

Democratización



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Armando Chaguaceda

Human history has mostly been a tale of autocratic politics, based on the dominance of *caudillos* and cliques, of dissimilar creeds, over their populations. However, during the past two centuries, the democratic alternative has increasingly become globally acceptable: the idea that those below can exercise collective self-government, elect and sanction authorities; express oneself, their voice and rights, publicly; stop being mere subjects to become active citizens in the field of politics.

Politics is the sphere of human action oriented towards the social management of conflicts. These inhabit any human community, within which differences –of traits, ideas, and values– that enrich them but also inequalities –of resources, rights and power– that stress them can be found. These communities live in the shadow of the dispute between the privileged who want to preserve the *status quo* and the unprivileged who want to change it, among crossed quests for security, prosperity and power. Politics thus works in order to resolve those conflicts and channel those anxieties.

Politics operates through the implementation of binding decisions –according to rules– capable of being imposed –through coercion, if necessary– on the members of a community. Its binding nature differentiates political action from family fidelity –based on blood ties–, social cooperation –based on mutual aid–

and the transactional logic of economy. Over time, the frontiers of politics have expanded to regulate various conflicts of class, gender, belief, race, among others. Politics is not good or bad *per se*: domination and emancipation converge under its mantle, as well as conflict and consensus, in the government of men and the administration of things.

In this sense, post-revolutionary regimes are particularly restrictive regarding citizen's appropriation of politics, because revolutions seem to promote, as Arendt recalls, the restoration of freedom oriented towards participation in public space. But several of the oldest authoritarian regimes of the past century were born after a violent revolution: the USSR and China, Iran and Vietnam, Mexico and Cuba.

A revolutionary change implants legacies that enhance the durability of the upcoming order. It destroys independent power centers, and cohesive governing parties that immediately install powerful coercive apparatuses emerge. Unlike conservative dictatorships –concerned with controlling and repressing civil society *ex post*–, revolutionary authoritarianisms seek to co-opt and denature the citizen initiative *ex ante*. That is precisely what happens in Cuba: inward repression, outward seduction. The shameful silence and the verbal pirouettes in the face of what happened in Cuba revive the worst features and moments of the Latin American left¹: the forever-present vileness in those who speak on behalf of the people while they impassively tend to those who deprive them of food and freedom.

Cuba is currently ruled by a State that loses legitimacy –its calls and supporting narratives demonstrate this, as well as the

1 Claudia Hilb, *¡Silencio, Cuba! La izquierda democrática frente al régimen de la Revolución Cubana* (Buenos Aires, Edhasa, 2010).

spontaneous rejection of the people in the face of repressive acts-, that displays its coercive spirit with greater brutality; a State with a lot of power, but little consensus. Its apparent overreaction -Internet cuts, media campaigns, criminal severity, mobster kidnapping of civilians- reveals that, even having all the advantage over the adversary, they must have some concern if they are responding in such way.

And what about the people?

Peoples subsume community solidarity and impoverished anomie anywhere. The poor rebel, with agency and civility, lives with the underclass accomplice of the oppressor. What makes certain subjects and popular claims into potential vigilant is their subaltern location in a given structure, added to the decision to subvert it. If democracy refers to a permanent struggle for the redistribution of power, wealth and knowledge, all hierarchical and extractive order is its opposite. And those who suffer it, at the base of the social pyramid, must be protagonists and beneficiaries of change.

As is the case today in many countries. The popular sectors in Cuba have suffered almost two years of the combined weight of the pandemic, poverty and repression. The so-called insular exceptionalism, by which Cubans enjoyed some social benefits in exchange for the state's hijacking of their political and civic rights, has ended. Exceptionalism only survives in the nature of a closed regime, the only one of its kind in a largely democratic region. A regime that -despite the Constitution approved two years ago- denies its people, before, during and after July 11, the right to exercise and demand rights.

That day tens of thousands of people, overwhelmingly peaceful, marched shouting social and political slogans. The

protests drew attention due to the creativity, diversity and massiveness of their gathering. All this took place under a Leninist political regime, with effective mechanisms of control and official mobilization of the population. As the Iranian, Nicaraguan, or Belarusian regimes did in the face of popular protests, the Cuban government repressed popular action. After the largest autonomous mobilization in 62 years, authorities detained many Cubans –more than 1,200 to date–, including minors. There was a mortal victim of the repression and numerous physically violated citizens. Many accused have been denied the right to a full and timely defense, and have been subjected to summary trials.

Those persecuted in Cuba are not “people who asked for it” or, as Cuban state propaganda repeats, “mercenaries of the Empire”. They are repressed, as in other parts of the world, for demanding rights from an abusive regime. The overcrowded prisons of one of the countries with the highest per capita prison population in the world are not only populated by political activists. In a Cuba with low wages and chronic shortages, surviving on a daily basis means buying almost everything on the black market, which is enough to have a pending case with the system.

The Cuban regime presents itself as People's Power, but in reality, it is its antipode because popular politics coexist and converge with liberal democracy in a cross arena of principles, formats and objectives. Assemblies can coexist with elections; the mobilization of the masses with the implementation of public policies. Redistributive conflicts, class and lexicon differences can distance them. The liberal state, dominated by the elites, usually responds in a different way to their demands. But only the autocracy, with its simultaneous suppression of all politics –popular and liberal– presents a Schmittian limit to both, adversely affecting any claim to autonomy. In his reign, it

became “impossible to think of a government of the broad masses without a free and unfettered press, without the unlimited right of association and assembly”². That is Cuba today.

With the continuity of the anti-popular agenda of the Cuban government, the causes of the protests are still alive. Indeed, repression increases fear, but also anger. The official legitimacy is underground. People know that there are many discontents, that they have a voice, and, despite their fear, they took the streets to demand their rights. The streets were theirs, for a few hours. That is very powerful. Something broke on a psychosocial level that Sunday. And repression is applied just to suture that crack.

The Government tries to resolve the accumulated tension by opening the migratory valve, approving partial reforms, and repressing the popular initiatives that emerge. It seems similar to what is happening now with the opening of immigration to Nicaragua and the persecution unleashed against any moderately dissident voice. There are still individuals –mostly aged, uninformed and politically subordinate– who justify the government's violations. On the other, mass organizations –bureaucratized, inefficient and parasitic– are incapable of guaranteeing rights or representing their members.

Certainly, forecasts are reserved. Demonstrators are still a minority, compared to the total population, that doesn't seem to be able to transform into a massive social movement. Some of the protagonists of these events end up leaving the country, which interrupts a pattern of resistance. Political theorist, public intellectual and democratic activist John Keane reminds us that “civil societies can be pulverized and wiped out, and that their destruction typically occurs much more easily and many times

2 Rosa Luxemburgo, *La Revolución Rusa* (1918).

faster than their slow-motion and step-by-step construction". This is the scenario that we see today in several Latin American countries, including Cuba.

Civil society actors find it difficult to overcome their repressive context; but they fight to reverse that situation from there. However, there is a powerful anthropological reason for not accepting the idea that Cubans have been denied democracy. People have different orders of needs, which are imperative and simultaneous. To the demand for security, shelter and food, which an enlightened despot –a species that does not live within the predatory and inefficient island oligarchy– can perhaps provide, we must add some basic, resilient, universal claims of agency and freedom.

On the "exceptional" island, there are already processes of civic activation, albeit modest. This year, there have been more protests, proposals and manifestos in public spaces and social networks, than there had been beforehand. The thousands of men and women who demanded their rights in Cuba this year, today make us discover the power to try, celebrate, err and rectify, together and with respect for diversity, our agency, and human dignity. In that search and action, nothing more and nothing less than the miracle of a new beginning appears. A beginning that, as Arendt would say, defeats the seemingly eternal and opens the horizons to a new world.