

Behind COVID-19: Deepening Poverty in Cuba

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The article explores the Cuban government's reaction to COVID-19, emphasising its control of the press and the role of the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR). The main question is whether the health crisis could empower or weaken the government vis-à-vis civil society.

Keywords: Amartya Sen, COVID-19, Cuba, democracy, freedom of press, Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias.

The pandemic found most Latin American countries with weak democratic institutions, economic recessions, political leaders under scrutiny, and mobilised civil societies. In this troubled context, an important factor conditioning the impact of COVID-19 has been the governments' control of information.

In his book *Development as Freedom*, Sen (1999) analysed one of the most important differences between a dictatorship and a democracy, comparing China and India managing famines. Sen studied the Chinese government's policies to face the famine of 1958–1961 that killed 30 million people and he emphasised that, since India's independence and the establishment of a multi-party democracy, its government had avoided famines. The differences and the incentives that Sen finds between these two government systems are vast.

In countries where information is controlled it is impossible to know the real levels of infection, the actors who are managing the crisis, or the efficiency of the measures implemented. In addition, in many countries, authorities have turned to the armed forces to alleviate the effects of the imposed restrictions. In the current crisis, it is worth looking at the consequences that COVID-19 can have in a political context where both factors are at play: rigid control of information and the political role of the armed forces. In Latin America, Cuba is the country that offers such a context.

This article explores the management of information by the Cuban government and the role that the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (FAR, Revolutionary Armed Forces) have assumed. Can the control of information and the role of the FAR strengthen the Cuban government during this crisis? Or, on the contrary, will the failures of the health system, shortages, and the fall in remittances and in tourism exhaust the patience of the Cuban people and lead to civil protest?

We conducted a survey of Cuban residents of the island. Although the number (27 Cubans) is not fully representative of the whole society, their contribution is added to by sources from both the independent and official press and from academic analysis.

Government Measures

On 24 March, the First Secretary of the Cuban Communist Party, Army General Raúl Castro Ruz, and the President of the Republic, Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez, activated the Defence Committees of provinces and municipalities, with the objective of carrying out the prevention and control measures of COVID-19. The Defence Committees are led by citizens, although as seen in the municipalities' press, for example in Las Tunas (Barrientos Matos, 2020) or Villa Clara (Fernández Ramírez, 2020), in their communication with the population they appear dressed in military uniform. In the past few years, their interventions have been directed towards alleviating the consequences of climate severity like Hurricane Irma in 2017.

Among the survey responses we received, for those who support the government, convening the Defence Committees and preparing a greater FAR presence in the streets are the correct decisions. They argue that the Defence Committees are already prepared for crisis management and, along with the FAR's presence, they prevent an increase in corruption.

The FAR organises queues for the purchase of food provisions, disinfects the streets, and ensures quarantine compliance. From the opposition's perspective, their role should be to try to resolve the economic crisis now as, since the 1990s special period, they have taken control of the means of production and commercialisation.

Government supporters emphasise two strengths. First, they trust that the authorities are making decisions based on the opinion of Cuban medical experts who are world renowned. Secondly, they affirm that the government has acted with exceptional informative transparency. This contradicts the research published by the Institute of Latin American Studies of Columbia University (ILAS, 2020), whose charts show an absence of information regarding economic measures to counteract the pandemic's impact.

The government's communication strategy is summarised in an article published by *Granma* on 24 March entitled '*La fabula de la silla voladora*' (The fable of the flying chair) that asked for the silencing of voices opposing the measures used to fight the pandemic (Estevez Rams, 2020). The line is that the government has the ability to resolve the crisis and provides trustworthy data. Cubans can keep quiet and wait.

A reading of the most followed Twitter accounts in Cuba – young students, *cuentapropistas* or journalists – shows that the most relevant topics are internet prices, connection issues, the Empresa de Telecomunicaciones de Cuba Sociedad Anónima (ETECSA, Telecommunications Company of Cuba) monopoly, the long queues to buy chicken, the lack of freedom and the persecution of artists and journalists. There are very few references to the pandemic.

Each country has faced this health crisis according to the resources they have and Cuba has scarce economic resources and stagnant leadership. The country has a weak civil society, there is no legal framework to protect it, there is mistrust among different groups and fear of repression. Its population is more worried about a daily fight for survival than the problems of the virus.

The Revolutionary Armed Forces, Back on the Scene?

The daily *Granma*, on 6 April, reported that members of the Prevention Troops Brigade (Brigadas Tropas de Prevención) of the Revolutionary Armed Forces and Havana's Regiment of Special Regional Military Troops (Regimiento de Tropas Especiales de la Región Militar de La Habana) deployed an intense awareness-raising effort regarding the dangers of COVID-19 (Ramos, 2020). In the same article, a photographic report about the role of the Special Troops and the preventive action of the FAR in avoiding the propagation of the virus was published (Ramos, 2020). Cuba is different from the majority of Latin American countries because the Revolutionary Armed Forces do not get involved in human rights violations and they maintain a high level of popularity. However, there is a critical eye on the FAR's high command for controlling the economy, especially for their almost exclusive management of the tourism sector (Tedesco and Diamint, 2020). The social classes that the Revolution attempted to erase from the map are well established in one of its most emblematic institutions: the high command of the FAR have become capitalist businessmen and the middle and lower command (particularly the soldiers on military service) represent the Cuban people.

The medical missions that the government has sent abroad sometimes are confused with the FAR. France 24 maintained that Fidel Castro had given an assurance that no medical professional would be a political pawn: 'Our doctors will not mix with internal politics in the slightest. They will be extremely respectful of the law, traditions, and customs of the countries where they work. They do not have a mission to propagate ideologies', said the then Head of State in 1998 (Calle Aguirre, 2020). It is difficult to confirm if the medical brigades are simultaneously members of the FAR, but it is true that health services are the second highest source of revenue in the Gross Domestic Product, and with the obvious fall of tourism it is likely to become the first source of revenue. According to the available information, in the last decade professionals working abroad have contributed annually 11,000 million dollars to the Cuban state, of which 9000 million came from doctors and medical personnel (Deutsche Welle (DW), 2020).

Conclusions

Most Cubans fear a return to the 1990s and the 'special period' when the Soviet Union collapsed and Cuba's economy followed suit. State Security persecution directed against independent journalists or artists continues during the pandemic.

As Sen argued, dictatorships make sure they control information and maintain the balance of power. In Cuba this balance means that the hierarchy of the Revolutionary Armed Forces continue to defend their privileges, while Cubans, the ones the Revolution came to liberate, are condemned to survive in the midst of scarcity and endless waiting hours in empty markets. So far, there are no signs to suggest that the health crisis could change that. On the contrary, the July economic measures (Monreal, 2020), mainly the opening of food shops that only accept convertible money (US dollars), are another sign of deepening economic and social gaps.

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