

GUEST ESSAY

The Day Cubans Lost Their Fear

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**By Javier Corrales**

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Cubans unexpectedly took to the streets on Sunday. Tens of thousands were chanting for freedom and food. It is hard to imagine a more succinct diagnosis of the problem with Latin America's oldest dictatorship.

For more than six decades, the Cuban regime has denied its people the basic building blocks of the human spirit and body. Of course, the U.S. embargo that's been in place nearly as long doesn't help. Government restrictions on the tiny private sector hurt Cubans even more. Businesses, including grocery stores and restaurants, are barred from taking out bank loans or importing products. Food has always been rationed, and now with the pandemic, restrictions are even stricter.

While the complaints are not new, there was something new about Sunday's demonstrations: their spread.

The protests broke out en masse, spontaneously, across the country, including in rural towns.

In the past, protests were limited to small groups, mostly in the capital, Havana. Ordinary Cubans, even those who were angry, knew better than to get too close to protesters — physically or politically. Any expression of solidarity with any form of dissent is just too risky. Losing your job is common. Getting arrested is typical.

On Sunday, however, it seemed that this collective "fear of joining" vanished. Solidarity trumped Cuba's fend-for-yourself mentality.

The government responded as it has with previous protests, with a call for "battle." The president, Miguel Díaz-Canel, sent out security forces to quash the protests. He also called on Communist citizens to "defend" the revolution.

The closest thing to Sunday's protests Cuba had experienced in the recent past was the "Maleconazo" of 1994, when hundreds of Cubans gathered in Havana's famous seaside esplanade, the Malecón, to protest the economic depression known as the "special period."

The triggers behind the two protests are similar. Today, as in 1994, Cuba is suffering because of upheaval in its main financial supporter and supplier of oil — the former Soviet Union back then; Venezuela since 2016. Power failures are as common today as they were in the early 1990s. Today, as in 1994, the country has endured a five-year-long economic contraction.



A scene from the “Maleconazo” protests of 1994. The demise of the Soviet Union had crippled Cuba’s economy. Prensa Latina, via Associated Press

In addition, a year before the Maleconazo, the Cuban state announced market-oriented reforms that were too limited, so most Cubans could not benefit from them. In early 2021, the Cuban regime introduced additional changes — and once again, they were too timid and benefited only well-connected Cubans. By now, Cubans know these measures mean that a few privileged people will make money while the rest will get nothing.

But Sunday’s protests happened in a vastly different Cuba from the Cuba of the 1990s. Cellphones and Wi-Fi are now available. Cubans were able to share in real time the demonstrations breaking out across the country.

The first protest erupted in the city of San Antonio de los Baños, near Havana. Protesters posted videos on Facebook Live, including clips of how security forces were trying to quell the demonstrations. That’s when protests exploded in towns and cities across the island. Ordinary Cubans, many of whom tend to be apolitical, apparently decided to join.

The government couldn’t block the videos on Facebook Live, so it blocked access to social media sites. Nonetheless, the protests continue.

Another difference is the pandemic. In Cuba, the coronavirus outbreak unmasked the decay of the public health system, with too few hospital beds and too many doctors abroad, often against their will, working for the state’s medical missions. Some 26.4 percent of the population has been vaccinated.

Cubans may also be feeling braver now that the much-feared Castro brothers are gone: Fidel Castro died in 2016 and his brother Raúl fully retired from leadership positions in April. Or maybe, the risks are still the same, but Cubans are feeling a bit more emboldened.



Police officers confronting protesters on Sunday, an encounter captured on cellphone cameras. Ramon Espinosa/Associated Press

They may also be drawing inspiration from Latin America, where protests have exploded since 2019. Closer to home, the San Isidro Movement, a group of artists with a strong Afro-descendant representation, has been protesting since late last year against the state's crackdown on artistic freedoms.

That movement gave rise to a Cuban hip-hop song called "Patria y Vida," or "Homeland and Life," a play on Fidel Castro's slogan "Homeland or Death." With more than six million views on YouTube, the song has emerged as the rallying cry of the demonstrations, not just in Cuba but around Latin America and in Spain and the United States. Whether the inspiration is international or local, there is new courage and hopefulness in the air.

Is the regime in danger? Hardly. The government has perfected, and indeed exported, the art of Communist repression to great effect. It is a combination of Soviet-modeled security forces, vigilante neighborhood committees and government-sponsored thugs disguised as civilians.

Sunday's protests nonetheless may be a turning point. In the past, the regime needed only to apply repression surgically. Fear was pervasive and kept everyone at home.

But as so many Cubans chanted on Sunday, "We are no longer afraid."

It's too early to tell what happens next. More arrests and intimidation will likely follow in the coming days, and the protests' energy may dissipate.

Still, the protesters have spoken loud and clear. With more freedoms, they can build a stronger nation; with more food, they can survive and lead healthier lives. "Patria y vida," that's all they want.

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