

Uncertainties and Paradoxes About Cuba's Future

Rut Diamint

Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, Buenos Aires, Argentina

Laura Tedesco

Saint Louis University/Madrid Campus, Madrid, Spain

Historically, the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias* (FARs) of Cuba have held an important role since 1959. In this paper, we offer some ideas regarding the FAR political and economic power in Cuba's new political scenario. This paper explores the role of FAR, the Cuban institution that is less transparent and most difficult to analyze. It discusses its economic activities and its relationship with civil society, and offers possible scenarios for the post Castro era. The article presents these ideas which have emerged after three visits to Cuba where we carried out 53 interviews in Havana, Santa Clara, and Cienfuegos.

Keywords: Cuba, Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (FARs), Raúl Castro, Fidel Castro

Introduction

Cuba has been historically considered an exceptional case. Two crucial changes have taken place, and surprisingly, both government and citizens have accepted them without restraint.

First, Cuba initiated the normalization of its relations with the United States on December 2014. Under President Obama's presidency, Raúl Castro carried out a process of negotiations with its historical enemy. This change was one of Barak Obama's last decisions: the change of the "dry feet, wet feet" policy which, for over 20 years, provided Cubans with US residency even if they had entered the United States illegally.

Secondly, Fidel Castro's death did not alter the political dynamic. After the funeral, the government and its citizens resumed their everyday lives. The importance given to Fidel Castro's death seems to be much greater on the outside than its impact at the domestic level. The argument to hold this statement is that the Cuban government had not been, in the last few years, relying on Fidel's charisma. Rather, it relied on extended mechanisms of social control, incentives for its supporters (mainly the members of the armed forces, loyal intellectuals or bureaucrats), and very poor but crucial means of cohesion for the Cuban people (social services, food subsidies, and the socialist ideology). Moreover, Fidel's death did not catch the government by surprise. He was only used for his symbolic power and it is very likely that the government will keep on using him that way (Lattel, 2005).

When Raúl Castro announced that he would leave the government in 2018, many analysts began to present different scenarios of the post-Castro era. Miguel Diaz Canel was named President of the State Council

Rut Diamint, PhD, Professor; principal researcher of the Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (CONICET), Argentina Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Laura Tedesco, PhD, Professor; Associate Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences Madrid Campus, Saint Louis University/Madrid Campus, Madrid, Spain.

in April 2018. He is, in paper, the most powerful man in the island. However, historically, the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias* (FARs) have held an important role since 1959. In the following pages, we offer some ideas regarding the FAR political and economic power and their role in this new political scenario. Are they going to accept orders from someone who does not belong to the Castro family? For how long the FAR can be the economic pillar of a civil government? What will happen to the FAR when the historic generation is gone?

In order to answer these questions, we firstly present an overview of its political power. First, the objective is to analyze the FAR, their political and economic role and their likely impact in the future of Cuba. One of the most challenging obstacles is the lack of transparency in everything related to the FAR. The officials on duty do not give interviews, unless it is for a government's newspaper with the aim of talking about the first years of the revolution.

Secondly, we will discuss the economic activities of the FAR, which are also kept in the dark, even if some publications have started, in recent years, giving out information which helps to solve the puzzle of its economic power.

Thirdly, we will expose the relationship between the FAR and the Cuban society and offer some possible future scenarios.

In this article, we offer preliminary ideas which have emerged after three visits to Cuba where we carried out 53 interviews with retired members of the FAR, university professors, artists, journalists, political dissidents, and *cuentapropistas*.¹

Historical Armed Forces

Historically, one of the pillars of the revolution has been the FAR. They were born from the revolution and have emerged from the victories of a handful of militants who overthrew the old regime. The revolutionary consciousness starts with them. The interviewed military and the civilians, the academics, the opposition, and the social activists agreed that the FAR are forces born from the people, who never shot against the people and who hold a different ethos than that of the armed forces in the rest of the region. Since the beginning of the revolution, the FARs have held a central position in the political structures (*Comité Central*, *Buró Político*, *Asamblea*, and *Partido Comunista Cubano*). Even though, during the Congress of the Communist Party (PCC) in April 2016, its intervention in the power structures has been reduced (from eight to four members), of the 17 members of the *Buró Político del Comité Central del Partido Comunista de Cuba*, five are military on duty and others have served in the FAR.

The FARs are regarded by Hal Klepak (2005), the main analyst of the Cuban military, as central agents for the process of change and as the institution with the best structure and preparation to provoke and lead any political and economic transformation. Cuban specialists tend to argue that any changes require the inclusion of the FAR. For instance, Roberto Veiga, director of the Cuban publication *Espacio Laical*, suggests that the FAR should be considered as guarantees of order in any process of changes.

Indeed, all of the interviewees in Havana agreed that the FAR are the central institution of the Cuban government. The retired military emphasized that the territorial nature of the forces guarantees their presence

¹ Through the Diálogos sobre Cuba project which began in 2016, we carried out the trips to Havana, Santana Clara and Cienfuegos and organized four events, two in Miami, one in Buenos Aires and one in Madrid with Cuban activists who are residents on the island.

on the entire island. They have been charged with the most important tasks to build, develop, and maintain the revolutionary government. They have been victorious in external military campaigns. Whilst the *Partido Comunista Cubano* is considered inefficient, the FARs are characterized as the most efficient and modern public institution.

Finances and Defense

In the 70s, the CIMEX (*Contrainteligencia Militar en el Exterior*) was founded, which later, in 1978 began being called "*Comercio Interior, Mercado Exterior, Sociedad Anónima*". With it, the entrepreneurial role of the armed forces began. It included the *Tiendas Panamericanas*, coffee shops called *El Rápido*, *Havanautos*, and the estate agency CIMEX.

During the so-called "special period during times of peace"², the FAR also underwent a process of austerity measures. Its budget dropped by 60 percent. Its hospitals received civil patients, its vehicles were used for civil purposes, and its main objective was to feed the Cuban people. Military training stopped; the exterior bases or the joint operations with Russia or other allied countries froze. While the military operations became paralyzed, the FAR transformed themselves into the economic pillar of the nation. Part of the agricultural production remained in their hands. As such, the economic sectors which guaranteed the entrance of funds were sent to the FAR, essentially tourism, the internal market of money exchange (*Tiendas de Recuperación de Divisa* [TRD]) and CADECAS (exchange shops), air transport and mining, biomedicine, tobacco exports, and other activities which economic profits.

According to some interviewees in Havana, Fidel and Raúl gave the FAR power and autonomy because they trusted them. Some dissidents told us that this trust was a way to ensure their support, giving them economic power. The Spanish colonel José Pardo, former military attaché in the Spanish embassy of Havana, suggested that, facing the surge of oligarchs in post-Soviet Russia, the Castros gave the political and economic power to the armed forces to avoid an experience of segmentation in Cuba.

Currently, the FARs control more than 800 companies mainly in the sectors of sugar production, agriculture, tourism, construction, and basic industries. Different publications, such as *Cubamet*, *14ymedio*, or *Espacio Laical* have been offering information that makes it possible to explore their economic power. Sixty-four percent of the total foreign currency that enters Cuba does so through the conglomerate of FAR companies. The Business Administration Group SA (GAESA) controls 70 percent of the retail trade. GAESA includes tourism companies (*Gaviota*, *Gran Caribe*, *Cubanacán*, *Islazul*, and *Horizontes*, with 57 hotels, restaurants, marinas, car rental, airline, and chains of stores), commerce, currency collecting stores, communications, and agricultural production.

Hal Klepak (2005) says that 60 percent of the economy, especially the sector that generates foreign currency, is currently in the hands of the FAR. The *Banco Financiero Internacional S.A.* (BFI), one of the most important banking institutions of the Cuban government, has been managed by GAESA. Considering the broad economic management of the military, added to the monopoly of the public force and the glories of military campaigns abroad, there is no room to doubt the centrality of the FAR in the economic opening of Cuba.

² The special period goes from 1990 to 1993 when GDP decreased by 36 percent after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 1994 there was a small improvement but it was only when Hugo Chávez won elections in Venezuela that the Cuban economy experienced a real improvement. Economically, the Revolution always needs a Big Brother providing subsidies to its weak economy.

Military Society or Militarized Society

The demilitarization of society is another challenge. On the one hand, the Cuban citizen is accustomed to control, repression, and abuse. According to Amnesty International, there were 9,940 arrests in 2016 and 5,155 arrests in 2017.

The FAR argues that they do not intervene in the repression, which remains in the hands of the Ministry of the Interior (MININT). Opponents point out that the MININT is the arm of the FAR which deals with the security of the state. They not only repress the opposition, they also try to tie up socialist dissidence and hinder the growth of private entrepreneurs and associates.

However, the FAR seems to be behind all areas of public and private life. The doctrine of defense itself states that all the citizens must come out in defense of the revolution, and there is a process of "education" or indoctrination that begins in early childhood. Military education begins with daycare. During primary education rudiments of military discipline are given. In secondary schools, there is already an integral military preparation, although until the age of 18 years, they are not allowed to touch a weapon. The so-called "*Camilitos*" are children between 15 and 16 years of age registered in the Military Registry. Teens receive a subject called *Preparación Militar Inicial* (PMI) as one of their high school courses and are trained in operational tactics for times of war. The subjects of National Defense and National Security are dictated in all the university careers.

In 2014, the Committee on the Rights of the Child of the United Nations sued the government of Cuba in order for it to explain this particular situation, considered irregular. The government responded by saying that education in Cuba is oriented towards the formation of values that reflect adequate behavior inside and outside of educational institutions. That is to say, that in Cuba the whole society prepares itself for the enemy invasion. In reality, there was no criticism of the Cuban education system that has been recognized as the best in Latin America.

It is evident that civil society is accustomed to a militarized regency and that many citizens believe that the threat of the United States persists, which merits the military preparation of the population.

Looking Ahead

Fidel is gone forever; Raúl retired and whether he is still governing behind the scenes is unclear. The main economic partner, Venezuela, is collapsing. The establishment of diplomatic relations with the US did not have any real economic impact after the arrival of Donald Trump to the White House. What expectations are there about the future? Recently, the government proposed a constitutional reform. Its real impact could be limited and slow. Here, we propose some short term scenarios based on the conversations held in Cuba. First, some analysts argue that Díaz Canel will not establish significant changes, assuring the status quo for those who hold real power and thus guaranteeing his permanence.

Other analysts believe that if we take as probable a continuous and sustained economic change similar to that made in China, the FAR would be guarantors of both the opening and the defense of revolutionary principles. There would be a certain degree of economic opening with continuous ideological control, i.e., *cuentrapropismo*³ together with political repression (Almeida, 2015).

A third possible scenario is that the hardships of society will produce popular uprisings. Faced with these rebellions, according to the interview's responses, the spirit of the FAR would go in defense of the revolution.

³ This name is given to small-private businesses.

Although they feel part of the people and many soldiers share the same hardships, according to those interviewed in Havana, it is possible that they may not support any type of social unrest. The scenario of popular uprisings could generate a process of fracturing within the Cuban elite, including the FAR and the PCC.

Fourthly, if the new economic guidelines provoke deeper transformations in social and political relations, it is also possible for the FAR to adapt to the new times by claiming advantages and prerogatives to the new government in exchange for ensuring some stability, something that is common in other Latin American countries. In other transitions to democracy in the region, the rapid accommodation of the military has been seen in exchange for impunity or indulgence. In our interviews, political activists remarked that the key to change is in the middle management of the FAR, since the superiors are historically committed to the revolution (Campos, 2014).

Outside of these scenarios, there are also analysts who bet on an immobility and an authoritarian regression, backed by a hopeless citizenship, a delegitimized opposition and the FAR as the most prepared political actor to guarantee the Castro succession. While some expect a transition to democracy, the government is only talking about updating the social and economic model.

The government's lack of transparency tires the public, especially young people, and exasperates the activists. Cuba is today surrounded by uncertainty. In the medium term, it can be said that Cuba faces two very complex situations: economic transformation and demilitarization of politics and society. And this must be done at a time of regional and international isolation. Although since the normalization of relations with the United States some visits have been accelerated, for example, the president of Japan, Shinzo Abe, the executive president of the Development Bank of Latin America, Enrique García, and the president of Ireland, Michael D'Higgins, the difficulties in Venezuela or the turn to the right of some Latin American countries have left the island practically abandoned to its fate.

It is necessary to highlight that many interviewees consider that the approach with the United States, with the European Union or the visits of heads of State, far from benefiting the people bring the government to ignore the requests so that any approach is conditioned by the respect for the human rights. Nowadays, activists, artists, and journalists denounced a censors' campaign to develop a restricted cultural policy. Any claim for improvements in society is considered an expression of disloyalty.

Cuban activists accept with disillusion that the popular discontent has not been transformed, for now, into a popular demonstration that forces the government to implement peaceful changes in the short term. There is a tension between those who supposedly want to impose democracy, tied to an eventual external solution, and those who surmise that spaces for dialogue will gradually open up, leading to the attainment of fundamental freedoms and rights and promoting democratic agendas.

It is important to highlight that the comments that we outline here do not give assurances. They are still speculations, based on interviews and without having been able—despite our attempts—to talk with government authorities.

We know that what we offer is an incomplete panorama. However, we believe that we have transmitted the questions that came to us when we studied the Cuban situation.

In general, it is perceived that there is no division between the State, the PCC party, and the FAR. Therefore, in this case, there is no fear of military autonomy. On the contrary, Cubans say that this is a criterion that can be applied to the capitalist regimes, but not to the Cuban one. However, it does not seem so clear that

the FAR that has some significant privileges, does not have a certain autonomy. Their economic programs generate certain conditions for the government since they have not been efficient in the management of productivity. If there is something certain, there is no possible reform without the support of the military.

Therefore, perhaps the only certainty is that whatever the coming situation, it is necessary to continue studying the FAR, exploring its internal structure, because they will be a central and decisive actor in Cuba.

Conclusion

The current situation suggests that changes will be extremely slow, and even that they may be paralyzed. At the same time, in the interviews, reflections arise about the exhaustion of the regime, the boredom of the population due to so many limitations and controls. The citizenry is tired. But it is not fatalistic. However, citizens have inadequate strategies. They usually use confrontation more than the construction of alternatives. Many of them are unaware of the role of the FAR. The unfathomable lack of transparency of the FAR is an insurmountable barrier to advance towards a demilitarization of Cuba.

Moreover, Cuba is isolated in two senses. On the one hand, many countries, especially Latin American ones, do not try to influence or question Cuba for fear of legitimizing external interference in the internal affairs of another state. On the other hand, the United States' economic blockade and the ideological persecution, produce a reaction in the population that feeds the notion of enemy and unifies the citizenship behind the revolution. In short, the picture is confusing, and the only thing that is clearly perceived is the apathy of ordinary Cubans.

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