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Cuba and a New Generation of Leaders Respond to U.S. Anti-People War



Photo by Nathaniel St. Clair

For almost 60 years Cuba has successfully defended its socialist revolution against a steady onslaught of U.S. aggressive actions, serious enough at times to warrant extraordinary measures. Cuba, for example, established alliances with the Soviet bloc of nations in the early 1960s, readjusted its economy and politics following the Soviet collapse, and sharpened its intelligence capabilities in response to terrorist attacks continuing into the 1990s.

Another set of far-reaching measures is in order now. The Donald Trump administration, intervening aggressively, has disabled both embassies, added restrictions on U.S. travel to Cuba and on spending there, limited remittances Cuban-Americans send to family

members on the island, continued to recruit and finance a political opposition, and implemented Title III of the 1996 Helms Burton Law – aimed at discouraging foreign investments in Cuba.

These actions compound Cuba's pre-existing economic difficulties, among them: excess imports, insufficient exports, reduced agricultural production, decreased worker productivity, and heavy foreign debt.

On June 27 Cuba's Council of Ministers announced a comprehensive, multi-faceted response to the recent U.S. aggressions. As reported by Granma, the newspaper of Cuba's Communist Party, and by other Cuban media, the Council's decisions constitute an agenda for ongoing planning of multiple processes leading to change. The ministers in their statements appealed to Cubans' sense of nationhood, unity, and culture.

Alejandro Gil Fernandez, Minister of Economy and Planning, provided a summary. The government seeks to increase production generally, diversify and increase exports, substitute endogenous products for imports, promote "productive chains," strengthen state enterprises, bolster food sovereignty and food production, promote local development, fully implement housing policies, and put "science at the service of solving economic problems."

Gil Fernandez and Minister of Finances and Prices Meisi Bolaños Weiss joined in discussing salary and pension increases taking effect in July. By the end of 2018 the average state-sector salary had risen from 600 pesos per month to 871 pesos, and as of July will be 1067 pesos. The idea is that increased salaries and pensions will facilitate consumer purchases and thereby stimulate domestic production.

Price controls and anti-inflation measures will be in effect. Future salary increases will depend largely on worker productivity. The cost of the increases is being squeezed into the 2019 budget. To prevent a shortfall, transfers of state funds and their use will be more tightly controlled than in the past, and state agencies will cut spending in other areas.

Miguel Díaz-Canel, Cuba's president and president of the Council of Ministers, on July 2 discussed the reforms on national television, as did other ministers. "We come to this Round Table," he announced, "to summon everyone to engage in this work with intelligence and love." And "we have not renounced – nor will we – the idea that our small economy, under siege for these 60 years, will be prosperous and sustainable."

Despite “a U.S. craving for us to return to the Special Period, we are now in better condition to overcome difficulties.”

Salary and pension increases, Díaz- Canel maintained, will lead to coherent pricing and prepare the way for an end to subsidies and Cuba’s dual currency. Those benefiting represent “the sector in which the conquests of the Revolution are defended; they offer important public services.” He called upon workplaces to implement the proposed changes and asked that Cubans align personal interests with the interests of society.

Díaz- Canel urged officials “to phase out administrative methods and adopt economic and financial methods” to be able to handle changing patterns of consumption, marketing, and pricing. Alluding to bureaucratic hindrances, he promised to address “what some call an internal blockade.” The government will promote workers’ commitment to efficiency and productivity. And “cadres and officeholders need preparation to avoid skewed interpretations of the changes.”

The quality of political leadership emerges as a decisive factor as Cuba copes with U.S. war without guns and with lingering problems of its own.

Díaz- Canel epitomizes Cuba’s new generation of revolutionary leaders. Since taking office in April 2018, he has traveled throughout the island, often in company with other ministers. In local meetings, workplaces, and the countryside, he communicates in person with citizens.

Everywhere Díaz- Canel is generous with praise for colleagues and for the Cuban people. They and the nation’s history appear to be his North Star. He refers often to moral and ethical values and not at all to state power. Nor does he dwell upon political enemies who are Cuban.

Speaking to the Union of Cuban Writers and Artists (UNEAC) on June 30, he described “delving deeply into the extraordinary creative reserves of the Cuban people. The truth always awaits us there.” Cubans, he noted, are “challenged to give continuity to a unique historical process ... a superior cultural event that transformed a small, backward nation, from the roots, into an unquestionable world power, not for its material resources, but rather for its human and emotional resources.” He extolled “a Revolution that has always placed human beings at the center.”

On July 13 Díaz-Canel spoke at the conclusion of the recent session of Cuba’s National Assembly, which featured working sessions of the various parliamentary commissions.

He pointed out that, “the 38 activities that the commissions investigated are precisely those that relate to complaints emerging in surveys of public opinion. We decided they were the very ones that require major government actions and solutions.”

The president’s speech covered legislation approved by the Assembly, Cuba’s economic situation, U.S. hostilities, Cuba’s position in the world, and more, including personal reflections.

As regards being president: “I know about the sincere concern of those who think that we demand too much, that any credit derives exclusively from our personal action, and that we even take on tasks that ‘are not those of a president’ ... I ask myself what task doesn’t belong to a president in a nation like Cuba, in a Revolution like ours, when we follow the examples of Fidel and Raúl.

“We believe profoundly in collective work,” he declared, adding that “our Council of Ministers is acting, in general, with the intensity and urgency that life demands of us. We begin with constant interchange with the people, with an ear to the ground.”

“In this new stage,” for example, “the key is in the regions and municipalities and in development of localities where they are aware of all they create. Advances there benefit people more directly.” And, “We have to keep on searching out our material and human reserves, looking to monetary savings as a source of income and to our spirituality as a source of creative energy.”

He was optimistic: “[W]hat adversaries ignore is that 60 years of sanctions, threats, and aggression of all kinds have stiffened our resistance. The historical experience of the revolution is an indispensable book of lessons. The first one is about personal, direct interchange with the people. They are the permanent source of creativity and encouragement.”

For Mexican political analyst Ángel Guerra Cabrera, President Miguel Díaz-Canel represents “a total revelation in taking on maximum responsibility for the state.” He notes that, “In our region there is not a single conservative president currently who exhibits even one quality marking a true statesman.” The fact of a highly competent political leadership surely is a favorable prognostic sign for Cuba, now battling to emerge from a newly reinforced U.S. siege on its economy.

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