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It's not just the US embargo

As much as the US embargo contributes to its problems, Cuba's historic protests show that the government can't ignore citizens' legitimate demands

After protests swept the whole country in July, the Cuban government has started taking measures to contain the fallout. While this response goes beyond the regime's initial repression, it hasn't yet entirely left that path. If the country's leadership wants to survive this test, it has no choice but to respond to citizens' legitimate demands.

Whether one may like it or not, the events of 11 July 2021 will have an effect on how Cubans themselves and their country. For most of the population, it was a sad day – and most people would rather not remember the sad days. But it cannot be ignored. At present, information about what actually happened is still patchy; it is difficult to navigate between fake news and the official versions of events.

What has been established is that, on Sunday 11July, there were widespread anti-government protests, some of which ended in violence – and this had never happened before in Cuba. As such, many observers and indeed the authorities themselves were surprised. The result was images of violence and a situation which had escalated out of control. Whatever the details, this is objectively damaging for the Cuban government: and even if, as looks unlikely, the situation settles back down, the reputational damage will last.

Not a surprise

Actually, the Cuban government shouldn't have been surprised by the course of events – this being the same government that had for months been talking up the possibility of a 'soft coup' or a 'colour revolution' planned across the water by its arch-enemy, the US. Perhaps it was the surprise of something actually happening that led the government to clamp down so repressively, while pursuing the same endless propaganda communication strategy as ever despite its demonstrably diminishing returns.

It's equally surprising that this unrest did not surface much earlier, considering the privations to which the Cuban population has long been subject and which have been further worsened by the pandemic.

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Now, the unrest is here – and its effect is palpable. Just three months after the Eighth Congress of the Communist Party and two years after establishing a new constitution, the new Cuban leadership finds itself in crisis. A crisis that, in many ways, evokes the situation in the socialist countries of eastern Europe just prior to their collapse.

Cuba's early achievements

There are, however, several differences. Cuba is a third-world country which, after years of neo-colonial suppression, liberated itself by means of a national revolution. As the result of an aggressive confrontation with Washington, this revolution became increasingly radical – and was initially successful, too, in its goal of halting the advance of US imperialism. The result was a socialist model that because of an alliance with the Soviet Union offered considerable advantages for at least the next three decades.

Thanks to the social progress of the early years and Cuba's international high profile, unrest in the country was staved off. Essentially, the fact that the socialist regime not only survived a direct confrontation with the US but went on to become a unique actor on the world stage – not only during the Cold War, but beyond – conferred considerable credit on the government and allowed it freedom of manoeuvre in domestic issues.

These achievements and successes are without doubt the foundation of Cuban regime's resilience and its people's stoicism in the face of lasting and quite extraordinary difficulties. Yet while these difficulties certainly are caused by the US embargo, they are in no small part also the result of governmental inadequacy and poor policy. When it comes to the role of the country's political opposition, the situation is similar. Certainly, some groups are being supported from the US with a view to subverting the Cuban regime.

The domestic opposition

Yet during the unrest, the activists with US support were less visible than those of the country's domestic Movimiento San Isidro and 27N

groupings. Then again, there is no doubt about the fact that protests were encouraged on social media – to no small degree by political influencers who do not live in Cuba, but rather mainly in Miami, where militant anti-Castro activism remains an important local industry financed from a range of state and non-state sources. In Cuban national reality, social media has become a toxic element as millions of dollars are pumped into fake-news campaigns aiming to destabilise the regime.

Even if, however, the trigger came from outside, unrest would not have flared up if it had, inside Cuba, not found fertile ground prepared by numerous political mistakes on the part of the government. Here, a range of factors played a role: in the poorest urban areas, conditions had worsened considerably; overall, food supply had become increasingly erratic; and after a successful start in combating the pandemic, the situation in healthcare was becoming unstable.

The government reacted by proclaiming that 'the embargo is the problem' and talking down the protests as 'interference from outside' in an effort to cover up its own errors. What the regime has underestimated is the dissatisfaction that this mantra now provokes. Certainly, the sanctions upheld against Cuba by the US for almost 60 years now represent, to paraphrase US historian Peter Beinart, a kind of economic war against a country under siege. Beinart is right to criticise the embargo as a non-military act of war – and one which, given that the stated aim has always been regime change, has never had much prospect of success. And while Washington refutes Cuban accusations, it is a simple matter of fact that Joe Biden has maintained sanctions imposed by Donald Trump even as the pandemic has continued to rage.

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Yes, for more than six months now, the Biden Administration has failed to make good on its manifesto promise and remains locked in the Trumpian version of Republican Party logic vis-à-vis Cuba policy – the illusion that ever more extreme sanctions will eventually succeed in dislodging the regime which came to power in 1959. So this much seems likely: sanctions against Cuba will remain in place for the next three years; Cubans will get even poorer; the Cuban government will continue to be bullied.

The Cuban government needs a rethink

In view of this, Havana is currently trying to contain the fallout. Yet the regime needs to examine the political and social situation – and grasp

that only economic policy focussing on efficiency and activating domestic productive capacity can get the country out of the current crisis. Continuing to place all the blame on external factors without any real introspection in respect of home-grown issues would be a grave mistake. The reforms the government has promised, especially in respect of food distribution, need to be enacted – fast.

The issue of how to deal with the figureheads of the protests adds another layer of complexity to the situation. The government cannot allow the impression to develop that, either at home or abroad, it is cracking down hard on peaceful demonstrations. Yet currently, there are rumours about summary justice and questionable court proceedings leading to sentences of ten to twelve months for people who, in many cases, do not seem to have been involved in any acts of violence. This comes for Cubans who have only recently had the important experience of debating and then approving a new constitution in which the importance of fair trials is underscored. Now more than ever, citizens are demanding nothing more – and nothing less – than that the police act within the law.

The Cuban government, too, needs to rethink how it works. As its population is increasingly deaf to the argument that the embargo is the root of all evil, it needs to make a serious attempt to overcome two key political-ideological obstacles in its way. Firstly, there is the outdated approach to socialism as a system primarily steered from central planning bureaus; this dogmatic dirigisme reduces the role of the market in distributing resources to a minimum – with all the attendant problems. Secondly, the regime needs to distance itself from an idea of socialism as an authoritarian model that can ignore or even criminalise those whose criticism is intended to make the country's economy more efficient and its society more democratic, to see its 2019 constitution enacted and establish the rule of law.

A whole new moment for Cuba

Yet the regime's reaction to the events of 11 July as communicated official media channels showed no signs of overcoming this tendency. Those who took part in the protests have been discredited and decried as criminal elements – overlooking the specific and legitimate demands made by many in a peaceful manner. This may come back to haunt the regime.

These demonstrations represent a wholly new

Furthermore, official announcements have sought to justify the use of repressive violence – a message with which many Cubans who, while

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not directly involved, have observed (and been shocked by) events, strongly disagree. Internationally, Cuba's image has taken a hit. There is still no clarity about the number of demonstrations or how they played out, how many took part, and how many participants have been placed under arrest. Meanwhile, intellectuals and artists have publically denounced the regime's repressive course, with many demanding the release of all peaceful protestors – including such figures as songwriter Silvio Rodríguez, who enjoys a great deal of respect among many in government.

The lack of genuine information is leaving space for disinformation to circulate around both external actors and the country's population – disinformation spread with the aim of undermining the government. At the same time, Cuban citizens have broadly accepted the precept that peaceful protests are legitimate and should be protected under law. This is a precept with which the government, however, in clear contravention of the principal of a socialist country under the rule of law, does not agree. This is not sending the right message – neither on a domestic nor international level.

These demonstrations represent a wholly new development for Cuba and make clear just what difficulties the country's society is facing. These difficulties have been further aggravated by a US embargo which continues to impoverish the Cuban population and exert pressure on the country's government. The current situation represents a stress-test for the Cuban regime, which would do well to remember that, when faced with similar situations, like-minded politicians had more success when they decided to pursue a path of generosity and listen to citizens' legitimate concerns rather than leaving demands to fall on deaf ears.

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