



Jul 19, 2021 by Michael Bluhm

Homeland and Life

What's behind the protests in Cuba? Javier Corrales on political repression, economic stagnation, and how Cubans overcame their fear of confronting the government.

Democracy 12 MIN READ

Denouncing the communist regime for its failures to provide basic material goods, coronavirus vaccines, and civil liberties, tens of thousands of Cubans protested in cities throughout their country on July 11. The protests stunned many observers of the island

nation, where there haven't been any widespread demonstrations since 1994. The regime has brutally repressed dissent since the 1959 revolution that brought Fidel Castro to power, while its economy has been in shambles for decades. What finally drove Cubans into the streets?

According to **Javier Corrales**, the author of five books on Latin America and chair of the Political Science Department at Amherst College, the most immediate cause was a viral video of police violently suppressing a demonstration near Havana early that Sunday, but the demands that ended up animating the protests have reflected long-term structural problems. As Corrales explains, Cuba's feeble economy had worsened recently, after Venezuela cut back its long-standing subsidies. The lack of vaccines also angered Cubans, Corrales adds, but the outbreak of protest—and the continuing unrest—represent far more than discontent with the government's pandemic response.

Michael Bluhm: Why did this happen?

Javier Corrales: It's not like there was a clear trigger. In many ways, we don't have an answer for what would have been the difference between this Sunday and previous Sundays. This protest was about issues that are very familiar.

There is an additional mystery: In Cuba, despite the complaints and how serious they are, people don't protest. This is one of the most repressive regimes still in place, with forms of vigilance and punishment that are effective and scary. Cuban citizens tend to be very cautious about joining these kinds of movements, because joining them or expressing solidarity can be highly risky.

We never saw coming a broad willingness on the part of so many people, who would have otherwise been very cautious, to come out and feel brave enough to do this.

Bluhm: What made them willing to join a protest now?

Corrales: At the end of 2020, a small group of musicians and artists started to organize protests. Some of these protests were difficult to contain. They weren't massive—they were localized and compartmentalized—but the regime started to crack down on them. Still, they were able to continue and be fairly active—if not in the streets, certainly online. I'm referring to the San Ysidro movement and a protest in November.



Ricardo Tamayo

They produced a Cuban reggaeton video that has resonated remarkably. As a marketing tool, what they did was so smart—to change the famous, fairly uncharitable slogan by Fidel Castro, “Homeland or death” [Patria o muerte], into “Homeland and life” [Patria y vida]. This has resonated throughout Cuba. Even people who don’t like reggaeton music are listening to the song, aware of it, or repeating the slogan.

Like Black Lives Matter in the United States, one trigger was that people were able to capture incidences of police brutality on their cellphones. This happened on Sunday; when the first protests emerged, people immediately posted images of security forces trying to repress them, and these images spread instantly. It produced an uproar.

Those are the most immediate causes. There are structural causes pertaining to the overall hardship in Cuba. But it’s interesting to focus on those immediate triggers. I wouldn’t have been able to tell you, *On Sunday, watch out—people are going to go out.*

Bluhm: In many social movements, there’s a key moment when the wider public realizes that many or most other citizens share their grievances. That helps them overcome fears of public protest, and it sometimes allows broad coalitions to form. The internet and social media have made this realization easier, but Cuba has long had tightly restricted access to the internet. How did Cubans use the internet to cultivate the protest on July 11?

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Corrales: This is the benefit of retweets, or how media tells you whether something is seen by others. It gives people the idea that it's a much bigger crowd—and this really emboldened people. This is one way in which social media addresses the problem that you have no idea how big your cohort is. That is very, very influential.

What is interesting about the situation with social media in Cuba is that, up until about 2010, the Cuban government did a remarkable job in blocking both access and content.

In China, to give a comparison, the government decided, *We cannot block access. We don't want to block access. We need access in order to be part of a global economy. We can block content.* And they do, and they have remarkable technologies for it.

But in Cuba, they decided, *We're going to block content—and we're going to block access as well.* For a long time, they were very successful. Then they changed their mind and began to open up access to a significant degree. For Cubans, this has been an amazing gift, because they had near zero internet access, and they got it, and this has changed Cuba absolutely.

The regime may have felt a little too confident when they liberalized this sector. It's very limited still; it's very spotty. It's very expensive, and most Cubans prefer to use the little social media access they have for things that are not political. But on Sunday, it did the remarkable thing of turning political.

Bluhm: Protesters decried the country's tattered economy, but the economy has been in terrible shape for decades. Did anything worsen recently?



Josh Sobel

Corrales: The Cuban economy has been underperforming incredibly during the entire revolution. There's a simple reason: There's only one engine there, and that is the state. The private sector has been repressed significantly, and the openings have been very small, very sporadic. There are very few countries that remain like Cuba. People are shocked to discover that very few private businesses have a license to import and export, or to open bank accounts. Tell the Communist Party of China that they're not going to have private businesses—it's unheard of.

What happened is that Cuba's sugar daddy, the Venezuelan regime, stopped providing some subsidies. That's big. The U.S. embargo hardened under the Trump administration, but this wasn't as major as the collapse of the Venezuelan subsidy. We don't have hard figures, but, by all accounts, it covered all of Cuba's energy needs. The economy is not very prosperous, so it doesn't have a large energy bill—it had enough oil from Venezuela to re-export some of these barrels.

Then there is the pandemic, but perhaps that's more obvious to understand.

Bluhm: How would you evaluate the response of the Cuban government to the pandemic?

Corrales: In every country, the pandemic revealed the worst or the best of the public sector. In Cuba, the authoritarian part of the regime became very obvious.

The regime was able to impose a very strict lockdown. The citizens are very used to complying with authorities; you don't get people protesting a lockdown. Because of that ability to be very uniform in the lockdown, the very early stages of the pandemic in Cuba saw great public-health results. The virus didn't spread to the same degree as in freer countries with more vibrant and globalized economies.

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The Cuban government does not have the dimension of some right-wing, populist governments of criticizing science. They didn't engage in that Bolsonaro-Trump-Lopez Obrador approach to the pandemic.

The Cuban government has not been able to vaccinate at the speed they would have wanted. This is remarkable, because they have vaccines from China and Russia, and yet the vaccination rate is very low. Cubans are used to receiving medical attention. For them, it's shocking, because demand is very high.

Cubans also got nervous about the vaccines. Who's testing this?

Finally, there is lockdown fatigue. In Cuba, this fatigue is confronting the worst wave of contagion.

I don't know whether we can make a direct connection between what's happening with the pandemic and what happened on Sunday. Cubans were demanding freedom and food, but also vaccines, so there's something to it. It's definitely part of the discourse, but

I'm not sure that it was the fundamental complaint. I don't want people to say that this was the COVID protest of Cuba.

Bluhm: Raul Castro, Cuba's former president and the brother of Fidel Castro, retired as the head of the Cuban Communist Party in April. He was succeeded by Miguel Diaz-Canel, who had succeeded him as president in 2018. Does it matter that now, for the first time since 1959, a Castro is not ruling Cuba?



Wladislaw Peljuchno

Corrales: It matters enormously. There are two schools of thoughts on Fidel: Some people say that Fidel had so much admiration—he had enemies, but the admirers superseded the detractors. And there was peace in Cuba because of that net result. The other school of thought, and I'm closer to it, is that Fidel Castro had admirers, but mostly, by the 1970s, people were tremendously afraid of him and his supporters.

The end of Fidel Castro lessened the terror in Cuba. But most people still thought of Raul as the extension of Fidel. It was in April that Raul finally stepped down. Maybe it's coincidence, but the timing works: That happened in April, and in July we get this.

The removal of the Castros also coincides with another important variable: the rise of Diaz-Canel. Diaz-Canel is incredibly hardline. He is soft-spoken and not prone to

theatrics, but some of the most draconian policies of the last 10 years have been sponsored by Diaz-Canel. He is far more hardline than Raul was as the president of Cuba. So, maybe rather than a reaction to the exit of the Castros, there is a reaction to Diaz-Canel's tightening of control.

Bluhm: Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that the most dangerous moment for a bad regime is when it tries to reform itself. But in Cuba, there doesn't seem to have been much reform. In recent conversations at The Signal, John Ikenberry and Minxin Pei said that the confrontation between democracies and authoritarian regimes will likely be decided by which regime type delivers better results for its citizens. Was the protest more a case of citizens simply telling the state to deliver better results?

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Corrales: Although Cuba is not stagnant, this is not a case of high levels of reform producing so much disruption that you lose control of it. This is not the Gorbachev model of trying to produce a big break from the past and, in the process, seeing things crumble.

It's more of a case of refusing to deliver more significant reforms, and, in doing the minimum, it probably angers more people than it pleases.

To invoke [the late Harvard political scientist Samuel] Huntington's idea that institutions have to adapt in order to stay stable, here we have a regime that hasn't been able to reform enough economically—and has reformed zero politically. This volcano was going to have to erupt, because it hadn't opened enough.

Despite the fact that this is a protest about material scarcities in a command economy, it was also a protest about intangibles. It was a protest about liberty—that was the word—and freedoms. I don't know what to call it, post-materialist or pre-materialist? Are we seeing the 18th century, or are we seeing the thesis that, after materialism, we can focus on cultural issues?

In other Latin American countries, protests are often people wanting more things from the state. They want the state to deliver; they want to see the results of their tax monies. In Cuba, people were demanding rights and public goods in the form of liberty.

Bluhm: How important was the day of spontaneous, nationwide protest on July 11?

Corrales: It is definitely historic.

Yannes Kiefer

It has traumatized the leadership. They are not going to treat this as any other day in the business of governing Cuba.

What's going to become of this is hard to predict. What we saw on Sunday is the tip of the iceberg in terms of the amount of punishment the state might end up delivering over

the coming days. The Cuban state has an effective capacity to deliver a significant degree of punishment, fear, and intimidation.

Social media is going to help the government, because images are available, and they can trace participants, blacklist them, and intimidate them.

But Cubans now know there's a nationwide movement behind this. That has a significant psychological effect on government-opposition relations in any regime, when you know you're a nationwide force.

It's changed the regime, and it'll probably change the way citizens interact with the state and dissidents.

Bluhm: How do the protests affect U.S.-Cuban relations? Aside from the ideological and economic questions, there's also an electoral one within the United States, because Cuban Americans are a powerful voting bloc in Florida, which is a swing state.

Corrales: The events on Sunday did not help the cause of lifting the embargo and sanctions. Every time there's discussion in the United States about the embargo and sanctions, the Cuban government does something really brutal—and it's the end of the discussion.

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The Biden administration came into office very aware that it wasn't going to repeat the Obama policy toward Cuba. The Obama policy became a complete opening, other than lifting the law [creating the embargo and sanctions]—in return for nothing. Obama thought he was going to get more, if not right away, then with time—that this was going

to unleash a process of reform. Even if Raul didn't deliver anything, reforms were going to come. Neither thing happened. Raul didn't deliver anything, and reforms didn't happen. We ended up with a worse hardliner in Cuba.

Then there's the Florida question. Any Democrat would be very cautious now to upset Florida, to give more votes to Republicans. This is not an administration in a hurry to change policy toward Cuba.

The Obama administration had perhaps the most Republican policy toward Cuba ever, pre-Trump. The Obama policy was a major handout to American capitalists and religious leaders. The restrictions that were lifted on travel benefited evangelicals, the tourism industry, Wall Street, the farm lobby, the pork industry—major constituents of the Republican Party. Many Democrats also liked it a lot. The one group that didn't like it very much was [Florida Senator] Marco Rubio's narrow constituency.

When Obama opened up to Cuba, the people cheering the most were many Cuban Americans in Miami—not all, but many—and the entire Republican party. You cannot repeat this policy, because Obama thought that he was going to win Republican support with it. And he did, until Trump came along.

Biden knows that possibility is no longer available. I don't expect Biden to soften the U.S. stance toward Cuba. He will win no Republican votes, unlike when Obama tried it. This is not a complicated game for Biden at the moment.

Bluhm: Where does this protest leave Cuban politics, at home and internationally?

Corrales: This regime became very comfortable in power. This poor island has to suffer getting hit by many hurricanes, but we didn't have to deal with popular unrest. There was a level of political stability that was the envy of many dictatorships. This has ended.

For now, they might be able to restore that stability. There's a significant degree of nervousness, and many times this nervousness produces experimentation. Sometimes, it produces a conservative reaction.

Everybody who understand U.S.-Latin America relations understands that Mexico and Cuba have been some of the most complicated relationships for the United States in the 20th century. With [the North American Free Trade Agreement], the United States was able to settle the Mexican question—but not the Cuba question.

I could go on about how traumatized the United States was by the Cuban Revolution, the Bay of Pigs, and the Missile Crisis—and when, during the transition to democracy [after the defeat of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989], Cuba remained the only one that wasn't going along. All these things have been very traumatic for the United States.

Making peace with Cuba is not going to affect the prosperity of the of the United States, but it plays an important role in the way that America thinks of its ability to get along with the world. That's why Cuba continues to be a major area of concern even for ordinary Americans, despite the fact that it's really a small, relatively unimportant actor in global affairs.

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