

# Cuban Exceptionalism

## INTRODUCTION

The *Handbook* presents individual country case studies in order to record the practical activity that diplomats from democratic countries have performed there in support of civil society, democracy development, and human rights. Situations can and often do resemble each other in some recognizable respects, and our aim is to enable diplomats and civil society partners in the field to obtain insights and guidance from actions taken elsewhere, without, however, suggesting that the experiences in one country can simply be transposed directly to another, since the trajectory of each country's development is singular.

The case of Cuba is extreme, and in many ways unique. Cuban history since the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century is intertwined in a relationship with one country, the United States. The mutual enmity between the two governments for much of the last 50 years has had a direct impact on conditions inside Cuba. Anything that diplomats of democratic countries can do in support of Cuban democracy development pales in significance to the potential effect of placing US-Cuba relations on a normal basis, possibly for the first time.

The only country in the western hemisphere that does not practice some form of electoral democracy, Cuba's government remains in principle a Marxist-Leninist throwback and a resolute holdout more than two decades after the abandonment of communism in Europe and adoption of the market economy in China. Expectations that Cuban communism would be merely the last domino to fall failed to recognize a signal difference with Eastern Europe where the regimes were judged to be collaborating with an outside oppressor, the USSR. The Cuban government presents itself as the patriotic defender against an outside threat.

The regime has from the outset been symbiotically identified with its *Comandante en jefe* who led the revolution that propelled it into power on January 1, 1959. Descriptive labels scholars employ to capture its essence range from "extreme paternalism" (Prof. Carollee Berghdorf, Hampshire College, UK) to "charismatic post-totalitarianism" (Prof. Eusebio Mujal-León, Georgetown University, Washington, DC). Exile adversary US Congressman Lincoln Díaz-Balart, has called it "the Fidel Castro regime," pure and simple. Although an orderly succession has obviously occurred as Fidel Castro retired from public office in July, 2006 and ostensibly turned power over to Raúl Castro, the question arises whether anything significant has changed. Fidel Castro's moral influence over the country remains, though he is without direct control of all details as before. Having described himself in 1961 as a "Marxist-Leninist until I die," he recast himself in post-retirement writings as a "utopian socialist," adding that "one must be consistent to the end."

The regime he built over the decades, "is not the German Democratic Republic," as one diplomat in Havana phrased it, but it is an authoritarian one-party state that has used an Orwellian security apparatus to rein in and quash democratic impulses over five decades, often citing the threat from the US as the rationale. Much of the world acknowledges the ability of Castro's Cuba to have stared down and survived determined efforts by successive US governments to end the regime, by invasion, attempted assassination, a CIA program of subversion, and a punitive economic embargo.

But increasingly, democrats rebuke the regime for its invocation of these real threats to Cuba's sovereignty to justify the continued and even tighter suffocation of human and civil rights of Cuban citizens.

The case study that follows attempts to identify activities by diplomats and democracies in support of Cubans' efforts to secure rights at home, including discussion of a more open and democratic system. But the study reports the view that these efforts tend to bounce off a tightly controlled and controlling regime that veers between self-confidence and paranoia, and discounts the pertinence of mutual leverage.

Diplomatic efforts meant to support democracy development are in consequence especially challenged in today's Cuba. Diplomats have to manage seemingly competing professional obligations of non-interference, official engagement, a long-term developmental perspective, and immediate democratic solidarity.

This challenge, familiar to diplomats and international NGOs working in other authoritarian and repressive states, is made especially vexing in Cuba by an authoritarian government that is fearful of change. But some signs of change are present in Cuba. Coming years will engage democrats in support of efforts by the Cuban people to pursue aspirations for more significant change that is theirs alone to accomplish.

## **CUBAN HISTORY**

In few countries are the links between history and the present as evident on the surface as in Cuba, where the struggles and passions of the last 150 years still play out in national psychology and perspectives today.

Christopher Columbus made trans-Atlantic landfall on Cuba on October 27, 1492 on his epic voyage of "discovery." By 1511, Spain had declared the island a Spanish possession and within decades the Taino-Arawak peoples were eliminated by a combination of harsh repression, suicide, European diseases, and assimilation. Except for a brief occupation of Havana by the British, Cuba remained in Spanish hands for almost 500 years, until 1898. During the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the island economy prospered from sugar and tobacco production that, however, relied heavily on African slave labor until the abolition of slavery in 1886.

Influenced by European and American revolutions, a vibrant national identity emerged over time, generating a movement for independence whose moral animator was Father Félix Varela (1788-1854), one of the first great protagonists of non-violent civil resistance. Several rebellions that were harshly dealt with preceded the Ten Year War that cost tens of thousands of Cuban lives and even more on the part of the Spaniards, until a negotiated compromise, which led to the abolition of slavery in 1886.

José Martí (1853-95) was since adolescence devoted to the quest for an independent and non-racial Cuba, causing his imprisonment and exile. In 1881, the nationalist writer and poet found his way to the US and began in earnest to mobilize support for an armed incursion of exiled patriots to throw the Spaniards out of Cuba.

The rebellion against Spanish rule that broke out on the island in 1895 (without the exile invasion force whose ships had been impounded) suited the long-standing aversion of the US to European possessions in the Western Hemisphere that was codified as doctrine by President James Monroe in 1823. The annexation of Cuba had been openly espoused by later Presidents Polk and Pierce.

Anxious to pre-empt the impulse toward annexation by expediting national independence as a *fait accompli*, José Martí was killed not long after he had joined the insurgents in 1895. But by the following year, the rebels had succeeded in controlling most of Cuba.

By 1895, a growing set of frictions with Spain added to public sympathy in the US for the Cuban patriots, making the option of war against Spain popular. As future president Theodore Roosevelt wrote, “This country needs a war.”

US Secretary of State Blaine secretly tried in 1896 to buy Cuba from a resistant Spain, but when the US battleship Maine (sent in aid of US citizens fearing for their safety) mysteriously blew up in Havana harbor in 1898, the US used it as a *casus belli*.

The latter stage of the Cuban War of Independence thereby became known in the US only as part of the larger Spanish-American War. US intervention was decisive within the year. Peace negotiations with Spain, from which Cubans were excluded, handed Cuba over to the US who then occupied the country for four years. However, because the joint resolution of Congress authorizing the use of force to help the Cuban rebels had an amendment (the Teller Amendment) that forbade annexation, the US consented to Cuban independence in 1902.

As historian Alfredo José Estrada has written, it was America’s “first experience of nation-building.” President McKinley instructed the military expeditionary chief General Wood to “try to straighten out their courts, (and) put them on their feet as best you can. We want to do all we can for them and get out of the island as soon as we safely can.”

But nation-building went hand-in-hand with a profitable reciprocity treaty that awarded US business and trade a privileged place in the Cuban economy. Moreover, Cuban sovereignty was diluted by the “Platt Amendment” that the US Congress passed in 1901 and had inserted into the Cuban Constitution giving the US the right to intervene if US citizens or property were endangered. Indeed, US troops occupied Cuba on the occasion of various uprisings thereafter, between 1906 and 1909, in 1912, and between 1917 and 1920. The amendment was abrogated in 1934.

### The 20<sup>th</sup> Century until 1959

Cuba’s enjoyment of independence was repeatedly spoiled by dictatorship and corruption. In 1925, modernizer Gerardo Machado was elected president, but soon gave in to the temptations of dictatorship. His rule was ended by violent opposition (“The *Abecedarios*”) and after a brief, idealistic, but chaotic socialist period, the army seized power in 1933. Authority, initially from behind the throne, was in the hands of ex-Sergeant Fulgencio Batista.

Batista, however, did initiate a democratic process and the adoption of a progressive constitution in 1940, following which he was fairly elected president, signaling the debut of Cuba’s only 12 years of democracy, recalled later as the “politics of disappointment.” The 1944 election was won by progressive Ramón Grau San Martín who presided over a rising economy but also much corruption and gangsterism. His successor in 1948, Carlos Prío, brought little positive change.

Before scheduled elections in 1952, Batista seized power, suspended the Constitution he had helped design, and began a darker chapter of dictatorial violence and widespread corruption.

Middle and upper classes prospered, but poorer people languished as disparities widened. The Batista regime’s staunch anti-communism appealed to the Cold War outlook of US authorities at the expense of Cuban human rights. In 1953, a group of rebels led by young lawyer Fidel Castro attacked the Moncada barracks. Released from prison, Castro organized in Mexico a rebel force that in 1956 landed and launched a disciplined mountain-based guerrilla campaign, under *comandantes* Che Guevara, Raúl

Castro, and Camilo Cienfuegos that drew decisive support from peasants, sugar workers, students, and their own persistence.

### The Castro Victory and its Aftermath

The hundred thousand or so refugees that followed Batista's flight from Cuba on December 31, 1958 in the inaugural wave to Miami were mostly embittered by what they had lost to the new regime.

The prevalent initial international reaction to the Castro victory was that despotism had been turfed out by an idealistic cause. Fidel Castro tried at first to showcase an inclusive social-democratic coalition of a wide variety of opponents to Batista. After these attempts were shelved, disillusioned democrats began to join professionals and small businessmen to abandon what seemed to be rapidly becoming a militant ideological monolith.

As part of the process of "draining the swamp," several hundred executions took place at Havana's *La Cabaña* fortress, after summary trials. But as John Lee Anderson reported in "Che," "There was little public opposition to the wave of revolutionary justice at the time. On the contrary: Batista's thugs had committed some sickening crimes, (and) the Cuban public was in a lynching mood."

But Anderson added, "Whatever the 'necessity' of the revolutionary tribunals, they did much to polarize the political climate between Havana and Washington." The gap widened as Fidel Castro's anti-Washington rhetoric escalated and his plans to nationalize American assets in Cuba clarified. Che Guevara upped the ante by urging violent revolution throughout the hemisphere, which Anderson calls "a siren call to would-be revolutionaries and an implicit declaration of war against the interests of the United States." So began a half-century of mutual enmity.

### The Castro Years, 1959-

This is not the place for detailed analysis of the dramatic history of Cuba over the last half-century. The regime was from almost the outset in a psychological and real state of siege: the failed US-financed Bay of Pigs invasion in February, 1961, was the only military attack, but there were repeated attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro over the years, most notoriously as part of "Operation Mongoose," one of the biggest CIA covert operations ever undertaken. Diplomatic relations with the US were severed in 1961. Subsequent events, from the fateful Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 that brought the world perilously close to nuclear war, through the passage by the US Congress of the Helms-Burton Act in 1996 that tightened the devastating economic embargo on Cuba, perpetuated the state of militant readiness that the Cuban leadership has invoked to justify the necessity of strict authoritarian control.

There is no question that the revolution of 1959 had wide popular support, having overthrown what was widely held to be a tyrannical regime. Most citizens took patriotic pride in Cuba's stature in the eyes of the world.

There was also initial enthusiasm about exporting the Cuban revolution throughout Latin America but it waned, and died in Bolivia in 1967 with Che Guevara who had become by then a revolutionary freelancer without much active Cuban government input. Cuba did take up arms in support of liberation causes, most prominently in Angola where a Cuban expeditionary army numbering as many as 55,000 fought for years to support the leftist MPLA against South African proxies with costs so huge to the apartheid regime that South Africans today credit Cuba with having done more to bring down white minority rule than anyone else from outside. (More than 2000 Cubans died in the Angola fighting).

In recent years, Cuba's international "brand" has been identified with the export of health services: 36,000 Cuban doctors are in service in over 70 countries, providing poor neighborhoods medical facilities for the first time, such as the "*Barrio Adentro*" project in Caracas. South Africa pays Cuba to supply doctors to replace the many who have emigrated in the post-apartheid era. Cuba provides medical services in Venezuela in return for oil, but Cuban emergency relief teams were among the first to support relief efforts after the tsunami in Indonesia in 2004, a major earthquake in Pakistan in 2006, and were prominent closer to home more recently in earthquake-devastated Haiti. The *Misión Milagros* has brought hundreds of thousands of poor Latin Americans to Cuba for eye surgery and sent teams of Cuban eye doctors abroad.

In those fifty-plus years, the Cuban government achieved important social goals. Diplomats in Cuba caution that whoever follows will have to accept that these achievements will need to be built-upon, not dismantled.

Cubans have never been as healthy, educated, or more or less equal. The Cuban government states that a population that was only 60% literate in 1959, is 100% literate; 94% of Cubans finish secondary school. Today, there are 80,000 doctors, compared to 6,000 at the time of the revolution (3,000 of whom emigrated). Life expectancy and infant mortality data rival those in Canada and the US, and are the best in Latin America. Latin American diplomats report that people struggling against criminal gangs in their region envy Cuba's relative absence of street violence.

However, the political attempt to re-engineer society along Marxist lines had far-reaching social and economic consequence, which combined with increasing ideological militancy and police control, has taken some toll on popular support, though there is no reliable way of estimating approval ratings apart from the enduring efforts Cubans make to emigrate. The number of Cuban emigrants and families in the US today is well over a million.

Following nationalizations of private enterprise and the confiscation of US businesses, the re-engineered socialist economy became mired in centralized control and leaden bureaucracy. Social gains that also had to struggle against the effects of US sanctions were slowed. The withdrawal of Soviet "fraternal" subsidies (amounting to 21% of the Cuban GDP) after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 essentially ended the radical Cuban social experiment. Having been over-reliant on the Soviet bloc, to the extent of 80% of trade, Cuba faced a grave economic crisis. The government responded by suspending its economic orthodoxy to accommodate pragmatic measures under "the special period in times of peace" that introduced limited private small enterprise (self-employment or *trabajo de cuenta propia*) and permitted the use of foreign hard currency.

Yet, recovery was staggered, further hindered by devastating hurricanes in recent years. The collapsed sugar market has never recovered. Some reforms initiated in the "special period" that authorized the emergence of semi-autonomous enterprises and research centers were rolled back a decade later. A senior economic minister told an ambassador at the time that the state's position as employer had dropped from 98% to 97% but was now back at 98%. Diplomats report that officials who had launched new ventures and centers with government favor found themselves in sudden disfavor and relegated to a limbo of obscurity.

## **CUBA TODAY: SOCIO-ECONOMIC ATROPHY**

The RAND Corporation writes today of "a vast array of dysfunctional legacies from the *fidelistas* past." In general, public grievances are less related to human rights than to improving the material conditions of day-to-day living.

There is a consensus among observers that the population is idle, underemployed, and apathetic, worn down by the struggle to feed families from meager personal food rations that the half of the population with no access to the convertible currency economy has to rely on.

70% of Cubans were born after 1959 and relate less to the revolutionary enthusiasm of early years. Cuban youth in the main wants what youth everywhere seeks, free access to popular outside cultural goods, life styles, and freedom to travel.

The regime under Raúl Castro appears committed to trying to improve the economy and has taken some modest steps to lighten bureaucratic controls that he repeatedly criticizes, and to decentralize, but structures are so ossified that the practical effect is hardly visible. About 60% of the economy is under the direct control of the self-financed FAR, the Revolutionary Armed Forces that constitute a powerful state-within-the-state with separate infrastructure for food, energy, and transport for its members' benefit.

In 2009, Raúl Castro enabled small private land-holdings to try to improve food production, as Cuba is now massively dependent on food imports (the US is the main supplier, food products having been excepted from the US embargo under strict terms of cash pre-payment).

Such steps reflect to some extent a pragmatic current among political elites. Raúl Castro's own political appointees tend to be older military intimates. They are described as status quo-oriented but not necessarily hard-line ideologically. They seem mindful, however, of potential resistance from more ideological loyalists, and pay heed to the destabilizing effects of "shock therapy" in Russia and elsewhere, that would in any case be anathema to a population fearful of weakening entitlement programs that at least keep everybody afloat. Nonetheless, even the most orthodox socialists are reported to see the merits of permitting the safety valves of some economic reforms, provided egalitarian principles remain paramount. However, the differences between those who have access to the convertible currency economy and those who don't are already corrosive enough.

### Political

From the outset, the regime has maintained pervasive supervision of the population, making ample use of the *Comités de Defensa de la Revolución*, that engage citizens as watchdogs in every block and workplace. The consensus among observers is that despite piecemeal concessions, Cubans are unlikely to see any significant weakening of doctrinaire political control as long as Fidel Castro is alive. Most acknowledge it has proven to be wishful thinking to believe that pragmatic specific reforms lead inevitably to wholesale political change, as a kind of Cuban *perestroika*.

"Elections" to local councils and state organs remain resolutely single-party.

On the occasion of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the regime in 2000, Human Rights Watch wrote of the "highly effective machine of repression." Only a few years later, in March 2003, police arrested 75 democracy proponents. The 52 remaining in prison seven years later are now slated for release, after the intervention of Cardinal Jaime Ortega. This leaves well over 100 prisoners of conscience still in Cuban jails. A good number were prosecuted mostly as recipients of US financial aid. (Internal security operatives who had infiltrated NGOs appeared as state witnesses). The propaganda machine remorselessly attacked civil society representatives as a mercenary fifth column serving Cuba's enemies.

## Civil Society and the Opposition

The notion of civil society acting independently of government that is at the core of democratic development was by definition abhorrent to old-line Soviet-style Marxists. From the start, the regime appropriated Cuban patriotism as the central theme of the revolution's narrative, ultimately incarnated by the government. The external threats produced national security laws that declare the acceptance of foreign funds to support change to the Cuban system to be seditious. The views of those who advocate change are represented as being inherently anti-Cuban.

Yet, Fidel Castro himself referred to civil society in positive terms internationally in 1992. The partial withdrawal of the state in the "special period" opened up spaces that were filled by informal arrangements among people that laid the beginnings of civil society. But a backlash in official opinion once the economy began an uneven recovery in the mid 1990s caused Cuban authorities by 1996 to label notions of civil society and democracy as being part and parcel of aggressive campaigns from the US for regime change.

A pattern emerged that once an advocacy organization became prominent or effective beyond a certain point, it was shut down.

An early example was the CCPDH (the Cuban Committee for Human Rights) that in the 1970s formed among imprisoned socialists and supporters of the 1959 revolution disillusioned by monolithic political control. In 1997, members of the "Working Group of the Internal Dissidence" were jailed, followed by more arrests in succeeding years.

The most high-profile advocacy initiative was the Varela Project, winner of the Sakharov prize and lauded publicly by Pope John Paul II and former president Jimmy Carter on visits to Cuba. Animated by Oswaldo Payá who had founded the Christian liberation movement in 1988, the Varela project took advantage of a provision of the 1992 Cuban Constitution to collect the requisite 10,000 signatures to petition the right to a popular referendum on basic freedoms of association and the press and free elections, and the right to operate a private business. It also called for an amnesty on political prisoners. The government crushed the initiative by organizing its own referendum in which 8 million Cuban citizens were herded into voting for a constitutional amendment making socialism permanent. Then, it seized 22 of the most prominent supporters of the Varela Project in its mass arrests in March 2002.

Oswaldo Payá was not among them, perhaps because of his international prominence. He has continued his efforts through the Christian Liberation Movement, starting the Cuban Forum, which encourages discussion meetings in peoples' homes. Some observers comment that the regime's tolerance of this activity, though it is subject to considerable surveillance, shows a post-Fidel measure of acceptance that the population increasingly needs and expects a debate about the country's political future. Overall, there is public fatigue over official propaganda and intrusion into personal lives, and Raul Castro has dialed down the propaganda volume.

But analytical opinion is that the discouraging material conditions mean that achieving a multiparty political system is not top in the list of Cubans' priorities. People do want less economic control. They accept the social and egalitarian values that animate the Cuban revolution, but deplore inefficient and demeaning delivery of social and other services.

Despite the hard line that has persisted since 1996, civil society has continued to expand in a piecemeal fashion, including in rural areas, especially to fill space created by inadequate social delivery by the government faced with an overcrowded agenda. While not presenting themselves as advocates of political

change, such civil society groups obtain pertinent experience in local and personal initiative from handling the functional issues at hand, laying foundations for building what the China case study refers to as the “ecology” of pluralism.

In the 1990s, the *Consilio Cubano* emerged as an umbrella group of 135 small organizations, including professional associations and independent journalists. It was blocked from meeting in 1996 and not revived. But over 2,000 NGOs with specific functional objectives are inscribed officially.

The Independent Library Movement addressed a gap in access to books in Spanish, and built a network of over 100 libraries with over 250,000 users. Though non-political in practical purpose, its founder, human rights activist Ramon Colas, was forced into exile in 2001.

The labor movement is dominated by the official CTC that is an instrument of regime control, but two more independent labor groups have emerged: the CUTC (the United Council of Cuban Workers); and the CUNIC (the Christian International Labor Movement).

The Federation of Latin American Rural Women (FLAMUR) founded in 1996 has collected over 100,000 signatures to a petition protesting the inequity of a dual-currency economy they maintain is unfair to poorer Cubans without access to convertible pesos.

Having been identified as a supporter of Spain and then of Batista and other dictators, the Roman Catholic Church is greatly diminished institutionally in Cuba, reduced to only 300 priests (half are Cuban). But religious faith is by no means extinguished.

In 1992 the Cuban government dropped the formally atheistic character of the country and returned the right to worship without official stigma. By the 1990s the Catholic Church was giving thought to its social role and began a non-political program of small projects for citizens such as day-care centers for single mothers and facilities for the elderly. It did not become a conduit for open political challenge as in Poland in the 1980s, but it has created a space for open discussion, and the Church is supported by congregants across the country. Raúl Castro held an unprecedented four-hour meeting in May 2010 with Cardinal Jaime Ortega and the Archbishop of Santiago de Cuba, Dionisio Garcia. This has led to further discussion between Church and State resulting in a set of concessions regarding jail sentences of prisoners of conscience, including the announced release, probably into exile of the remaining 52 prisoners arrested in March, 2003.

A variety of congregational and religious assemblies are able to draw resources from corresponding religious communities in the US and elsewhere. The Afro-Cuban traditional popular practice of *Santería* remains part of Cuban national culture.

A plethora of associations and cooperatives emerged for developmental purposes, working on alternative energy, agriculture, and restoration of local buildings, sometimes involving wholesale community development such as the *El Condado* movement aimed at remodeling the city of Santa Clara.

Artistic, intellectual, and research circles have banded into informal groups. Rock music has attracted a strong following on the part of young people that authorities have belatedly and without much credibility tried to align with.

All in all, diplomats and other observers judge that the foundations of civil society, while rudimentary, are taking root, providing foreign democratic partners with a growing variety of non-state partners.

## Cuba's Relationships with Community of Democracies Member States

Cuba's foreign relationships have varying degrees of intensity.

As described above, the **relationship with the US** is overwhelmingly the most important from every point of view. There is scarcely a family without relatives in the US, and US policies on permissible remittances from family members, as well as on visits, are of primary importance on the island. The Obama administration has relaxed the regulations that had been considerably hardened by the preceding administration. In 2010, US visas were again being provided Cuban artists and performers to tour in the US, such as the emblematic poet-singer Silvio Rodríguez.

The Helms-Burton Act, however, is rooted in law and many of the provisions of the US embargo cannot be changed by executive order. Yet, as time goes by, the ability of the harder-line exile community in South Florida to dictate terms of the relationship between the two countries diminishes. A growing number of US voters would share the consensus among non-US democratic representatives in Cuba that the US embargo and US policies have been counter-productive, enabling the regime to justify strengthening its control over the population. A recent article by Human Rights Watch monitors Nik Steinberg and Daniel Wilkinson judged that "It is hard to think of a US policy with a longer track record of failure."

Professor Lopez-Levy has observed that the fault with US policy is that it "wants to start at the end." The Helms-Burton Act indeed rooted its embargo provisions not only in Cuba adopting a multiparty democracy, but on the Castros being no longer in office.

Fidel Castro has always turned US policy to his advantage and has mobilized Cuban fears the Cuban American community aimed at restoring economic as well as political control over the island. Cuban citizens are generally reported to be bitter about the hard line from either side: the Cuban authorities who care more about ideology than the plight of Cubans; and US authorities and lawmakers who chose to tighten sanctions and the embargo at the moment of greatest economic hardship for Cubans. By all accounts, ordinary Cubans hope the Obama administration will succeed in inducing flexibility, a relaxation of enmity and also of Cuban controls.

The Obama Administration has initiated talks with Cuban authorities over immigration and overflights as well as preliminary talks on the prospects for improving the relationship. Though Fidel Castro has never accepted the premise of "normalization" in exchange for democratization, it is implicit that both sanctions and Cuba's continuing to imprison prisoners of conscience must ultimately be bargaining tools in a larger picture.

The Cuban government has recognized the need to diversify relationships, having learned a harsh lesson from over-dependence on the USSR. There has been something of a revival of relations with **Russia**, and **China** has become Cuba's second largest trading partner.

Cuba's other relationships have in some ways been strengthened in recent years. Virtually all **Latin American countries** now have diplomatic representation in Cuba, especially since Cuba stopped supporting leftist uprisings in Central America in the early 1990s. Indeed, Cuba is seen by Latin Americans to have played a constructive role in mediation of conflicts in the region.

A wave of electoral victories of the left and center-left in Latin America in recent years translated into cooperative relationships with Cuba. While most reject Cuba's political model, the Castros' anti-democratic policies and practices have seemingly been applauded by the likes of Venezuela's Hugo

Chavez. Generally, in line with historic Latin American neuralgia toward outside interference in domestic affairs, Latin Americans take a hands-off attitude toward Cuban governance.

Worker-based and left of center Latin American political movements and parties long enjoyed close relations with Cuban political elites, and once in office, several leaders such as President Luiz Inácio ‘Lula’ da Silva of Brazil, President Evo Morales of Bolivia, or ex-President Michelle Bachelet of Chile, reciprocated for past Cuban support.

Cuba has been admitted to the Rio Group devoted to economic cooperation among Latin American and Caribbean countries. Though the US has continued to resist the idea (advanced by Canada) of inviting Cuba to Summits of the Americas, Fidel Castro was enthusiastically welcomed at the first Summit of Latin America and the Caribbean on Development hosted by Brazil (that excluded the US).

Venezuela is a high-profile ally of the Castro regime and is a major financial benefactor. Mexico has recently restored a productive political level dialogue after the tensions with ex-President Fox, strengthening economic relations and consulting on other issues of mutual importance such as illegal migration. President Lula da Silva who visited Cuba several times during his tenure as president, paid a state visit to Raúl Castro in 2008 featuring a major economic assistance and development package that situates Brazil as a central partner, particularly in the energy development field.

Dr. Julia Sweig points out that Cuba’s emphases on social justice resonate in Latin American public opinion. This may explain the paradox that while many have only recently overcome the abuse of human rights at the hands of military regimes, they nonetheless fail to criticize Cuban human rights abuses. Dr. Sweig assesses that “Latin American governments today generally see gradual reform under Raúl Castro as the path most likely to bring about a more plural, open society on the island,” a judgment corresponding more to the dispiriting material conditions in Cuba than to the reawakened aspirations of the people.

**Canada and the European Union** countries have always maintained relations with Cuba and have opposed Helms-Burton both for its negative impact on developments regarding Cuba and for its extra-territorial projections of US law that foreign partners judge to be unacceptable. But “western” democracies have also been firm about the unacceptability of Cuba’s disregard for human rights and for the holding of prisoners of conscience.

After the arrests of 75 democracy activists in March, 2003, the EU and its diplomatic missions in Cuba placed a severe downgrade on relations, which was only removed in 2009. There are varying degrees of warmth or lack of it among EU countries individually. Spain is the most active, including fast-track access to Spanish citizenship for Cubans with at least one Spanish grandparent, and productive partnerships in such areas as the environment, disaster preparedness and relief, and science and technology. The Czech Republic probably represents the other end of the EU scale, reflecting the priority that the former communist country places on democratic transition, and also the convictions on human rights of former president Vaclav Havel, who founded the International Committee for Democracy in Cuba. (The Fidel Castro government had supported the 1968 USSR invasion to crush Czech political reform). Individually, other EU countries have tried to engage the Cuban government in the last year, while also keeping a focus on prisoners’ lists. The European Commission has become a development partner of Cuba, but has done so in tandem with a high-level EU-Cuba dialogue on human rights.

Canada has maintained political engagement with Cuban authorities while arguing with them “nose-to-nose” for the space to continue contacts with civil society. Although Cuba normally discounts economic

leverage, the Cubans do care about their image in a country such as Canada that sends so many tourists to Cuba and continues to be an economic partner.

There are indications that Cuba knows it needs to reach out to major democracies to balance what will likely be a wave of activity from the US if and when relations do become more normal. Cuban leaders have told European partners they would like to think that Europe's greater emphasis on social democracy will enable Cuba to cement some of the social principles of the revolution amid inevitable change.

## **RESOURCES AND ASSETS OF DEMOCRATIC DIPLOMATS IN CUBA**

The Cuban government is not isolated from the representatives of foreign democratic governments as is Burma/Myanmar, nor is it indifferent to foreign views – the foreign press section of the Foreign Ministry is its biggest. But authorities can and do turn access for foreign diplomats on and off, depending on behavior.

The regime rarely goes so far as to request withdrawal of diplomatic representatives. Democratic diplomats do exercise their **immunity** in order to meet with civil society, speak freely, and even demonstrate solidarity with the victims of human rights abuse.

On the other side of the coin, there have been ample reports in the past of diplomatic **immunity** being violated by random if systemic acts of harassment and intimidation against mainly US diplomats, their dependents, and even their pets.

Diplomats have been able to count on the **support of home authorities** for diplomatic activity corresponding to the policies of the sending government at a given time. The most antagonistic approach was assigned to James Cason, the Bush administration's Head of the US Interests Section (a fully-staffed diplomatic mission located within the Swiss Embassy) from 2002 to 2005. Mr. Cason recalled he was told, "You are not at a mission. You are on a mission... The mission is to support the democracy movement." In doing so, Mr. Cason antagonized Cuban authorities. It was an outcome that would not have been considered productive by other countries whose relationships were less officially hostile, but it was one that Washington (and Miami) at the time seemed to want. Writer Daniel Erikson explained that "Castro and his top ministers despised Cason (who 'could not have cared less what Cuban officials thought' of him, his focus (being) wholly on supporting Cuba's nascent opposition movement). But they also found his overt support for Cuban dissidents to be politically useful, because it helped them to make the argument that opposition to the regime depended on overseas sponsors. Many Cubans in the system with reformist instincts found that the US Interests Section had become such a hot potato that they were forced to give it a wide berth." On the other hand, Mr. Cason's support for Cuban would-be democrats may well be remembered long after tit-for-tat antagonisms between the governments are forsaken.

The remarks of current UK Ambassador Dianna Melrose to a UK website on Cuban issues typify the dualistic approach most home authorities expect of their democratic diplomats. She spoke of her commitment to constructive engagement with the Cuban government. But she underlined that they cannot demand "mutual respect" to fend off criticism of the suppression of human rights in Cuba where "people are locked up for criticising the government" without "mutual respect also by the Cuban government for the European Union and the values important to us, including commitment to full civil and political rights, democratic freedoms, freedom of expression: all the rights that are fundamental to our society." On this basis, EU diplomats have continued their contacts with a range of opposition and other figures in civil society as detailed in the next chapter on applications, confident they will have support at home for activities that demonstrate solidarity with those persecuted for their principles.

Former Canadian Ambassador Michael Small records he was always clear with Cuban authorities that his mandate was “to talk with the whole range of the country,” and he was not curbed in making contacts with civil society.

Most diplomats interested in civil society contacts on a trip also met conscientiously with Cuban official contacts. The Cuban authorities respected a certain balance. If the emphasis became swollen toward dissidents, the official contacts were cut off and diplomats were left with only dissidents to meet.

Diplomats committed to maintaining contact with civil society and offering solidarity with human rights defenders come from the missions of several democratic countries in Cuba. The recent “Awards to Committed Diplomacy in Cuba” offered by CADAL (*Centro Para la Apertura y el Desarrollo de América Latina*) for “showing solidarity towards democrats in the island and for taking committed actions” on “human rights violations” honor three diplomats from Germany, two from the US, and one each from Poland, the Czech Republic, and Norway.

Diplomats recognize the reality that they have limited direct **influence** on any top-down regime whose political priorities are wholly internal. That being said, Cuba has specific development needs and not a lot of strategic leverage over countries able to address them. For decades, outside the US, Cuba enjoyed a generally sentimentally sympathetic international image and press, but the clampdown on free speech and political opposition, especially the arrests in 2003, have given the regime a black eye in democracies. A resolution adopted by the European Parliament in March, 2010 condemning Cuba directly addresses the responsibilities of Cuban authorities.

Raúl Castro has acknowledged that Cuba has to modernize, and to do this Cuba needs partners. This situation creates some political capital that embassies can deploy.

**Financial assistance** is a resource of diplomatic missions that ought to correspond to a dire shortage of resources on the part of Cuban NGOs. US agencies have very large amounts of money to disperse from funds authorized by Congress. The vast majority is spent on programs and NGOs outside Cuba, though the Cuban Democracy Act (1992) authorized direct US funding of NGOs seeking non-violent change. The direct funding by embassies of civil society groups, especially advocacy NGOs, has been vigorously objected to by authorities. In practice, because it was controversial, such funding often became divisive, and as mentioned, placed some Cuban recipients in a position of vulnerability. Apart from the US, diplomatic missions in Havana generally do not provide funds to support political dissidents. But they pursue the opportunity to fund developmental activities in Cuba, often preferring projects undertaken at the municipal level by local authorities or coops.

That some US funds are channeled via NGOs in newer democracies such as the Czech Republic and Poland is an example of **solidarity** among democracies, though most embassies of democratic countries in Cuba confide it would have been counter-productive in recent years to be closely associated on political issues with the US Interests Section that in the words of a US diplomat, seemed “radioactive” because of the US regime change agenda. EU countries struggled to work out a common EU position, but there were until recently few formal demarches together with non-EU partners. Over the last two decades, “like-minded” embassies, including Sweden, the Netherlands, Canada, Chile, Mexico, Spain and Britain have regularly compared notes on the ground in Havana, though they do not coordinate activity in any organized way.

The election of a new US administration in 2008 has made the working relationships among embassies in Havana more productive, and mutually reinforcing acts of human rights support are more frequent, as

detailed in the next chapter. Of course, EU embassies and those of other democracies have been consulting on development assistance issues.

Diplomats from Community of Democracies countries have consistently maintained the **legitimacy** of their solidarity with those seeking freedom of assembly and speech, and human rights defense. Cuba signed the Santiago Declaration in 1991 containing the “commitment to democracy, the strengthening of the rule of law, and access to effective justice and human rights.” In 2008, Cuba signed the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (see Annex) that guarantees such rights as well as the freedom to leave the country. There has been little apparent follow-up in concrete rights made available, but the fact that Cuba claims to be a democracy further legitimizes the right to support Cubans who seek debate about democratic norms.

## APPLICATIONS

### The Golden Rules

Listening, respecting and understanding: Understanding Cuba and its nuances is a challenge for any foreign observer. There are angles and complexities at every turn. Diplomats are reminded constantly of the need to respect the Cubans’ sense of their history, both to understand the present, and to grasp the fundamentals of national psychology. Many of the structures of Cuban social organization in Cuba are unique to that society.

Diplomats from democracies balance ambivalence and nuance against the need to contest the categorical denial of fundamental human rights inherent in such official acts as the harsh sentences meted out to dissidents and reformers arrested in March, 2003, and the public cynicism over the crude propaganda with which the regime characterizes activists of conscience.

They register their deep respect for the courage of dissidents described by Mario Vargas Llosa as “those who resist the dictatorship in difficult, even heroic, conditions,” who continue to protest violations of human rights, and who pay a high price for taking a stand, often extended to their families. But the imperative for democratic diplomats to support those raising a democratic voice in opposition has in practice taken account of the greater vulnerability direct contact and especially direct financial support can trigger. In April, 2007, Oswaldo Payá and Marta Beatriz Roque (founder of the Assembly for the Promotion of Civil Society, who had been jailed in 2003 on trumped-up charges of “acts against the independence or territorial integrity of the state”) joined other democrats in stating that “achieving changes in our society is a task corresponding to Cubans and only Cubans, to define and decide freely and democratically the future of Cuba without foreign intervention.” In short, supportive diplomats report a need to know when to keep their distance from those engaged in a struggle with authorities who monitor events closely, and especially contacts with foreign embassies in Cuba.

This applies to officials as well as to civil society activists. Diplomats observe that members of the political elite, even very senior figures such as deposed former Secretary of the Council of Ministers and Vice-President Dr. Carlos Lage, back off from what had been effective mutually beneficial contacts because of a need to avoid any accusation from security personnel of dangerous associations. In periods of thaw, such as the mid-to-late 1990s, younger officials were able to enjoy foreign contacts that in periods of retrenchment were then held against them with a cost to their careers.

Sharing among embassies is routine practice, though some are more like-minded than others. The EU, of course, shares systematically among member-state embassies and keeps balance and absence of duplication in development assistance efforts. On political/human rights issues, as mentioned above, some

embassies, possibly those with fewer concrete interests at stake in Cuba, take stronger declaratory positions. There is acknowledgment of the potential for an informal division of labor and differentiation of role among democratic embassies, especially in the EU. As detailed later, EU diplomats have teamed up to support victims of political persecution and their families, and to demonstrate public solidarity with peaceful demonstrators.

## Truth in Communications

### Reporting

Analysis of the situation in Cuba has been an ongoing duty of diplomats for many years; a local form of “Kremlinology” has grown out of the need to decipher opaque relationships in the FAR and in upper reaches of the Communist Party.

There have been major episodes of wishful thinking and cases of telling authorities at home what they wished to hear. Morris Morley (in *The Cuba Reader*) cites CIA field officers on how, prior to January 1, 1959, “Ambassadors Smith and Gardner were both absolutely convinced that Castro wasn’t going to come out of the hills. They believed what Batista told them and didn’t see that changes were going to come.”

Contemporary diplomats do not accept, obviously, the assessments of the Cuban regime at face value. They anticipate that the current repressive system will founder once Fidel Castro disappears from the scene. But they acknowledge that there is a risk of reporting isolated reforms, gestures, or contacts as heralding already the beginnings of more important structural change that has never yet emerged in any fundamental rights-altering way.

### Informing

Cuba remains a closed society as far as information is concerned. There is no access to foreign news outlets (though bureaus of foreign media are in place). There had been a short-lived growth in the late 1990s of autonomous media but following a crackdown, none of the periodicals then published still exists (with the exception of the official *Gazeta* of the Union of Writers and Artists).

The Internet is basically not available to citizens, though recently it has become possible to acquire computers (at costs prohibitive for the vast majority). The regime seems to recognize that Cuban youth will access foreign websites and social networks through bootleg connections, and observers report a debate in Cuban political circles as to the inevitability of greater openness and its implications. A blogging community operates out of Cuba (the most prominent example being Yoani Sánchez of “Generation Y”), working through cut-out servers off the island where most of their readers are. There is an Internet freedom campaign channeled through RSF (Reporters Without Borders).

Journalists have been jailed for accepting financial aid from the US. The harsh fact is that there is no independent alternative in Cuba to state-owned TV and to the propagandistic Cuban news service *Granma*. The online newspaper *Candonga* in Holguín has been blocked and its director Yosvani Anzardo Hernández was detained by police for two weeks and threatened with prosecution because he was acting as a correspondent for a Miami news site. Contact with foreign press is punishable in Cuba with sentences of up to 20 years. The Writers in Prison Committee of PEN International urges democratic governments to pursue the release of journalists among the prisoners of conscience in Cuban jails.

The US, whose resident Cuban exile community argues that Cubans are brainwashed by absence of alternative and objective views, inaugurated in 1982 Radio Martí which broadcasts to the island much as Radio Free Europe did to communist countries during the Cold War. The Cuban Government eventually jammed the broadcasts that are estimated to have had little credibility among the population in any case because of distrust of the US agenda, and the tone of hostility to the Revolution about which Cubans are conflicted.

The US Interests Section and embassies of other democratic countries have always made available news and information bulletins about world events and bilateral relations. Some welcome Cuban Internet users to embassy facilities.

The US Interests section has organized meetings and workshops, and distributed publications and information material at every opportunity, making the information program the Section's central activity. In 2006, the Interests Section ratcheted the campaign for freer information upward by installing an electronic news ticker along the top of its Havana building that attempted to rebut Cuban government claims and views. The authorities countered with a massive protest and the construction of a plaza for popular demonstrations against the US adjacent to the building whose electronic ticker they attempted to block from view by masses of black flags.

The tit-for-tat campaign spurred on by Fidel Castro and the Bush Administration has since been deescalated and the US administration pulled the plug of the electronic ticker in July, 2009.

Despite the crackdown a decade ago that reversed short-lived tolerance of independent commentators and outlets, Cuban scholars and intellectuals continue to value access to outside contacts and materials. A semi-autonomous magazine of social commentary, *Temas*, is printed in and distributed from Colombia and has sustained a fair measure of free-wheeling debate, mirrored by *Temas'* regular monthly public discussions of current social and economic issues. Some embassies help start-up magazines by providing access to newsprint.

### Working with the Government

The prevailing approach of democracies represented diplomatically in Cuba toward working with the government is to do so without forfeiting the need to dialogue on the human rights situation and demarche the Cuban authorities when the situation calls for it.

A dominant theme of foreign analysis expects that significant political reform in Cuba is more likely to emerge from circles and developments within government than from fragmented political opponents of government who are not well known to a public immersed in state propaganda and in any case preoccupied by bread-and-butter issues. But if so, few Cuban officials allow themselves to be perceived by foreigners as potential agents of democratic change. Still, the functional value of developing a wide range of confidence-building contacts among government officials, including in the FAR, is undoubted. US and Cuban military authorities have cooperated on issues arising from the US presence at Guantánamo, and on maritime patrolling against drug trafficking. Canadian federal police work with the Cubans on trafficking issues. Several intelligence agencies from democracies have working relationships with Cuban counterparts at the Ministry of the Interior on concrete issues where notes can usefully be compared.

The Cuban regime projects an air of supreme self-confidence that narrows opportunities for diplomats to advise the government. But confidence-building activities addressing Cuban concerns are possible. The challenges of delivering large amounts of humanitarian aid in the aftermath of devastating hurricanes

costing 20% of GDP, engaged the Cuban authorities for the first time in working partnerships with foreign agencies and NGOs, prominent among them, Catholic Relief Services.

Several embassies work on a variety of infrastructure and social issues with municipal levels of government and local co-ops, such as projects for restoration of historic monuments, buildings, and whole neighborhoods, partnered by agencies of EU member states.

US authorities have worked effectively with Cuban authorities over hostage and other emergencies even at the height of tension in relations. Under the Obama administration there is an increase in contacts, though diplomats report disappointment among Cubans that controls persist over scholarly and cultural exchanges. Cuban authorities allowed US military overflights for emergency relief operation after the Haiti earthquake. Cuban medical teams participated in the international effort there which represented a change from earlier international humanitarian operations in Haiti when the Canadian Prime Minister's suggestion Cuban cooperation be engaged ran into political complications.

Dialoguing with Cuban authorities takes place at the political level with possibly increasing degrees of frankness, with ministers and senior officials from Europe, Latin America, and North America. Diplomats report that senior Cuban officials take non-polemical dialogue seriously. Several ambassadors report that it is productive not to work human rights into every discussion. This may have the effect of adding force to specific demarches on human rights. But declarations made by western ministers for the benefit of their domestic audience tend to undermine the credibility of such demarches in Cuban eyes. Publicly-announced exercises in passing prisoners' lists generally remain without outcome, deflected with the answers, "We'll check", or "It's on Fidel's desk." But private communications in 2008 by Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, and Pope John Paul II during his own visit in 1998, did have a more productive effect, as have the discussions undertaken by Cardinal Ortega leading to release of the 52 remaining prisoners arrested in March, 2003. Carefully pre-negotiated outcomes for specific head of government visits have obtained exit permits for designated Cuban activists accepted for asylum in the country concerned. This was done without publicity.

### Reaching Out

Connecting to civil society is essential to most democratic missions, though how it is done is carefully considered. It is obvious that civil society in Cuba is underdeveloped, and not well networked, and could benefit from international contacts and non-political support. But the benefits to members of civil society have to be weighed against the risks of their being accused of being subject to foreign influence.

British Ambassador Melrose echoed the position of several ambassadors of Community of Democracies countries when she stated that "We don't accept any government can tell us who we can or can't speak to. There are British and other EU Ministers who would very much like to come to Cuba. But they insist on being able to have meetings with both their Cuban government counterparts and with whoever they choose from the peaceful opposition."

US diplomats from Washington recently met privately with opposition figures after concluding a round of re-launched immigration talks. (These talks had been broken off by the US in 2003). Cuban spokesmen initially reacted wildly to the meetings, accusing the American officials of "plotting subversion" with "dozens of their mercenaries." Assistant Secretary Crowley responded that "meeting with representatives of civil society who simply want a voice in the future of their country is not 'subversive.'" On February 23, Ricardo Alarcón, the President of the Parliament, lowered the tone of Cuban reaction, observing that such meetings with civil society are not apt to "rupture the dialogue."

Democratic embassies follow different practices for purposes of connecting to specific figures of the peaceful opposition. Many designate officers within the embassy as the prime focus of contact, without diminishing the ambassador's political commitment. Some missions, and notably US personnel, stress the symbolic importance of the head of mission being seen personally in acts of personal solidarity and outreach.

Some ambassadors make a point of not hosting political opposition figures at their official residences, but receive them privately in the embassy chancery. To meet opposition figures outside, heads of mission tend to join events that include political activists hosted by other embassy officers. As pointed out above by Ambassador Melrose, visiting ministers and senior officials of Community of Democracies countries often insist on including in their programs meetings with opposition figures, and they generally also often do so privately at their embassy's chancery.

Embassies play an essential role in brokering and encouraging people-to-people exchanges with groups in their own countries. Cubans are deeply committed to high performance in culture and sports, and avidly welcome connections with partners and to events abroad. The Cuban authorities are wary, and of course the hardening of US rules on exchanges limited interchange with America in recent years, though it is now showing signs of revival.

Convening opposition or civil society members invites friction with the government but several democratic embassies have offered embassy venues for workshops or discussions on a good offices basis without specific political goals on issues that Cubans need to resolve among themselves.

Over recent years, different democratic embassies have taken a variety of approaches to inviting civil society representatives and political activists to official receptions. In that Cuban authorities object to their presence, some embassies give two distinct receptions on National Days, while others continue to mix them together, accepting that there will in consequence be fewer if any higher level representatives from government. Cuban authorities can be volatile when embassies alter practice in favor of greater presence of democracy activists: one year, the authorities withheld an embassy's permit to clear liquor and wine through customs until after the reception (to which dissidents had been prominently invited) had taken place.

The fragmentation of Cuban democratic opposition poses the question of whether democratic embassies could facilitate greater cooperation by offering their neutral good offices to groups seeking to work together more effectively, as has been done in authoritarian settings elsewhere, such as Chile or South Africa. In Cuba, that would be difficult to do except very indirectly.

Embassies do facilitate contacts between Cuban citizens and family members outside Cuba, with several making Internet available for the purpose.

Cuba has succeeded in exporting into exile much of its opposition. Several democracies facilitate refugee status for those seeking or having to leave Cuba, especially the US, Spain, Canada, Mexico, France, and Chile, occasionally, as mentioned above, as negotiated outcomes of high-level official visits.

There has been a long tradition of the Cuban exile diaspora seeking harmony of purpose with activists inside Cuba (Jose Martí's sojourn in the US prior to the 1895 rebellion comes to mind). Democratic governments and institutions abroad frequently sponsor workshops and colloquia on Cuban human rights issues. However, because of the state control of media, these events have minimal direct resonance within Cuba, insulated by barriers to information from outside. Writer Raúl Rivero who had been sentenced to 20 years in prison in 2003 but released in 2004 on health grounds expressed appreciation for his refuge in

Spain, where he acknowledged to Daniel Erikson, “The community has been very welcoming... The journalistic community has embraced me.” But the harshness of conditions in Cuba provided him with little opportunity for re-connecting. Yet while the direct connections between dissidents outside and civil society inside may not be robust, the knowledge inside that such mobilization of democrats outside occurs provides moral reinforcement for Cuban democrats.

Financing civil society and NGOs is controversial and subject to close official scrutiny. Direct financial support for opposition groups has resulted in accusations that they are “mercenaries,” and embassies avoid those situations. But fast-disbursing small amounts of support from mission funds of democratic embassies can be of great value to groups working on development and social issues. Embassies value the opportunities that emerge at local levels for small projects where there is less likelihood the partnerships can be misconstrued as having a political rather than developmental, or even humanitarian, agenda. Sometimes, they make contributions anonymously.

Showcasing experience and creative cultural performance is central to public diplomacy in Cuba. Cuban artistic and cultural life has always been vibrant. Though constrained on issues of self-expression with any political implication, graphic art, music, and dance are among art forms where Cuban performance has created an audience avid for connections to performance from outside.

Cuban youth are keen to have the opportunities to consume international popular culture. The rock music scene has emerged in strength and after an extended critical attitude, the regime has bowed to the inevitable strength of popular culture.

Embassies are able to invite from capitals experts in a range of activities where the Cuban system needs development, or where the delivery of services falls short, as well as scholars to engage with Cuban researchers and academia. Canadian cooperation for some years was typical in lending the benefits of Canadian experience to institution building that is not overtly political but that contributes to the habits of transparency and accountability: the development of effective committees in Parliament, systemically greater accountability of Ministers, and an Ombudsman’s office in government. Another notable emphasis has been on decentralized partnership activity working with Cuban unions and housing, food production, or micro-financing coops in the provinces.

Showcasing political examples can also be effective. The Cuban ambivalence about US involvement in Cuban affairs has always had at one pole the “America of Abraham Lincoln” whose Emancipation Proclamation had enormous impact on an island where at the time about half the population was composed of slaves and freed slaves originally from Africa. There are differing views as to the extent to which race relations are vexed in Cuba today. Ostensibly Cuban society is non-racial, but interest is high in others’ experiences in managing pluralistic societies, though this is a difficult topic for Cuba’s monolithic socialist model.

### Defending Democrats

Demonstrating solidarity with persecuted peaceful democracy activists is part and parcel of embassy support for the rights of freedom of assembly and speech that democratic countries represent. Embassy personnel can often provide a local focus to recognition extended by their governments and parliaments to local democrats, such as the resolution of the European Parliament March 10 criticizing Cuban human rights violations.

In bestowing an international profile along with its annual Andrei Sakharov Award, the Parliament may also have enabled in the case of recipient Oswaldo Payá a degree of insulation from direct persecution.

But this was not the case for the *Damas de Blanco*, who also received the Sakharov Award. The several Ladies in White are wives of prisoners of conscience arrested in March 2003 and still jailed. To express their silent protest, the women attend mass on Sunday in Santa Rita Church in Havana's *quinta avenida* before proceeding on a short walk in public. Clearly, the dignity and moral force of their protest irked authorities to the point of retaliation. In April, 2010, pro-government groups harassed the *Damas de Blanco* (a frequent act of organized intimidation called an *acto de repudio*), at one point confining them under harsh abuse for several hours.

Diplomats responded in support. US diplomat Lowell Dale Lawton attended a recent mass with the women. German and Czech Embassy officers Volker Pellet and Frantisek Fleisman accompanied them on their walk.

Verifying and witnessing is an important embassy function in regard to such acts of intimidation. Chris Stimpson of the UK Embassy described his presence as a witness at the confrontation with the organized counter-protestors as constituting observation "to monitor human rights and freedom of expression."

There are also efforts to verify the health of prisoners of conscience. Cuban authorities do not grant human rights monitors access to their prisons. Recently, some prisoners of conscience have undertaken hunger strikes. One of the 75 arrested in March 2003, Orlando Zapata Tamayo, died as a result on February 23, 2010. Foreign leaders such as US Secretary of State Clinton and Spanish Prime Minister Zapatero condemned the act that Amnesty International called "a terrible illustration of the despair facing prisoners of conscience who see no hope of being freed from their unfair and prolonged incarceration." The Mexican and Chilean parliaments adopted similar declarations. President Raúl Castro unusually expressed public regret for Zapata's death, though the authorities then arrested dozens of his supporters to prevent them from attending the funeral that was, however, attended by diplomats from several countries. There have been concessions since, worked out in a meeting in May, 2010 between Raúl Castro and Cardinal Ortega, to ensure adequate hospital treatment for sick prisoners and to move prisoners to their home provinces to facilitate family contacts and then, the announcement in July 2010 that all 52 remaining prisoners from March, 2003, would be released.

In August 2009, five EU diplomats from Sweden, the UK, Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic brought food and clothing to the wife of Darsi Ferrer, imprisoned without charge in July the day before he was to lead a demonstration for human rights. The Cuban Foreign Ministry protested that "the EU is putting in danger the political dialogue begun with Cuba." But as an EU Mission spokesman in Havana (Sven Kühn von Burgsdorff) restated the EU's policy on the occasion of re-launching the dialogue, "there is no reason to lack trust in our desire to do both things at the same time – improve dialogue with the government, and with civil society, including the peaceful opposition."

Such acts by diplomats of demonstrating solidarity, and witnessing events, do have the effect of offering some protection to activists and human rights defenders who have already courageously crossed the line of protest so that gestures of moral support for their rights do not expose them particularly to greater danger.

Direct acts of protection have also been performed by embassies in Havana over the years. Dr. Julia Sweig records the most prominent of these: "By March of 1980 a handful of Cuban citizens had already smuggled themselves into foreign embassies in search of asylum. The Peruvian embassy was one target, and the Peruvian government was not at the time disposed to return the intruders to Cuban authorities. Later that month, when several Cubans crashed a bus into the gate of the Peruvian complex and provoked a violent incident with Cuban soldiers, Fidel responded by removing all police protection from embassy grounds. Within 48 hours, over 10,000 citizens had taken refuge inside the gates."

The episode led to the Mariel boatlift, once US President Carter said he would open America's doors to Cubans wishing to leave. Fidel Castro took up the offer and within months 125,000 Cubans so emigrated.

## **SUMMING UP/LOOKING FORWARD**

Cuba represents a complex challenge for democratic diplomats today. Pressing the regime to drop its absolutist doctrines in favor of a full-blown democracy is unrewarding in practical terms. And yet, a relativist approach that concedes that the denial of essential and universal human rights can be overlooked is not one most members of the Community of Democracies can accept.

Clearly, in Cuba, a transition is anticipated if not actually already underway. The outcome is unpredictable though it is clear that the Cuban population, especially younger Cubans, want to be part of their open hemispheric world and the wider world. Diplomats in Cuba from democracies represent links to that aspiration and are its witnesses on behalf of democrats everywhere, all the while trying to engage the Cuban authorities in activity and contact that will help improve the situation of Cubans today.

When Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Ángel Moratinos recently visited Cuba, he was quoted as telling Cuban officials that Spain would use its period in the rotating EU presidency to “elevate relations” between the EU and Havana, though it is unclear if EU members form a consensus around this objective.

The US administration is also working for more normal relations. There is an irreducible quid quo pro the EU and other democratic partners and their embassies keep in mind. Perhaps President Obama's words of advice for Spanish Prime Minister Zapatero best sum up the prognosis, “Have the Foreign Minister tell the Cuban authorities we understand that change can't happen overnight, but down the road, when we both look at this time, it should be clear that now is when those changes began.”

At the Community of Democracies tenth anniversary ministerial meeting held July 2 – 3, 2001 in Kraków, Poland, Father Jose Conrado of Santa Teresita de Jesus parish, Santiago de Cuba, received the Bronislaw Geremek Award for his longstanding and courageous dedication to the defense of civil and human rights in Cuba.