$130 billion dollars.<sup>102</sup> The loss of billions in revenue, restrictions to foodstuffs and medical supplies, and the villainization of their socialist regime has helped to form an ideology of contempt for U.S. supremacy.

The history of Cuba's political culture in opposition to American interests does not begin with the ascension of Fidel Castro in 1959. One of Cuba's most celebrated individuals dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Jose Marti, was a poet, activist, and revolutionary who has his name and image adorned throughout the island. Marti is embedded in Cuba's nationalistic ideology due to his impact on their independence from Spain. It was not just his actions but his words that resonate throughout the citizenry.

After living in New York, Marti expressed in a letter to Mexican activist and close friend Manuel Antonio Mercado, "I lived inside the monster and therefore recognize it's entrails: my sling is the sling of David."<sup>103</sup> Castro's rebellious presence was a perfect fit for a Cuban population nostalgic for anti-imperialist leaders like Marti. The advent of *Castroism* was a

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<sup>101</sup> Pertierra, "Cuba without the Castros", p.38

<sup>102</sup> Reuters, "U.S. trade embargo has cost Cuba \$130 billion, U.N. says"

<sup>103</sup> Olivera, "Jose Marti en Nueva York urbe y escritura." P.61



product of the socialist regime stitching together revered figures from the past to their own political movement.<sup>104</sup>

American intervention following Cuba's independence starting with the Platt Amendment has given Castro ample fodder to demonize U.S. foreign policy.<sup>105</sup> Efforts to undermine and overthrow his regime has unintentionally equipped him with concrete examples to perpetuate the useful imagery of his defiance to American hegemony. He has used this imagery to appeal to the country's appreciation for liberation struggles further reinforcing his own revolutionary credentials.<sup>106107</sup>

Murals and images of Marti and Fidel are on display throughout the island, but the political identity of Castro's Cuba also stems from the nationwide adoration of Che Guevara and his exploits throughout Latin America and Africa. The significance of "El Che" as an inspiration for armed resistance is not exclusive to his role in Cuba's revolution.<sup>108</sup> Guevara was just a year removed from participating in the opposition against the C.I.A.-backed coup of Guatemalan president Jacobo Arbenz before joining Castro's M-26-7.<sup>109</sup> Che's symbolism as the most recognized of Castro's *barbudos*, "bearded ones", elevated his profile to motivate marginalized peoples in their own liberatory movements around the world. His experience in the anti-imperialist armed resistance throughout Africa and Latin America was foundational to his idea of the *hombre nuevo* or "new man".<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Hennessy, "The Roots of Cuban Nationalism", p. 345

<sup>105</sup> Pertierra, "Cuba without the Castros", p.37

<sup>106</sup> Pertierra, "Cuba without the Castros", p.39

<sup>107</sup> Perez, "Fear and Loathing of Fidel Castro: Sources of US Policy Toward Cuba", p.240

<sup>108</sup> Christensen, "Che Guevara and the Hombre Nuevo in Cuba: The Ideological Formation of Foreign Policy", p.99

<sup>109</sup> Tablada, "Che Guevara: Economics and Politics in the Transition to Socialism", p.99

<sup>110</sup> Christensen, "Che Guevara and the Hombre Nuevo in Cuba: The Ideological Formation of Foreign Policy", p.99

Che's *hombre nuevo* was imperative in motivating Cubans to participate and assist in literacy and vaccination drives in the countryside. Cuban migrants flocking to South Florida left huge labor shortages on the island forcing the new leadership to urge every citizen to do their part in voluntarily rebuilding Cuba. Solidarity amongst citizens after the revolution to contribute to building a new society was a microcosm for the humanitarian missions the government would dispatch years later. These missions have their roots in the *hombre nuevo*. Che's teachings were exported and adopted by leftists, radicals, and activists in the underdeveloped world. International proletarianism anchors the *hombre nuevo* and Castro has seized the opportunity to use Che's worldwide popularity as an emblem of Cuba's political character.<sup>111</sup>

Castro's PCC has benefited from the portrayal of the U.S. as an imperialist oppressor strangling the economy and meddling in Cuban political affairs. Events like the Bay of Pigs, botched assassinations, and an embargo dating back to the Cold War have all helped the party promote Cuban nationalism and anti-Americanism helping to solidify Castro's legacy as a heroic underdog fighting against U.S. expansionism.<sup>112113</sup> Even though the efficacy of nationalist rally-cries by the PCC has been substantial, the government cannot simply lean on the magnetism of Castro's persona or the legacies of Che and Marti to maintain their popularity. Continued social turmoil and a widening generational gap presents a real problem for the PCC attempting to win over young Cubans who have no memory of Castro's guerillas and their revolutionary accolades. Aside from Raul, the revolutionary leadership is gone. Most Cubans today have only known hardship and the excuse of a blockade is starting to ring hollow.

## **VI. Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR)**

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<sup>111</sup> Christensen, p.99

<sup>112</sup> Pertierra, "Cuba without the Castros", p.39

<sup>113</sup> Perez, "Fear and Loathing of Fidel Castro: Sources of US Policy Toward Cuba", p.252

Animosity and sabotage directed at Cuba has escalated the PCC's paranoia of dissenters on the island. On September 28, 1960, Fidel was giving a speech outside the former presidential palace when large explosions were overheard by the crowd.<sup>114</sup> This event would end up being decisive in launching a powerful politically motivated surveillance network in Cuba. After the bombing, Castro compelled Cubans to organize and identify any possible counterrevolutionary activity.<sup>115</sup> His call for "vigilancia", surveillance, was a precursor for the emergence of the CDR.

The role of the CDR however was not just reduced to act solely in some secret police capacity but also pivotal for the country's political process and civic engagement. Their widespread impact on community issues is geared towards tackling local and national issues that weigh on the heads, hearts, and wallets of the citizens in their respective districts. Despite their reputation as the surveillance operatives of the PCC, they also have built trust with neighbors through a history of facilitating voluntary outreach programs as well as literacy and vaccination campaigns.<sup>116</sup>

The CDR plays a critical role in both national and regional elections in Cuba. Castro and the PCC were essentially a non-constitutional government for nearly two decades as they replaced the 1940 constitution with the "Fundamental Law".<sup>117</sup> Castro would either weaponize the constitution of 1940 or apply the Fundamental Law for the first 17 years of his regime to amend or implement policies granting the state more control.<sup>118</sup> In 1976, Cuba had finally passed their first constitution by popular vote.<sup>119</sup> Within the new constitution, the government was able

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<sup>114</sup> Castro, "Speech", September 28, 1960

<sup>115</sup> Fagen, "The Transformation of Political Culture in Cuba", p.70

<sup>116</sup> Halbert-Brooks, "Cederistas: Women's Education and Vigilance in Cuban Comites de Defensa de la Revolucion", p.137

<sup>117</sup> Wachs, "Reviving the 1940 Cuban Constitution: Arguments for Social and Economic Rights in a Post-Castro Government", p.546

<sup>118</sup> Wachs, p.546

<sup>119</sup> Roman, "Electing Cuba's National Assembly Deputies: Proposals, Selections, Nominations, and Campaigns", p.69

to concretize the provision of free healthcare in addition to creating the *Organos Populares de Poder* (OPP).<sup>120</sup> The new constitutional structure organized the electoral configuration to be divided into municipal assemblies, provincial assemblies, and the National Assembly with only the latter holding legislative power.<sup>121</sup> It is under this new electoral design where the CDR finds themselves occupying a significant space in Cuba's formalized process as they are part of the municipal candidacy commissions.

Nevertheless, mass political participation finessed by groups like the CDR is inadequate in determining the extended occupancy of the PCC. The disconnect between young Cubans and the revolutionary party has led to one of the largest migration waves out of the island in decades in the past few years.<sup>122</sup> Furthermore, tensions are so high that protests have exploded onto the streets reaching levels of social unrest the island has not seen since the height of the *Special Period*.<sup>123</sup> This contentious political climate has not only led to eruptions of political demonstrations but also a sense of disillusion among Cuban voters.

Cuba has experienced high levels of voter turnout for decades in comparison to countries in the Global North, but this past election featured the highest percentage of abstention under the PCC's rule.<sup>124</sup> Vigilant community-facing groups dedicated to safeguarding the PCC's interests have played an important role for the party's preservation. However, declining party approval and record numbers of migrants leaving for the U.S. in recent years indicate the penetration and influence of grassroots political groups like the CDR could be diminishing amongst Cuban citizens.

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<sup>120</sup> Roman, p.69

<sup>121</sup> Roman, p.69

<sup>122</sup> Sesin, "Historic wave of Cuban migrants will have a lasting impact on Florida," December 16, 2022

<sup>123</sup> Lopez Segrera, "Cuba: The July 11, 2021, Protests", p.40

<sup>124</sup> AP News, "Voter abstention rises in Cuban National Assembly election", March 27, 2023

## VII. Human Capital

Cuba's heralded healthcare system has been a core element to the PCC and Castro's capacity to legitimize their administration. Their ability to provide adequate care for Cubans and uplift the health standards on the island has earned them the respect of the global community. Whenever a natural disaster or tragedy strikes anywhere in the world, Cuba immediately mobilizes physicians to tend to the suffering. Cuba's disaster relief and medical diplomacy programs send more physicians to the Global South than all the G-8 countries combined.<sup>125</sup>

Despite the longstanding antagonisms the U.S. has directed at Cuba, Castro proposed to send 1,586 medical personal and 36 tons of supplies at no cost to help the communities destroyed by Hurricane Katrina but the United States turned down the offer.<sup>126</sup> Cuba's willingness to send physicians and supplies to a country who has for decades been sponsoring insurrection in Cuba is a testament to Castro and the PCC's humanitarianism.

Social inequality before the revolution significantly hindered the opportunities for many Cubans to access proper healthcare. Most medical services were in bigger cities and urban areas meaning agrarian workers and peasants in the rural countryside had difficulty getting their medical needs tended to.<sup>127</sup> Political movements promoting egalitarianism and espousing to reduce inequality oftentimes drive away a mass migration of educated and elite classes due to concerns that their privilege will be threatened by the new leadership.<sup>128</sup> These privileged classes

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<sup>125</sup> Huish and Kirk, "Cuban medical internationalism and the development of the Latin American school of medicine", p.82

<sup>126</sup> Huish and Kirk, "Cuban medical internationalism and the development of the Latin American school of medicine", p.82

<sup>127</sup> Chomsky, "A History of the Cuban Revolution", p.51.

<sup>128</sup> Chomsky, p.51.

represent *social capital* which is a resource desperately needed for a country attempting an economic reconstruction.<sup>129</sup>

After Castro's revolution, many physicians, academics, and business professionals fled the country fearing a risk to their lifestyle. The large exodus of doctors following the revolution left a shortage of medical personnel on the island posing a large problem for a government looking to up the quality of healthcare in Cuba.<sup>130</sup> Providing subsidized medical coverage to all Cubans was an objective of the M-26-7 from the very beginning as can be seen in Che's essay titled "On Revolutionary Medicine". In his writings, Che tasked the Ministry of Health to "provide public health services for the greatest possible number of persons".<sup>131</sup>

Because inequality on the island made it difficult for those in rural areas to gain access to healthcare and a massive evacuation of doctors caused a huge scarcity of medical professionals, the government shifted the education and training of aspiring physicians in Cuba. In 1960, Castro established the "Rural Health Service" to help connect citizens outside of urban areas to facilities in the hinterlands and bridge the asymmetrical health gap from core and periphery.<sup>132</sup>

To address the imbalance of medical care between town and country the government required every medical school graduate to spend a year servicing an impoverished community in Cuba's farmlands.<sup>133</sup> Aviva Chomsky notes that Cuba's emphasis on restructuring the country's educational and medical system was not done merely to remedy the failures of the Batista administration but more of a "revolutionary transformation of society".<sup>134</sup> Some key life indicators did briefly dip after the revolution, likely due to the mass migration of doctors in the

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<sup>129</sup> Chomsky, p.51.

<sup>130</sup> Eckstein, "The Impact of the Cuban Revolution: A Comparative Perspective", p.530

<sup>131</sup> Guevara, "On Revolutionary Medicine", p.5

<sup>132</sup> Chomsky, "A History of the Cuban Revolution", p.51

<sup>133</sup> Chomsky, p.52

<sup>134</sup> Chomsky, p.52

early years of the regime.<sup>135</sup> But once the new generation of health care professionals were trained, the country's life expectancy, infant mortality, and doctor to patient ratio all significantly improved and exceeded pre-revolution statistics.<sup>136</sup>

Boasting health standards that rival most developed countries, Cuba's medical services have been praised globally. Castro issued swift justice to Cubans who were exploited by landlords through his agrarian reform, nationalized higher education, and socialized medical care which quickly made him a beloved figure among Cubans. By keeping promises made before his triumph on the battlefield, Castro and the M-26-7 validated their trustworthiness to the citizens of Cuba.

The PCC finalized their medical policy in 1976 under the new constitution which grants a wide range of comprehensive and preventative care to all Cubans at no charge.<sup>137</sup> This connects to Kapcia's contention that Cuba has prioritized "citizenship" by investing in the health and nutrition of the people.<sup>138</sup> Cuba's progress and innovation in their medical field and the training of physicians based primarily on compassion for the neglected and underserved has resulted in a great supply of *human capital*.<sup>139</sup> Cuba's celebrated medical internationalism is sourced from their abundance of human capital that the government distributes to countries experiencing health related emergencies.

Castro spoke to the importance of human capital in relation to the PCC saying<sup>140</sup>:

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<sup>135</sup> Eckstein, "The Impact of the Cuban Revolution: A Comparative Perspective", p.528

<sup>136</sup> Eckstein, p.528

<sup>137</sup> "Chang and Besel, "Cultivating next generation of healthcare leaders in Havana: Barriers and recommendation for succession planning", p.1064

<sup>138</sup> Eckstein, "The Impact of the Cuban Revolution: A Comparative Perspective", p.528

<sup>139</sup> Huish and Kirk, "Cuban medical internationalism and the development of the Latin American school of medicine", p.78

<sup>140</sup> Huish and Kirk, p.90

“[...] human capital is worth far more than financial capital. Human capital involved not only knowledgeable but also – and this is essential – conscience, ethics, solidarity, truly humane feelings, spirit of sacrifice, heroism, and the ability to make a little go a long way”.<sup>141</sup>

An enormous benefit that Cuba’s reservoir of human capital has afforded the government is their utility in trade relations through ALBA. After the dissolution of COMECON and the Soviet Bloc, Cuba lost access to raw goods and materials. The rise of Chavez in Venezuela breathed new life into Cuba as they could now exchange their distinguished medical personnel for much needed oil. While the regime continues to show camaraderie to countries undergoing catastrophe through programs like the *Henry Reeve Brigade*, the impact of Cuba’s reputable medical professionals has greatly ameliorated their economic strife and their cachet in international relations.

Economic reforms and tourism accounted for the initial thrust of Cuba’s resuscitation after the *Special Period*, but the government shifted to using their medical services to promote growth. This transition to relying on their healthcare system and physicians as a cash-cow allowed for additional export diversification that has delivered beneficial outcomes for the PCC. By 2006, Cuba’s earnings from their globally disseminated medical professionals amounted to more income than the revenue generated from tourism and their nickel and cobalt reserves.<sup>142</sup>

Cuba’s medical program over the years has developed into a multifaceted resource for the government. The origins of Cuba’s health services began with the M-26-7 making good on their guarantees to resolve the country’s problems of illness and malnutrition in the rural parts of the island. Despite economic hardship and periods of social unrest, the state continued to pour any funding they could into their medical programs. Consistent funding of R&D for Cuba’s biotechnology eventually progressed into one of the most internationally heralded institutions

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<sup>141</sup> Castro, “At this moment, Cuba is training more than 12,000 doctors for the Third World”

<sup>142</sup> Feinsilver, “Oil-For-Doctors: Cuban Diplomacy Gets a Little Help from Venezuelan Friend”, p.216



from both a professional and humanitarian standpoint. Cuba has been sending physicians to treat the world's most afflicted populations for decades; treating patients of Chernobyl after their nuclear disaster in 1986, relief for Haiti after the 2011 earthquake, and the medical brigades spanning nearly every continent during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>143144145</sup> Their medical diplomacy was born out of a Guevarian-enthused global solidarity that has become Cuba's most highly sought-after export.

Studies have suggested that countries can use medical diplomacy as a form of "soft-power" intended to raise the international profile of the sending country.<sup>146</sup> Because global health in a diplomatic sense is usually outside the realm of geopolitics and is advantageous to both the donor and recipient country, it is a form of soft-power that strategically shapes a charitable interpretation of the sender.<sup>147148149</sup> Cuba has wielded this power by enlisting their physicians into a foreign policy agenda that has augmented their humanitarian prestige. Global health consultant and scholar on Cuban affairs Julie Feinsilver details the mutation of the country's healthcare commitments:

"[Medical Diplomacy] has helped Cuba garner symbolic capital (goodwill, influence, and prestige) well beyond what would have been possible for a small, developing country, and it has contributed to making Cuba a player on the world stage. In recent years, medical diplomacy has been instrumental in providing material capital (aid, credit, and trade), as the oil-for-doctors deal with Venezuela demonstrates. This has helped keep the revolution afloat in trying economic times. What began as the implementation of one of the core values of the revolution, namely health as a basic human right for all peoples, has continued as both an idealistic and pragmatic pursuit."<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Garcia and Medina, "Fifteen years of the Cuban Program, with children from areas affected by the Chernobyl accident", p.39

<sup>144</sup> Kirk and Kirk, "Cuban medical cooperation in Haiti: One of the world's best-kept secrets", p.14

<sup>145</sup> Wylie, "Cuba's response to COVID-19: lessons for the future", p.359

<sup>146</sup> Collins, Bekenova, and Kagarmanova, "Negotiated Health Diplomacy: A Case Study of the EU and Central Asia", p.433

<sup>147</sup> Collins, Bekenova, and Kagarmanova, p.433

<sup>148</sup> Nye Jr., "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power", p.94

<sup>149</sup> Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Laughlin, "Strategic Narrative: A New Means to Understand Soft Power", p.71

<sup>150</sup> Feinsilver, "Fifty Years of Cuba's Medical Diplomacy: From Idealism to Pragmatism", p.85

Diaz-Canel has inherited a system of governance that is in a state of flux with their medical industry being the guiding light for Cuba's financial future. Cuba still depends on tourism, FDI, and profits from their nickel and cobalt supply to be contributors in financial growth going forward but Raul Castro made a concerted effort to use Cuba's leading medical professionals as their money-maker starting at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This has relieved the PCC of economic difficulties to an extent, but chaotic political conditions in Venezuela as well as the collapse in oil prices threaten the sustainability of the "oil-for-doctors" agreement.<sup>151</sup> Cuba has first-hand experience in going through a traumatic fallout from oil dependency, another cycle of the social discontent akin to the *Special Period* could be devastating for the party.<sup>152</sup>

### **VIII. Conclusion**

Cuba's catastrophic tailspin on the heels of the U.S.S.R.'s downfall pressed the state to decentralize their state-monitored economy. Heightened rates of FDI and tourism were indispensable to the island's recovery after the *Special Period*. Detractors concerned with heightened privatization not seen since pre-Castro were initially skeptical of these reforms. Anxieties of pessimists were eased as most profits earned from FDI and tourism were reinserted back into the state budget instead of into private hands.<sup>153</sup> The PCC's neostructuralist methodology necessitated the island's quick recuperation to avoid future politically charged outbursts like the *Maleconazo* in 1994.<sup>154</sup>

Economic reforms have calmed the fears of many who struggled fiscally during the early 1990s, but market liberalization has not completely remedied social angst. The Soviet Union's

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<sup>151</sup> Feinsilver, "Oil-For-Doctors: Cuban Diplomacy Gets a Little Help from Venezuelan Friend", p.216

<sup>152</sup> Feinsilver, "The Cuban alternative to neoliberalism: Linkages between local production and tourism after 1990", p.216

<sup>153</sup> Enriquez, p. 94

<sup>154</sup> Gershman and Gutierrez, "Can Cuba change? Ferment in Civil Society?", p.37

example of *Perestroika and Glasnost* demonstrates the unpredictability of reform measures as being the only viable solution for regime stamina. Despite the implementation of Gorbachev's reforms being widely supported throughout the region, the Soviet Union collapsed anyway.<sup>155</sup> The PCC continues to sit at the helm of Cuba's political leadership, and while introducing market reforms have been beneficial for the party, they still cannot prevent riots and protests like the ones seen on July 11, 2021.<sup>156</sup>

Castro's mythos has been effective in stoking the fires of nationalism in Cuba, however in the long run it has not been a reliable variable in explaining the regime's longevity. For starters, Fidel's health began to decline and his death in 2016 signaled a passing of the torch to his brother Raul. While Raul has echoed the same political sentiments as his predecessor, he does not possess the same charisma nor the ability as the gifted orator that was Fidel. Due to his irregular public appearances, a common joke shared by Cubans was "Raul no habla" or "Raul doesn't talk".<sup>157</sup> Raul's successor, Miguel Diaz-Canel, has faced even more of an uphill battle as he does not wield the aura of Fidel either and unlike Raul, he cannot rely on any revolutionary laurels as he was born a year after the revolution ended.

An additional hurdle in front of Diaz-Canel and the PCC is the fact that younger Cubans have no connection to the M-26-7 and have grown tired of the government using the blockade as an excuse for their troubles. In response to poor societal circumstances, large portions of Cuba's youth have either voiced their frustration with the regime through protest or have just outright left the country.<sup>158</sup> Castro's veneration of Marti's anti-imperialist spirit and Che's *hombre nuevo* simply do not inspire a population who have little to no recollection of the island's most

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<sup>155</sup> Mason, "Glasnost, Perestroika, and Eastern Europe", p. 431

<sup>156</sup> Lopez Segrera, "Cuba: The July 11, 2021, Protests", p.40

<sup>157</sup> Pertierra, "Cuba without the Castros", p.39

<sup>158</sup> Pertierra, p.41

decorated rebels. Cosmetic policies and celebrating the achievements of wars won before most Cubans were born are not sufficient in explaining the perseverance of the PCC.

Part of the reason Cubans have grown weary of Castro's regime stems from their draconian laws on political assembly and expression. Cuba's CDR has undoubtedly had a large impact on driving political engagement and protecting the party from endogenous and exogenous threats. However, the societal utility most associated with the CDR is that they are the surveillance apparatus for the PCC. They infiltrate neighborhoods and remain in constant contact with their respective community generating a political ecosystem that pressures their citizens to vote and behave favorably towards the party.

While CDR members do surveil and report what they suspect to be counterrevolutionary activity, they also build trust and relations through outreach programs, conduct mutual aid, and assist in literacy and vaccination campaigns.<sup>159</sup> Their universal presence has suffused the state amplifying the politicization of Cuban citizens.<sup>160</sup> The seeming ubiquity of the CDR has created an overarching sociopolitical atmosphere in which a "Big Brother" state is in constant supervision of every individual. A population that feels they are constantly being watched or suspected of harboring anti-PCC sentiments may incite voters to show their loyalty to the party and remove doubt by remaining civically engaged and showing up on election day. Studies show that higher rates of voter turnout occur under instances of rampant surveillance or social pressure.<sup>161162</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Halbert-Brooks, "Cederistas: Women's Education and Vigilance in Cuban Comites de Defensa de la Revolucion, 1960-1970", p.37

<sup>160</sup> Reuter, "Civic Duty and Voting under an Autocracy", p.1602

<sup>161</sup> Gross, Schmidt, Keating, and Saks, "Persuasion, Surveillance, and Voting Behavior", p.458

<sup>162</sup> Gerber, Green, Larimer, "Social Pressure and Voter Turnout: Evidence from a Large-Scale Field Experiment", p.40

However, tensions in Cuba remain have severely tarnished the image of the PCC. Not only have the past few years seen a record number of migrants leave the country, but their vaunted voting numbers have decreased significantly in the most recent elections.<sup>163</sup><sup>164</sup> An uptick in citizens abstaining to vote could be a sign that more Cubans are exasperated with the current situation and could want a change of leadership. Cuban scholar Andres Pertierra claims that without the government conceding substantial amounts of political rigidity, the credibility of the PCC will deteriorate, and levels of voters abstaining will continue to rise.<sup>165</sup>

Economic reforms, nationalism, and low intensity repression have all been used as explanatory factors for one-party states. Cuba's main departure with many autocratic regimes is their medical commitments that have bettered the lives of not just Cubans but citizens of the world. In a country that has had issues in promoting industrial diversification, finding a dependable export in their human capital has been of utmost importance to the regime.

Certainly ending the blockade like the U.S. had done with Vietnam in 1994 would dramatically improve the socioeconomic outlook for Cuba, but that seems unlikely to change under the Biden administration.<sup>166</sup> Cuba does not have the same manufacturing potential that Vietnam possessed at that time, and Florida has become such a battleground during elections that ending the embargo would be too much of a political risk for any candidate or party.<sup>167</sup> U.S. policymakers have continued their hostile antics towards the PCC and have made little to no efforts thawing relations despite an overwhelming majority of the global community voting to end the blockade.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Reuters, "Cuba agrees to accept US deportation flights as border crossings rise"

<sup>164</sup> AP News, "Voter abstention rises in Cuban National assembly election"

<sup>165</sup> Pertierra, "Cuba without the Castros", p.42

<sup>166</sup> Stauch, "The United States and Vietnam: Overcoming the Past and Investing in the Future", p.997

<sup>167</sup> Stauch, p.1034

<sup>168</sup> AP News, "UN votes overwhelmingly to condemn US embargo of Cuba"

Without lifting the sanctions, Cuba will have to continue to hope that leftist movements not just in Latin America but throughout the world can arise and flourish as possible allies and trade partners. Conservative leaders in South America sent many of Cuba's doctors working in the region back to the island.<sup>169</sup> This worsened health concerns in these countries as COVID-19 rates rose considerably shortly after and it simultaneously hurt Cuba in that their deals with these countries were temporarily frozen. Lula's reelection in Brazil and the electoral victory of Luis "Lucho" Arce in Bolivia has steadied relations, but reactionary responses in Latin America could be around the corner as they had been just a few years ago.

If Cuba has no trade partners for their doctors and travel restrictions continue to hurt Cuba as a tourist destination, then the next wave of political uprisings could be fatal for the party. More research will have to be done to verify what geopolitical developments are necessary to explain the PCC's lengthy existence as well as other policy mechanisms that can add to the understanding of relevant regime survival tactics.

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<sup>169</sup> Bermudez, Garcia, and Concepcion, "Narrative and Dissent in Times of COVID-19", p.213

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