



Notes on the Revolution / Column 18



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The Evolution and Continuity of the Cuban Revolution

By Charles McKelvey

In a historic moment in which the National Assembly of People's Power has elected someone born after the triumph of the Revolution to newly established post of President of the Republic of Cuba, we reflect today on the evolution and continuity of the Cuban Revolution.

In his first public discourse following the triumph of the Revolution, from the city hall balcony overlooking Parque Céspedes in Santiago de Cuba in the early morning hours on January 1, 1959, Fidel declared, "The Revolution begins now. The Revolution will not be an easy task. The Revolution will be a hard enterprise, full of dangers, above all in this initial stage."

Since that day of triumph, the hard task of the Revolution has been a continually unfolding enterprise. It has passed through decisive moments, including the Agrarian Reform program of 1959, ending the concentration of land and distributing large-scale private agricultural property, both foreign and domestic, to the people in the form of state, cooperative, and private ownership. And the nationalization of U.S. properties in 1960, transferring them to control of the Cuban state. Both measures were necessary for breaking the neocolonial relation



with the United States, and they definitively established the anti-neocolonial character of the Cuban Revolution.

In 1960, Fidel had hoped for cooperation between the United States and Cuba. He proposed that the United States increase its purchase of Cuban sugar in order to enable the Cuban state to compensate the USA for nationalized properties and to invest in the development of its industry. But the United States expelled Cuba from Latin America, compelling the Revolution to incorporate itself into the East European socialist bloc.

In 1959, Fidel had initially conceived the Revolution as including Cuban privately-owned national industry. But Cuban the big industrialists were totally subordinate to U.S. corporate interests, and they were incapable of participating in project of independent national development. They abandoned the country to participate in the U.S. directed counterrevolution. The Revolution was obligated to nationalize Cuban industry, which it did in 1960, thereby expanding the network of state-managed companies.

In addition, the Revolution developed popular democracy, an alternative to the structures of representative democracy that are common in capitalist societies. In the period 1959 to 1961, the Revolution created and expanded mass organizations of neighborhoods, workers, students, women, and small farmers, which provided structures for active popular participation. During the same period, the Revolution created a mechanism for dialogue between Fidel and the people in the form of mass assemblies, the most important example of which was the National General Assembly of the People of Cuba, which emitted the Declaration of Havana on September 2, 1960, defining the concepts and rights that would guide the revolutionary process in the subsequent stage. One million people were present, constituting approximately 20% of the adult population. In 1959 and 1960, Fidel referred to the evolving Cuban political practice as “real democracy” and “direct democracy,” an alternative to the “false democracy” that prevails in the world. In false democracy, he proclaimed, the people count for nothing; but direct democracy, in contrast, defends the interests of the great majority.

Recognizing the need of the people for political education and guidance, the Revolution developed a vanguard political party, which has the function of educating the people and leading by example. The vanguard political party, which in 1965 became the Communist Party of Cuba, institutionalized the charismatic authority of Fidel. The authority of the vanguard party is limited, however. The Party teaches and exhorts the people, preventing them from falling into confusion and division. But the people decide. The correct and necessary road cannot be imposed; the people must discover it for themselves, on the base of their revolutionary practice and experience, with the guidance of the Party.

The Cuban Revolution institutionalized the alternative structures of popular democracy in 1976. The Cuban Constitutions of 1976 names the Communist Party of Cuba as the vanguard party that organizes, educates, and leads the people toward the construction of socialism. At the same time, the Constitution concentrates political power in the hands of the elected deputies of the people, by establishing a National Assembly that is the highest authority of the nation, with the power to enact laws and designate the high members of the executive and judicial branches of government. The deputies of the National Assembly are elected by the delegates of the 169 municipal assemblies of the nation, delegates who themselves are elected through direct and secret voting in more than twelve thousand small voting districts, in which voters choose from two or more candidates. And the Constitution establishes an integral role for the mass organizations, by establishing candidacy commissions composed of representatives of the mass organizations, which propose lists of candidates to the delegates and deputies when the assemblies carry out their electoral functions.



The collapse of the socialist bloc pushed the Cuban Revolution to the stage of the “Special Period.” With the disappearance of Cuba’s trading partners, the purchasing capacity of the nation was reduced from 8 to 1.7 billion dollars in three years. The adjustment measures included seeking new trading partners; and attracting new investments in tourism, the pharmaceutical industry, biotechnology, petroleum, and nickel, primarily through joint ventures with foreign capital, with terms that protected Cuban interests. The policies were effective in leading to a slow but steady recovery over the next decade, although with increasing social inequalities and social problems that previously had been reduced.

The people demonstrated a remarkable fidelity to the Cuban Revolution during the decade of the Special Period, such that there was an economic crisis but not a political crisis. However, the expectations of the people were rising faster than the recovering standard of living, generating an inquietude among the people with respect to the material standard of living.

In response to the growing inquietudes of the people, the Communist Party of Cuba, on the basis of popular consultation led by the Party, proposed to the National Assembly a new Social and Economic Model, which, after further debate by the Assembly, led to the approval by the National Assembly in 2012 of the Guidelines of Economic and Social Policy. With the intention of improving the productive capacity of the nation, the Guidelines expanded self-employment, cooperatives, and small-scale capital; reduced some restrictions in foreign investment; and introduced ties between wages and productivity. The adoption of such market measures was not made as concessions to particular interests, but as a response to the inquietudes of the people; and they occur in the context of an economy that is directed and regulated by the state, with state-ownership continuing to be the principal form of property.

As a result of the changes in economic policies introduced by the Guidelines of 2012 as well as social changes with respect to sexual orientation, gender identity, and religiosity, the Party proposed the formulation of a new Constitution, believing that the 1976 Constitution no longer corresponded to Cuban reality. In response, the National Assembly of Popular Power appointed a Constitutional Commission, which led an extensive popular consultation from August 13 to November 15, 2018, which was characterized by ample, vibrant, high quality, and dignified participation by the people. The new Constitution affirms continuity with principles of the triumphant Cuban Revolution of 1959; reaffirms the socialist character of the Revolution and the nation; preserves the structures of popular democracy established by the 1976 Constitution; defines the various forms of property that emerged from the Guidelines of 2012; reaffirms a foreign policy based in the principles of national sovereignty and international solidarity; and affirms the equal rights of all, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

The new Constitution was approved in popular referendum on February 24, 2019, with a voter participation rate of 90%, and with 86.8% of the voters choosing “Yes.”

Revolution is an evolving process. It begins by doing what is possible, in the context of the national and international situation. Subsequently, it must adjust to changes in the international situation, to new situations created by economic and social development, and to changing values of the society. In the case of Cuba, the dynamics that defined the context of its evolution include: the U.S. counterrevolutionary response in the period 1959 to 1962; the participation of the Cuban national bourgeoisie in the U.S.-directed counterrevolution; the expulsion of Cuba from Latin America and the Caribbean; the inclusion of Cuba in the socialist bloc and the Non-Aligned Movement; the collapse of the socialist bloc; the long-term response of the people to the adjustments of the “Special Period;” and the inclusion of Cuba in the process of Latin American and Caribbean unity and integration at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In the social plane, important developments include the persistence and growth of religious practices among the people, and the emergence of attitudes in defense of



gay rights. As is evident, the Cuban Revolution has made politically-intelligent adjustments to these developments, with fidelity to the principles formulated by the triumphant Revolution in 1959 and 1960.

We will look at our next program at the transition from Raúl Castro to Miguel Díaz-Canel as the Cuban head of state.

This is Charles McKelvey, reflecting on the unfolding global popular socialist revolution forged by our peoples in defense of humanity.

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