

CRISES IN CUBA AND VENEZUELA: REVOLUTION AND REFORM

Silvia Pedraza and Carlos A. Romero¹

Both Cuba and Venezuela are living through extremely deep crises. In Cuba, the economy is dismal; in Venezuela, it has collapsed. Inequality has risen dramatically—in Cuba, both of class and race; in Venezuela, of class, with enormous political polarization. Moreover, in Cuba, the exodus continues, not only to the U.S. but increasingly to other lands, an exodus that draws particularly from the young. In Venezuela, the exodus is now so massive that it has become a humanitarian crisis. The Cuba-Venezuela alliance that bolstered both revolutions remains politically strong; however, its economic underpinning has weakened. In Cuba, the revolution is now an old revolution, and it houses distinct political generations, as well as a dissident movement, with new challenges to the government's political legitimacy. In Venezuela, the crisis of political legitimacy manifests itself in the dual power of two heads of state. Last but not least, both countries' relations with the United States, given the economic sanctions imposed by President Trump, deepened the economic crisis.

CONTEMPORARY CRISIS IN CUBA

Economic Crisis and Economic Reforms

For over half a century, Cuba relied on the twin leadership of the two Castro brothers: Fidel at the helm of government, supported by Raúl at the helm of the military. Through their continued leadership, Cuba managed to survive the deep economic crisis that intensified with the collapse of communism in the So-

viet Union in 1989 and that Fidel dubbed "*el período especial*"—a special period in a time of peace. Cuba lost its benefactor and its economic lifeline, particularly serious given its isolation from the rest of the world. That crisis reached its maximum depth from 1989 to 1993 when Gross Domestic Product (GDP) contracted by one-third (Mesa-Lago 2011). The food shortages were so severe that signs of famine were visible in people's faces; people also became more vulnerable to disease. In the summer of 1994, the *baleños* crisis took place, when over 36,000 rafters put out to sea trying to leave Cuba.

The crisis of "the special period" ushered in a period of economic reforms from 1993 to 1996, aimed at strengthening the role of the private sector in the economy. The government legalized the use of foreign currencies (the euro and the dollar) and promoted foreign direct investment (for example in joint ventures between Cuba and Spain in hotels for tourism). Moreover, the government began to allow private economic activity, expanding self-employment. Suddenly very small restaurants, called *paladares*, appeared inside people's homes, mostly for tourists. The government also broke-up the large state farms and converted them into cooperatives and established private farmers' markets where farmers could sell fruits and vegetables after meeting their procurement quota to the state. As Mesa-Lago and Pérez-López (2005: xi) pointed out, these measures "under-

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taken reluctantly by the Cuban leadership, were sufficient to stop the contraction of GDP and bring about modest economic growth.” However, soon after, the Cuban leadership aborted the market-oriented reforms because they were concerned that they would weaken their political control. Even more, in 2003–04, they took steps to reverse them, re-centralizing the economy and eliminating the limited spaces opened to private economic activity (Pérez-Villanueva 2014). Along with this retrenchment came increased repression aimed at dissident groups that, through non-violent means, sought to effect change. While Fidel remained at the political helm, and articles signed by him reflecting on Cuba’s condition regularly appeared in *Granma*, unbeknownst to most a leadership transition from Fidel to Raúl was gradually taking place.

Mesa-Lago and Pérez-López (2013, 2005) assessed Cuba’s economic and social performance from 1990–2012, comparing it to 1989 (the year before the crisis) and 1993 (the trough of the crisis). They showed that the slow-down in economic growth that occurred from 2001 to 2004, although attributable in part to external factors, had as its root cause “politically motivated paralysis of essential structural reforms” (2005: xiii). Social services—particularly education and public health, whose extension had proved paramount in the success of the Cuban revolution—steadily deteriorated (Mesa-Lago 2011). However, the strong alliance and friendship between Fidel Castro in Cuba and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela served to buoy up the island.

Raúl Castro’s new government again underwent a cycle of pragmatic reforms that began with a national dialogue provoked by the 6th Congress of the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) in 2011 and the *Lineamientos* (Guidelines) to put in place its major policy objectives in the 7th Congress in 2016 (*CubaDebate* 2016). Perhaps the major accomplishment was the rejuvenation of the Central Committee of the PCC and the greater representation of women and Afro-Cubans. The size of the state sector also declined, from 81% to 71%, while the private and cooperative sector increased. Raúl emphasized this did not mean a return to capitalism, lauding the successful eco-

nomie reforms in China and Vietnam. Raúl remained as First Secretary of the only political Party, though given his age (mid-80s) it was clear he would be appointing his successor as Cuba’s President (eventually Miguel Díaz-Canel was appointed).

Raúl also turned to tourism to lift Cuba’s economy. An avalanche of tourists then arrived in Cuba to witness the allure of a beautiful Caribbean island and “tropical socialism.” In 1990, Cuba received only 340,000 international visitors. Spurred by improved relations with the U.S., in 2016, a record 4 million tourists visited Cuba (a nation of 11.2 million people), including some 140,000 U.S. residents (not Cuban-Americans). In 2018, 4.7 million tourists visited Cuba, though in this last year the number of overnight visitors declined, and it was cruise tourists, who leave little revenue behind, that increased (Spadoni 2019). In 2020, with the arrival of the coronavirus, the U.S. government halted all tourism as well as shipments of goods to Cuba (including the mail). The U.S. also curtailed travel to the island by American citizens and sending remittances by Cuban Americans. While those policy actions helped to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 inside of Cuba, they further damaged an already devastated economy.

Despite those fresh policies, Cuba’s economy failed to grow. As Mesa-Lago (2019) explained, “the island’s economy is neither efficient nor competitive.” Simply put, for the last 60 years Cuba relied on substantial aid and subsidies from a foreign nation (first the Soviet Union, then Venezuela), and was unable to finance what it imports from its exports, thereby failing to generate appropriate, sustainable growth. Mesa-Lago noted the massive aid Cuba received from the Soviet Union from 1960 to 1990—\$65 million, three times the total amount of aid that Kennedy’s Alliance for Progress gave to Latin America as a whole. Venezuela also aided Cuba when support from the former Soviet Union ebbed. At its peak in 2012, Venezuelan aid, subsidies and investment amounted to \$14 billion, or close to 12% of GDP. Yet, despite the staggering foreign aid subsidies Cuba received, the Cuban economy’s performance was dismal. To Mesa-Lago and other analysts, the Cuban

economic situation is—in large part—the result of the failure of the “inefficient economic model of centralized planning, state enterprises, and agricultural collectivization its leaders have pursued despite the failure of these models worldwide.”

Raúl Castro’s reforms sought to tackle Fidel’s legacy of economic disaster head-on, by enacting a series of market-oriented structural reforms. However, these policies were timid and incomplete. To Mesa-Lago (2019), there have been too many restrictions, disincentives, and taxes, which impeded the growth of the private sector. Domestic capital accumulation has been insufficient, an obstacle for economic growth. In 2014–2018, the annual average was 9.7% vis-à-vis 25% in 1989, which remains the government target but has not been met since then. Direct foreign investment has also been insufficient: \$500 million annually vis-à-vis the official target of \$2.5 billion a year (Mesa-Lago 2019a).

Mesa-Lago argued that the market socialism model could provide a way out for Cuba, an economic model that proved very successful in China and Vietnam, still under Communist Party rule. In both China and Vietnam, the government allowed farmers to sell their output to whoever they wanted, at prices set by supply and demand. In Cuba, they must sell them to the state at prices set by the state, despite the perennial food shortages people suffer. In both China and Vietnam, self-employment in the private sector was an important engine of economic growth. In Cuba, the *cuentalpropistas* are extremely important for tourism, one of the pillars of the economy. But they are heavily taxed and seriously restricted. Yet, Raúl Castro’s successor, President Miguel Díaz-Canel, has only promised “continuity” with the existing economic model, failed as it has been. And the new Cuban Constitution (approved in February 2019) does not introduce any significant changes to the model of centralized planning and state dominance over the economy. Fear of the return of capitalism, they say, guides their reluctance to engage in these sorts of reforms that proved so successful in two other nations still under Communist Party leadership. Fear of loss of power and retribution must underlie their reluctance.

When Raúl Castro took over the presidency of Cuba in 2006, due to Fidel’s resignation, he started a debate, together with members of the Communist Party and the National Assembly, regarding the need to reform laws, public policies, and economic practices to correct the worst effects of the centralized economy.

From 2006–2012, an economic opening took place under Raúl that allowed for the legal development of the non-state sector that, in truth, already existed clandestinely. Among the most important changes were that the government expanded the list of authorized categories of self-employment by *cuentalpropistas*. The government authorized the distribution of idle state-owned land (usufruct) for a specified period of time to individuals, cooperatives, and state entities. Moreover, the government boosted non-agricultural production, for example through the authorization of service cooperatives that brought together private taxis and other forms of transportation to improve public transport. Cubans were also allowed access to hotels and restaurants until then accessible only to foreign tourists. With respect to the unpopular rationing system, known as *la libreta*, many food items were eliminated. The government allowed the sale of homes, which was forbidden since 1960. And the government did away with the restrictions preventing Cubans from traveling abroad (see Mesa-Lago and Pérez-López 2013, Table 6.1 for a full list of the reforms). However, from the outset there were real obstacles that rendered the reforms less fruitful than might have been: the excessive red tape involved in implementing them; the exaggerated state interference; the absence of a wholesale market; difficulties in acquiring inputs; lack of access to the internet; the dual currency (already cancelled in 2021); low incomes and wages; and the reality of unfair labor market competition. Cuba is engaging in reform of its currency system, as a result of which the convertible dollar—the CUC—now has disappeared, leaving only the traditional Cuban *peso* and the U.S. dollar for the nation to use (Mesa-Lago 2016).

In 2020, the COVID-19 epidemic arrived to a devastated economy, further deepening the crisis

(Torres-Pérez 2020). Thus, a series of modifications were decreed that aim to correct and expand the reforms that for 14 years were insufficient to substantially improve the economy. Among the welcomed changes are doing away with the list of approved jobs for the *cuentapropistas* and lifting the penalty from the U.S. dollar when exchanging it for domestic currencies (exchanges from the euro did not have such penalty).

Rising Inequality: Class and Race

In recent years, social inequality continued to grow in Cuba (Espina-Prieto 2004); social class inequality between the haves and the have nots also had a racial dimension. The migration exodus always had a racial dimension, as it was white Cubans that disproportionately left the island (Aguirre 1976). Therefore, so did the remittances the émigrés sent. Sarah Blue's (2007) survey of Havana residents assessed the impact of the 1993–96 economic reforms on the rising racial inequality in Cuba. She found that increased access to education—the structural means through which the revolution once equalized the income levels of various sectors of the population—had lost its equalizing force, while differential access to state employment, self-employment, and remittances from abroad resulted in rising racial inequality in the island. Flows of remittances back to the island from a large Cuban-American community aggravated the division between the races in the island, since black Cubans did not have as many family members living abroad to help them.

Alejandro de la Fuente (2020, 2001) has studied the issue of race in Cuba from the early part of the 20th century until the new millennium. He recently sponsored a conference at Harvard University from which resulted a special issue of *Cuban Studies* (2019) dedicated to the Afro-Cuban Movement. He has consistently emphasized that the Cuban revolution had important impacts on issues of race, eliminating the structural racism of the past, and opening new opportunities, particularly through the enormous expansion of the educational system and the public health system, to black and mixed-race Cubans. Data from the recent censuses of Cuba in 1981, 2002, and 2012, comparing the educational levels of white,

black, and mixed Cubans show that overtime the race differentials became very low, as the improvements in education took place for all races; as did the improvements in life expectancy resulting from good public health. By the 1980s Cuba had become a more racially equitable society. By the new millennium, racial disparities in education and in professional jobs were few, as non-whites were well-represented in those jobs. Thus, Cuba became a more racially equitable society than most multicultural societies.

However, de la Fuente has underscored (2020) that by the 1990s “racially differentiated effects became immediately and painfully visible.” White Cubans mobilized to exclude black Cubans from the burgeoning tourist sector. To appeal to the tourists, racist beauty standards (“*una buena presencia*”) became a requisite to acquire good jobs; racist attitudes continued to flourish, as epithets, discourses, and practices could again be seen and heard. Today there is an absence of black Cubans in the tourist sector, as well as in the private, non-state sector, where the jobs that pay well reside (approximately one-third of all jobs), in contrast with public sector jobs that pay very little.

Thus, de la Fuente wondered whether racism could co-exist with equality. This is particularly salient since the government insists on portraying the Cuban people as mestizo in a land where there is no racism and all forms of racism are understood, as befits the Marxist ideology, as “vestiges of the past.” Increasingly, however, activists that take an anti-racist stand, those that are part of Afro-Cuban movements, contest the notion that racism is a vestige of the past and point out that racism is institutionalized, producing unequal outcomes.

Even more, in the last decade, the municipal university system that opened up opportunities for a wide range of citizens to be educated in the *municipios* where they lived and was in place from 2000 to 2010 came to an end. There has been a rapid and massive whitening of the university system. Going beyond levels of education and health, de la Fuente went on to show that the proportion of Cubans living in tenements in the major cities of Havana and Santiago is quite low among whites, much higher among mestizos, and rather high among blacks. As Tanya

Hernández (2020) pointed out, living conditions in tenements are, in fact, abysmal, without running water or decent bathrooms. De la Fuente concluded that three factors combined to produce massive racial inequality in Cuba today: a history of unequal race relations; the impact of remittances; black market initiatives; and the retreat of the public sector that until the 1980s functioned as an agent of equality.

Thus, after the frontal attack of the Cuban revolution on inequality since 1959, today there is massive inequality in Cuba—of class and of race—that cannot be hidden. Yet it is largely ignored in the official statistics. This led the Afro-Cuban scholar Esteban Morales Domínguez (2018) to call for ONEI to publish statistics that are more meaningful regarding the relationship of race—the reality of skin color—to multiple social indicators. Katrin Hansing and Bert Hoffman (2019) conducted a survey of over 1,000 respondents throughout the island that showed the re-stratification taking place. Their results showed that since wages are extraordinarily low in the state enterprises, access to hard currency has become key. But given the racial disparity in the exodus over time, white and black Cubans have highly unequal access to family remittances. These spur not only different patterns of consumption but also of possibilities for investment (start up capital and goods) in the newly emergent private business sector. As Hansing and Hoffmann (2020:45) concluded, “with much less access to financial capital, goods, and mobility, Afro-Cubans are being clearly disadvantaged. In the current re-stratification of Cuban society, this racial bias is turning back one of the proudest historic achievements of the Cuban revolution.”

The impact of differential family remittances is exacerbated by the tendency of the tourism industry—hotels and restaurants, in particular—to prefer hiring white Cubans, imagining that tourists prefer them. Writing as the editor and publisher of the *Casa de las Américas* in Havana, Roberto Zurbarano (2013) highlighted that after nearly 60 years of revolution, racial inequality still persisted in Cuba, where two different realities diverged: “The first is that of white Cubans, who have leveraged their resources to enter the new market-driven economy and reap the bene-

fits of a supposedly more open socialism. The other reality is that of the black plurality, which witnessed the demise of the socialist utopia from the island’s least comfortable quarters.” That racism is not openly discussed, he added, only makes it flourish. Zurbarano acknowledged that the first decade of the revolution, the 1960s, “signified opportunity for all” and that the 1980s produced a generation of black professionals, such as doctors and teachers, “but these gains were diminished in the 1990s as blacks were excluded from lucrative sectors, like hospitality.” Now in the 21st century it is apparent that black Cubans are “underrepresented in universities and in spheres of economic and political power,” while they are “overrepresented in the underground economy, the criminal sphere, and in marginal neighborhoods.”

Cuba’s Continuing Exodus

The economic crisis of “the special period” became a political crisis, reaching its apex in the summer of 1994. That July, some Cuban families left in a small tugboat called *13 de Marzo* seeking to cross the dangerous waters standing between Cuba’s north coast and the Florida Keys. Due to the aggressive actions of the Cuban Coast Guard, the tugboat capsized, and 41 lives were lost. People in Cuba were outraged. Fidel replied by telling the people that the gates to their departure were now open, as he ordered the Cuban Coast Guard to stand down and not to detain them. This gave way to the enormous, chaotic exodus of the *balseros*, the fourth wave of the Cuban exodus—thousands of rafters who tried to cross the Florida Straits in July-August. The U.S. Coast Guard rescued over 36,000 at sea, who were housed in a tent city in the U.S. Naval Base at Guantanamo until, over a couple of years, immigration officials gradually processed them to come to America. That summer of 1994 culminated in Cuba with massive street protests in Havana on August 5th, which came to be called “*el Habanazo*” (Pedraza 2007). On September 8, the day that Cubans commemorate the feast day of their cherished patron saint, *la Virgen de la Caridad* (Our Lady of Charity), a small town priest, José Conrado Rodríguez, in Palma Soriano, celebrated mass with his parishioners. The homily consisted of his reading a letter he had written to Fidel Castro, telling him:

For over 30 years, our country engaged in politics at the base of which was violence. This politics was justified because of the presence of a powerful and tenacious enemy only 90 miles away, the United States of America. The way we confronted this enemy was to place ourselves under the power that for years confronted it, the Soviet Union ...

While the Soviet Union gave massive assistance to our economy and our arms race, Cuba gradually fell into a state of internal violence and profound depression. ... The use, within and without our country, of hatred, division, violence, suspicion and ill will, has been the main cause of our present and past misfortune.

Now we can see it clearly. The excessive growth of the state, progressively more powerful, left our people defenseless and silenced. The lack of liberty that would have allowed healthy criticism and alternative ways of thinking caused us to slide down the slippery slope of political will and intolerance towards others.

The fruits it bore were those of hypocrisy and dissimulation, insincerity and lying, and a general state of fear that affected everyone in the island. ...

We are all responsible, but no one is more responsible than you (Rodríguez 1995).

The letter also called for a peaceful, negotiated agreement through the process of a national dialogue among the major political actors—the Communist Party, the dissident movement, as well as Cubans in exile—and called for a popular referendum. To date, that meeting of the major political actors to negotiate Cuba's future has not taken place.

The *balseros* crisis gave way to President Clinton signing a new Migration Accord with Cuba, as part of which he devised the “Wet Feet/Dry Feet” policy that shaped the fourth wave of the Cuban exodus. This policy was in effect until President Obama overturned it in January 2017, just before he left office, arguing that U.S. immigration policy should treat Cubans the same as all other immigrants wanting to come to America. While the Cuban Adjustment Act remains in place, it is the case that it is increasingly difficult for Cubans who manage to enter the U.S. to attain political asylum, needing to give evidence of the probable fear of persecution. Nevertheless, as we saw earlier, a fifth wave of the Cuban exodus, mostly coming over land, developed in recent years. Today

Cubans leave the island not only for the U.S. but also for many other nations in South America (Ecuador and Panama, in particular), the Caribbean (Guyana, in particular) and Western Europe (Spain, in particular). The exodus has simply never ceased.

Cuba–Venezuela Alliance

Despite the deep economic crises in both Cuba and Venezuela, their alliance has never ceased, given its political importance to both nations. Little by little the Venezuelan process is becoming closer to Cuba's, as if in a symbiosis that opens the door to a totalitarian model and in which each provides the conditions for the other to continue existing. However, , the number of Cuban doctors and health personnel sent to work in the social missions in Venezuela has vastly declined, from a peak of around 50,000 to now only 20,000. Likewise, given the collapse of its economy, Venezuela's contribution to the island's economy has halved. In 2000–2012, Venezuela was supplying around 100,000 barrels of oil per day (bpd) to Cuba; in 2013–2016 that had fallen to around 65,000 bpd. At present, in 2017–2020, it is less than half what it was ten years ago, 43,000 bpd— a decline that is bound to be permanent.

United States–Cuba Relations

A turning point in the history of the relations between Cuba and the United States came with the restoration of diplomatic relations under President Obama, relations that the U.S. government severed in 1961 during the Cold War—over half a century earlier (LeoGrande and Kornbluh 2015; LeoGrande 2015). Cubans in the island and many, though not all, on the mainland, greeted the re-establishment of relations in July 2015 with hope. Then Secretary of State John Kerry underscored that “U.S. policy is not the anvil on which Cuba's future will be forged” since Cuba's future is for Cubans to shape. However, he stressed, “We remain convinced that the people of Cuba would be best served by genuine democracy, where people are free to choose their leaders, express their ideas, practice their faith; where the commitment to economic and social justice is realized more fully; where institutions are answerable to those they serve; and where civil society is independent and allowed to flourish” (U.S. Embassy in Uruguay 2015).

Yet, as he has repeatedly done, Raúl Castro defended the primacy of Cuba's one-Party system, which could not be challenged (Castro, Raúl 2016). He argued, "If they manage someday to fragment us," in the name of bourgeois democracy, "it would be the beginning of the end" (in Pérez, Jr. 2015:353).

Overall, despite their profound differences, United States Presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump all followed the traditional line of conditioning the lifting of the embargo to the implementation of real democratic reforms in Cuba, particularly freeing the political prisoners and engaging in electoral democracy. President Obama, however, took the different tack of actually restoring diplomatic relations with Cuba, an effort in which he engaged together with Cuba's President, Raúl Castro. On December 17, 2014, the two leaders started a rapprochement process that came to be called "12/17". Obama's measures had a significant impact on Americans' travel to Cuba.

Working with data provided by Cuba's MINTUR (Ministry of Tourism) as well as ONEI (National Statistical Office), Paolo Spadoni (2019) showed the dramatic rise in tourism to Cuba from 1990 to 2018. In 1990, the number of tourists was only 340,000; in 2000, close to 2 million tourists traveled to Cuba, jumping to 4 million tourists in 2016 and reaching nearly 5 million in 2018 (Spadoni 2019). While Canada remained the largest source country throughout this period, with 28% in 2018, the United States came in a close second, with 21% in that year (including both Cuban-Americans and other Americans).

Wanting to undo Obama's legacy and to deprive the Cuban state of U.S. dollars, the Trump Administration implemented measures that put an end to the avalanche of U.S. tourists to Cuba. These measures prohibited American companies from doing business with firms owned or controlled by GAESA (the Cuban military's holding company), ended the travel to Cuba by cruise ships authorized by President Obama, and severely curtailed the individual people-to-people travel and visas that President Bill Clinton had initiated. Trump also eliminated flights by U.S. commercial airlines (Delta, American, Jet Blue, and

others) to airports located in various cities in the island, retaining only flights to Havana. In April 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all Cuban airports and ports were closed, bringing tourism to a complete halt.

While President Trump stated that he wanted to empower ordinary Cubans by funneling dollars to their small-scale entrepreneurial activities—the emergent *cuentapropismo* (small business) sector in the island—the data also show a negative impact on those entrepreneurs who depended on tourism. Cuban entrepreneurs feared for their future, given both the harsh response of their new leader President Miguel Díaz-Canel towards the growing dissident sectors in the island, as well as the new efforts to isolate Cuba stemming from the Trump Administration in the United States.

A key difference between the revolutionary processes in Cuba and Venezuela arises from the large size and role of the Cuban exile community in the U.S., its ability to lobby Congress and its capacity to influence life in the island. Its large size—enhanced by the large number of people that left the island and settled in the United States since the "special period"—means that flows of remittances intended to help families left behind increasingly flowed back to the island.

All Cuban-Americans want the return of democracy and free elections to Cuba, in addition to the free expression of opinions and free association. However, this community is divided between *los intransigentes* (the hard-liners, those who think one should not give an inch in concessions to Cuba's communist government) and *los moderados* (those who think that through dialogue and negotiation one may attain more). The former identifies with the Republican Party, the latter, with the Democratic Party. In the November 2020 presidential elections, in which Donald Trump ran as candidate for the Presidency under the aegis of the Republican Party, there was a slight increase in the proportion of Cuban Americans and other Latinos who voted Republican. His message and the Florida Republican Party's portrayal of Joe Biden tapped into their fear of socialism cum communism.

Initially, Trump's policies vis-à-vis largely maintained the status quo established by the Obama Administration. Two years later, Trump's policies became far more restrictive toward Cuba. In April 2019, the Trump Administration announced new sanctions that went further, tightening restrictions on travel and remittances to Cuba, reversing the engagement policies from the Obama era. However, travel for Cuban American to visit their family were unchanged, and the new limits on family remittances remained generous. Nonetheless, the administration removed the dust from the Helms-Burton Act, ending the practice of waiving an important provision of the Act passed under President Clinton in 1996 that was never implemented. Now lawsuits in federal U.S. courts will be allowed for U.S. citizens seeking compensation for properties confiscated by the Cuban government after 1959.

What the Trump Administration policies mean for Cuba is that its support of Maduro's regime will come at a real cost. For example, John Bolton, then National Security Advisor, expressed it in a speech in Miami, delivered on April 17, 2019, the anniversary of the Bay of Pigs invasion, before the Bay of Pigs Veterans Association: "In no uncertain terms, the Obama administration's policies toward Cuba have enabled the Cuban colonization of Venezuela today." The changes were designed to reverse the Obama-era policies (in Gámez-Torres 2019).

President Trump stressed he would not ask Congress to end the commercial sanctions against Cuba that had been in place since the Kennedy Administration until political prisoners were liberated and free elections held. As was to be expected, Cuba's President Raúl Castro insisted that they would not allow themselves to be pressured—that they would not make political reforms to negotiate on economic matters with the U.S. Thus, both countries returned to the chess game that for many years was frozen in these two positions, with the chess pieces unable to move (Erisman 2017).

Strangely, late in the summer of 2017, a sizable number of personnel in the American Embassy in Havana, as well as a few in the Canadian Embassy, reported that they were ill as a result of "sonic attacks"

(Entous and Anderson 2018). President Trump took a tough stance, ordering the return to the U.S. of many of the Embassy's staff. Since then, the U.S. Embassy in Cuba has very limited personnel, and the Cuban Embassy in Washington, D.C. runs with reduced staff. This situation was aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Obtaining a visa for Cubans in the island to travel abroad is currently almost impossible, as it involves traveling to a third country where the U.S. Embassy interview takes place, adding enormously to the time, cost and anxiety involved. Thus, the lively two-way flow of communication that had been established among relatives and friends on both sides of the Florida Straits came to an end.

In our view, Cuba deserves to have a system of free elections, more than one political Party, and the expression of disagreements that we understand constitute the practice of democracy. To many Cubans from a moderate persuasion, in the negotiations regarding the re-establishment of relations, Obama did not ask enough from Raúl, although he did open the door to a new relationship that means a great deal to Cubans who live in the island. It is also possible that Trump was asking too much from Raúl. The Cuban people are caught in the middle. They continue to suffer from the system under which they live, despite the efforts and the courage of so many dissidents and political prisoners. They also suffer from American sanctions, despite their wish to live as good neighbors.

Political Crisis and Political Legitimacy

Cuba's crisis is also the crisis of a revolution that is now quite old. After 60 some years and the dramatic changes that accompanied the many stages of the revolution, distinct political generations formed (Pedraza 2016b). Following Mannheim's (1952) suggestion regarding the importance of the concept of political generation, several analysts used it fruitfully to study the Cuban revolution. [A political generation consists of people who during their coming of age (roughly 18–25 years old) were deeply influenced in their political attitudes by the dramatic historical events they lived through, events that marked their consciousness and their lives.] Luis Aguilar-León in

his *Cuba: Conciencia y Revolución* (1972 [1959]) used the concept to analyze the political generations that were present when the armed revolution originally took place. Maurice Zeitlin (1966) relied on Mannheim's analysis of the various political generations to analyze the response of the Cuban working class to the triumph of the revolution. Silvia Pedraza (2016b, 2007) used it to analyze the political generations that were present in both the island and in the exile at the dawn of the 21st century. Based on participant observation, fieldwork, as well as in-depth semi-structured interviews, Pedraza (2016b) identified and named four major political generations present at the dawn of the 21st. For the sake of brevity, only the first and last generations will be contrasted here. At present, members of these generations live side by side in Cuba, more often than not in the same household.

The Generation of the Glorious Revolution consists of people who came of age at the start of the revolution (1950s and early 1960s). They made the revolution through their own efforts and endured substantial sacrifices fighting in the mountains or the urban resistance, assisting those who were part of the struggle. Today they are in their mid-70s to mid-80s or older, often in positions of leadership in the Communist Party, government, or major cultural organizations. Mesa-Lago (2019) noted that the reluctance of the Cuban Communist Party to engage in real, structural reforms to benefit the economy might well be the result of opposition by the old guard. Pedraza's interviews with those who participated in the struggle and lived during the glorious years of the revolution found that this generation, no matter how poor the country has become, still sees communism as a good system that looks after the poor and gave women and black Cubans their rightful place in the nation. Not blind to the dismal economy, they blame it solely on the U.S. embargo. This generation has never really handed over the reins of power to the next generations; they still dominate most institutions. An example should suffice. Although Cuba now has a new president, Miguel Díaz-Canel, born in 1960, in his acceptance speech upon formally becoming President, let the nation know that Raúl Castro would still be making the major decisions.

The Generation of Disbelief consists of people who are adolescents or in their 20s, born during the "special period." For them, the glory of the revolution is only a story their elders told them or a sign painted on one of the many billboards along the mostly empty highways. All their lives they have known only poverty and want, as well as the wish to be free. Most of them seek to leave, as the island's economic and social deterioration means they have lost hope, cannot see a better future, and have little sense of *la Patria*. Demographic change is inexorable, and it will not be long before the old guard disappears, necessarily giving way to the newer generations. Sad to say, some young Cubans are no longer willing to try to shape the island's future. The revolution's old age, coupled with the dismal economy, has created a crisis that runs much deeper than the naked eye can see. Young Cubans who leave simply say, "There is no future in Cuba." The decline of Venezuela's support only exacerbates this crisis.

Fidel Castro's passing marked the end of an era in Latin America. He left power in 2006 due to his declining health and died on November 25, 2016, after the leadership transition was completed. Back in January 1959, after overthrowing Batista, Fidel had departed Santiago de Cuba in a victorious caravan across his country, ending in Havana. Almost six decades later, his remains were carried on the same journey, in reverse. Commenting on his legacy, just as his remains arrived to Santiago de Cuba, Pedraza (2016a) underscored that Castro's most enduring legacy will inevitably be that of David vs. Goliath: "He was the young, bearded revolutionary from a small island who took on the enormous Goliath of U.S. capitalism and American hegemony. That is the stuff of dreams."

But it was not a dream for everyone, and real disagreements remain as to whether he was David or Goliath (Pedraza 2016a). The image of Castro as David was first established during the victory of the Cuban government forces over the exiles' American-sponsored invasion at the Bay of Pigs in 1961. This image was reinforced repeatedly as Fidel lobbed verbal stones at his superpower neighbor relying on the economic support of, first, the Soviet Union, then,

Venezuela. Over the next half century, Fidel repeatedly used his sling to throw stones at the United States. Each time he blamed all of Cuba's economic ills on the U.S. embargo, rather than taking responsibility for his government's policies that failed to deliver prosperity to Cuba. Each time he turned the massive exodus of Cuban citizens trying to move abroad from a problem for Cuba to a problem for the U.S. This is an image that some Cubans—those who succumbed to his charisma and passionate oratory which painted the suffering of the present as necessary steppingstones for a better future—bought into, at least for a time. This was particularly true for those who benefited from the initial advances of the revolution and who lived through Cuba's phase of early civic glory.

Cubans who fought against Fulgencio Batista's dictatorship in the 1950s and risked their lives in that undertaking by and large remain attached to the revolution. They lived through Cuba's civic joy at the end of the dictatorship and they followed Fidel when he veered from a revolution originally fought to restore political democracy to a different revolution that sought to bring communism and socialism to the island.

To many of those who benefited from the expansion of education and public health services, Fidel Castro remained an admirably defiant figure even after his death. And these advances cannot and should not be overlooked, especially as they were the product of the tangible sacrifices the Cuban people made day in and day out. Many previously illiterate Cubans learned to read during a literacy campaign launched at the beginning of the revolution. Many poorer Cubans in rural areas, and those from working class backgrounds in the cities, experienced a remarkable social jump in status due to the improved education and health.

But to many Cubans, the David long ago morphed into an ugly Goliath. As Castro continued to blame all of Cuba's economic ills on the U.S. embargo rather than taking responsibility for his own policies, many Cubans sought a new life in the United States.

Among the failed policies, for example, was Castro's attempt to mobilize Cuba's population to cut sugar

cane in 1970. He exhorted everyone, professionals and peasants alike, to go to the countryside to cut sugar cane with the goal of a 10 million-ton sugar harvest, all the while insisting Cuba's honor was at stake. The enormous mobilization failed to accomplish his goal, leaving Cubans exhausted and humiliated.

Ultimately, Cubans paid dearly for the social advances under the Castro regime. Their meager salaries have driven the majority of the population, including professionals, into poverty. Even the well-educated are left struggling to put food on the table, to *resolver*—to make ends meet, legally or illegally. Cubans also paid for Castro's achievements with a lack of liberty that constrained both their efforts and their souls, stunting the economic development of the island. Families were torn apart after the lack of economic growth and lack of liberty pushed so many to leave their home country.

What difference will Castro's death make to his legacy? For a long time, Cuba has been like a slow-moving chess game, where the pieces struggled to move. Now that the King has moved, other pieces have room to move, too. What moves they will make, though, remain to be seen.

To most Cubans that today live in the United States—as well as to the many scattered all over the globe—Fidel was no David. But this was also true for many in the dissident movement inside Cuba who valiantly risked their lives in the decades-long struggle to restore electoral democracy to Cuba, even in the face of government crackdowns.

The new dissident movement in Cuba began to develop among young people in the mid-1980s, many of whom had studied in the Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries. It grew out of their first-hand knowledge of communism and the attempts to reform the system from within through *glasnost* and *perestroika*. Today, the dissident movement in Cuba includes numerous groups, all of whom espouse non-violence as means and as ends. Some of them have religious roots. For example, Dagoberto Valdés-Hernández's efforts have taken the shape of two magazines: first, *Vitral* (the image of a stained glass window that refracts many colors as the light passes

through) and now *Convivencia* (to live together with tolerance) (Valdés-Hernández 1997, 2014). Likewise, four leading dissidents representing the full gamut of race and gender in Cuba (Vladimiro Roca, René Gómez-Manzano, Félix Bonne-Carcasés, and Marta Beatriz Roque) in 1997 wrote *La Patria es de Todos* (The Nation Belongs to All) in which they called for a plebiscite so that Cubans can freely elect their government. The *Movimiento Cristiano Liberación* (Christian Liberation Movement), part of the Christian Democrats movement worldwide, gained the largest following inside the island, under the leadership of Oswaldo Payá (2018, 2001). In 2002, their *Proyecto Varela* collected and handed to the National Assembly of Popular Power more than the 10,000 signatures required by the 1976 Cuban Constitution for citizens to advocate for democratic political reforms. As Payá expressed it, “Let no one else speak for Cubans. Let their own voices be heard in a referendum” (Payá 2001). He was confident that change could be achieved in Cuba from within and that the darkness of night would not last forever, as he titled his last book (2012). But in 2012 he met a sudden death in an accident that many believe was not really an accident.

Of all the dissidents, the *Damas de Blanco* are probably the ones who have most captured the international eye. This group of ladies marches every Sunday through Havana, all dressed in white, each holding a flower in her hands, asking for the release of their husbands, sons, or brothers, who were imprisoned due to their dissent over a one Party, authoritarian society. They challenge the State by their visible and constant presence. Recently, they have met not only with insults but also with beatings. The Unión Patriótica de Cuba, UNPACU (Patriotic Union of Cuba), is a major social movement. One of its leaders, Guillermo Fariñas, carried out numerous hunger strikes, particularly calling for the government to give the people access to the Internet; in Santiago de Cuba its leader, José Daniel Ferrer, was imprisoned years ago and is now an Amnesty International “prisoner of conscience.” *Somos Más* (We are Many More) arose from the activism of young students who debated the premises of the government. Together with the independent journalists, such as Yoani Sánchez’s

and Reinaldo Escobar’s *14yMedio*, they are now a voice inside Cuba. All are marginalized, derided, insulted, and isolated. It is to their credit that they have remained steady and defiant. Their presence, as well as the recent demands from artists and intellectuals, continue to push the regime to enact serious reforms (Castellanos 2017).

On November 27, 2020, an unprecedented event took place as around 400 artists and intellectuals, mostly young, led by the Movimiento San Isidro, protested for days in front of the Ministerio de Cultura (Ministry of Culture) in Havana. Their main demand was greater freedom of expression in Cuba for all its citizens and respect for political dissenters. They demanded a real dialogue with the government as well as real participation and representation in the nation’s political institutions. While the government has tried to dismiss them, this is no longer possible. Univision’s Spanish-language news anchor, Jorge Ramos (2020), interviewed an important participant, well-known artist and activist Tania Brugera. Brugera underscored that none of their ability to gain international recognition is a function of the new social media. In the past, she underscored, many people made courageous acts and demands but no one knew about it; now everyone learns about it. Thus, a collective movement was able to take shape. Soon after this interview, the Cuban government ended the dialogue with the artists and called them “mercenaries.” We can expect to hear from them again.

Just a couple of weeks later, in a Christmas greeting to all Cubans, Cuba’s new Cardinal, Juan de la Caridad García-Rodríguez, together with the two other Archbishops and nine Catholic bishops highlighted the suffering of the island’s people. They underscored that their suffering was due to an economic crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and natural disasters, leading people to be fearful and anxious. At the same time, these circumstances gave everyone the opportunity to practice compassion and charity towards one another (*Conferencia de Obispos Católicos de Cuba* 2020). The Cardinal and the bishops also underscored the need for a dialogue among all Cubans. As Christ’s nativity is usually seen as the harbinger of good news, not mincing words, they itemized what

would constitute the good news of the season for Cubans: “Good news for Cubans would be that we should not have to search outside of our country for what we should be able to find inside; that we should not have to wait for those above us to give us what we could and should create ourselves from below.” And “Good news for Cubans would be that all blockades should cease—both external and internal—but, instead, set free our people’s creative initiative, set free the productive forces and the laws that support our people’s creative initiative, so that they can play a leading role in their own life.” This call for a national dialogue and for both the domestic embargo of the Cuban government as well as the external embargo of the U.S. to come to an end is a remarkably political statement on the part of the Cuban Catholic Church.

CONTEMPORARY CRISIS IN VENEZUELA

Economic Crisis: Economic Collapse

In the last decade, Venezuela has suffered a deep economic crisis, mostly due to the decline in oil revenues. This was due to a decline in oil production (an average production of 450,000 bpd in 2020) together with a decline in the price of oil (an average of US \$28 dollars per barrel), the extremely high rate of inflation (estimated at the hyper-inflation rate of 3,500% in 2020), and a loss of economic activity (a contraction of GDP of -90 % compared with 2013.) This extreme situation was aggravated by the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, the steep decline in trade relations with the U.S., and the economic sanctions Trump applied (Velásquez 2021). In addition, the dollar exchange rate deteriorated to 1 million *bolívares* for a dollar in December 2020. Moreover, gasoline is now scarce, as are other oil industrial products. The gap between the salaries and earnings of most of the population and the price of food, social services, and health services is now quite wide.

How do Venezuelans survive? Depending on their social class, there are four ways to face the rising inequality. Some Venezuelans are supported by the government’s social policies, although with declining efficacy. Other Venezuelans participate in an informal economy which allows them to buy and sell goods and services in U.S. dollars. Still others depend

on the remittances sent by relatives and friends living abroad. Finally, others, particularly working-class Venezuelans, leave their country for another—across a bridge, across an isthmus, across the sea—in search of a better life.

Venezuela is in a deep-seated economic crisis that José Manuel Puente (2021) has characterized as a historical macro-economic collapse. As he pointed out, in the last 5 years Venezuela has experienced a tremendous GDP per capita contraction, which he puts at 46.90% and the International Monetary Fund at 35% in 2019 and 25% in 2020—the worst economic performance in South America—coupled with the hyperinflation noted earlier. Puente has underscored that Venezuela’s GDP today is smaller than that of small economies, such as the Dominican Republic and Costa Rica. This economic collapse is home-made, as it occurred prior to Trump’s sanctions and to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the economic crisis runs deep, however, the State still has international reserves; trade with its partners continues; part of the middle class continues doing business; and the services sector still works. Many workers and poor people continue to depend (as they do in Cuba) on the meager subsidies the government gives, as well as what they can reap from the informal economy (Velázquez 2021).

Venezuela’s dire economic situation is the combination of several failures: the State-socialist oriented economic model, which limited private initiatives and investments and failed to provide economic incentives; the United States’ embargo and economic sanctions under Donald Trump; and the current crisis of the international oil industry (low production and low prices for many years now). As we said before, international assistance, trade with non-traditional partners, and the existence of an informal economy prevent Venezuela from becoming “a basket case” (Barry 2016).

Rising Inequality and Political Polarization

As President, Hugo Chávez wanted to use his electoral support to radically change Venezuelan institutions and political practice. The radical reforms that he put in place were intended to constitute revolutionary change—the Bolivarian revolution—and to

create “the socialism of the 21st century,” a socialism without poverty. While he lived, this plan was effective, given his efforts to create redistributive justice for the poor, based on Venezuela’s oil revenues.

But the year 2013 dealt *el Chavismo* two serious blows. First, Hugo Chávez’s death on March 5, 2013, after having been in Cuba to receive medical treatments, was an enormous loss. Second, the economy began to stumble and decline at an accelerated rate, which has now reached critical conditions. The “socialism of the 21st century,” the new model which Chávez fervently offered not only to Venezuelans but also to all of Latin America and the Caribbean, lost ground.

Nicolás Maduro assumed the provisional role of President of Venezuela in March 2013 and as elected President in April 2013 for the Constitutional period of 2013–2019, during a steep economic decline that alarmed many, coupled with the military’s increasing role and the resurgence of the opposition. Today, among those who still are *Chavistas*, many are anti-Maduro. Others became totally disappointed with the *Chavista* illusion. Still others simply failed to be motivated by the promises of the new leadership. From the moment that Maduro became President, the ordinary citizen began to live through a deep crisis: direct transfers declined, access to cheap and subsidized dollars became difficult, rising inflation made a stable income impossible, and securing one’s daily bread became arduous. Thus, a flood of Venezuelans emigrated from the country. The estimates are that close to five million Venezuelans live abroad. Most of those who left were not only tired of the *Chavista* model of politics but were also afraid of the economic corruption and the violence and crime that were rampant on the streets, as well as their lack of a future.

Finally, the symptoms of a serious malaise—poverty, violence, and insecurity—broke through. Elections gave a clear signal about the mounting number of citizens who opposed *el Chavismo*, as evidenced by the *Mesa de la Unidad Democrática* (MUD) candidates’ impressive victories in the December 2015 Parliamentary elections. However, the tense coexistence of different views (the government and the opposition)

within the National Assembly (*Asamblea Nacional*, AN) ended and electoral authoritarianism took over (Flores and Nooruddin 2016:95). *El Chavismo* put an end to any dialogue within a National Assembly controlled by the opposition, with the Supreme Court of Justice removing a significant part of the AN’s power.

The straw that broke the camel’s back was the government’s attempt in 2017 to convene and install the National Constituent Assembly (*Asamblea Nacional Constituyente*, ANC) intended to alter the Constitution, deepen the *Chavista* project and put the seal of approval on its authoritarian-corporatist model of government. The election of the ANC members on July 30, 2017 upset international observers. Most international multilateral organizations, foreign governments, and non-governmental organizations criticized the *Chavista* regime, condemning its human rights violations and echoing the opposition’s denunciation of Venezuela’s loss of democracy. They accused Maduro’s government of being outside the law, systematically violating human rights while increasing the number of political prisoners and reducing the institutional spaces the MUD obtained democratically in the National Assembly as well as among governors and mayors. Amidst this extreme polarization, the efforts of many governments (such as Norway and the European Union), international organizations, and world personalities (including António Guterres, General Secretary of the United Nations) to promote a dialogue between the government and the opposition failed. Many governments closed ranks either against or in favor of the *Chavista* regime. In addition, the General Secretary of the Organization of American States (OAS), Luis Almagro, openly criticized Maduro’s government; with the support of its members, Almagro discussed the current Venezuelan domestic situation and applied some sanctions. As a result, Maduro decided that Venezuela would leave the OAS (Marsteintredet 2020).

From a domestic point of view, the tendencies that already existed in 1999—extreme political polarization and increasing authoritarianism—were exacerbated. The government elite increasingly controlled the institutional, electoral, and judicial processes.

Thus, the balance of powers and the exercise of “fair play” that every democratic model demand were lost.

The opposition, for its part, has not responded well to the government’s excesses, despite retaining the parliamentary majority in the AN since December 2015. The opposition could have successfully carried out a non-binding popular referendum to reject the ANC in July 2017. In addition, it could have participated in other regional and local elections: for governors in October 2017; for mayors in December 2017; for council members in December 2018; in the advance presidential elections of May 20, 2018; as well as for the parliamentary elections in December 2020. Yet only a small part of the opposition participated in those elections, breaking with the majority decision. All the while, the PSUV ruling Party had an electoral advantage, particularly as all the elections were marked by a high degree of abstention.

The ruling party’s candidate, Nicolás Maduro, and his allies insisted they won the May 20, 2018 presidential election with 68% of the valid votes cast, with the opposition candidates garnering 32% of the valid votes with a high degree of abstention (54%). Thus, Maduro was sworn in as the re-elected President before the ANC on May 24, 2018. The opposition considered this a farce, particularly since, according to the 1999 Constitution, the presidential term was supposed to begin on January 10, 2019. The AN elected in 2015 and dominated by the opposition ignored Maduro’s swearing in and called for a new presidential election.

The deepening economic crisis, massive exodus, and the lack of international support from foreign governments, multilateral organizations, non-governmental organizations, and social media created a “ball of fire” that constantly threatened the regime and the nation’s stability. These political actors emphasized that the humanitarian crisis called for international humanitarian aid. They labelled President Maduro a “dictator,” characterizing the Venezuelan state as “on the verge of collapse,” and classifying Venezuela as a “failed state.” The Venezuelan government countered this international sentiment by insisting the situation was the result of the conjunction of a media campaign and an economic war against Venezuela.

A sizable part of the domestic opposition sought to cut off the country’s foreign trade, limits its access to external credits, and limit the flow of its energy and mining investments, while also discrediting it internationally. Most of the Venezuelan opposition created a political platform to act in coordination with external political actors to promote regime change. In turn, the Venezuelan government defended itself with the open support of countries like Cuba, Bolivia, China, Iran, Russia, and Turkey.

However, the Venezuelan crisis is more than a media conflict based on bitter mutual accusations. Objective conditions lead to classifying the nation as in a state of pre-collapse: hyperinflation, lack of food and medicines, lack of gasoline, breakdown of public services (power shortages, lack of water, failure of waste collection), crumbling communication channels, insufficient transportation, together with hunger, emigration, and social unrest. The situation is extreme.

It is worth mentioning that between the months of September 2017 and January 2018, several rounds of dialogue between the government and the opposition were held in the Dominican Republic. However, they achieved neither a roadmap for a way forward nor the signing of an accord for the future of the nation. Since these initiatives failed, the democratic international community stepped forward in the media to criticize Venezuela. Numerous organizations condemned the presidential elections of May 20, 2018 as illegitimate, among them the UN, the EU, the OAS, and Mercosur. Also critical of Venezuela were some of the countries involved in the failing UNASUR, CELAC, the Lima Group, and over 60 governments world-wide. Those governments, including the United States, sanctioned Venezuela’s leaders and institutions.

By contrast, most of the members of the *Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América* (ALBA) opposed international interference in Venezuela’s internal affairs. However, in 2018, Ecuador exited the ALBA due to Maduro’s inaction in the face of the migration crisis. Cuba observed in silence. Bolivia moved with diplomatic prudence and decided to exit ALBA after President Evo Morales left power. One can expect that Bolivia’s new president, Luis Arce,

will return Bolivia to ALBA. Nicaragua did not get involved, as President Daniel Ortega faced opposition accusing him of exercising unlimited repression.

The 14 Latin American countries that are part of the Lima Group judged Maduro's government negatively, repudiating his domestic and international actions by not accepting his presence at the 8th Summit of the Americas, held in Lima in April 2018. Furthermore, in May 2018, OAS Secretary General Luis Almagro supported an investigation of President Maduro by the International Criminal Court (ICC). The OAS cannot bring a case before the ICC, but a member country that has signed the Rome Statute may. Five Latin American countries have supported this proposal (Argentina, Colombia, Chile, Paraguay, and Peru) along with Canada and France. This is a preliminary step to the ICC's opening of a formal investigation (Hirst et al. 2020).

The Venezuelan Exodus: A Humanitarian Crisis

Nothing has had a greater impact regionally than the massive flow of Venezuelans who have left their home country—again demonstrating the important role an exodus can play. It is estimated that about five million citizens have left Venezuela, including more than one million Colombo-Venezuelans (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2018). The Venezuelan diaspora has become a problem for its neighboring countries, particularly Colombia, where the number of Venezuelans reached 1.8 million in 2020 (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de Colombia 2020). Participants at a meeting held in September 2018 in Quito, Ecuador, attended by representatives of 13 Latin American countries and the OAS to discuss the regional situation generated by this humanitarian crisis, declared their commitment to coordinating a regional response.

The General Assembly of the United Nations also criticized Maduro's regime and favored humanitarian aid. The UN Human Rights Council approved a report on promoting and protecting human rights in Venezuela. United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet (former President of Chile), told the UN Human Rights Council, that her office had "documented numerous human rights violations and abuses by security forces and pro-gov-

ernment armed groups, including the excessive use of force, killings, arbitrary detentions, torture and ill-treatment in detentions, threats, and intimidation." She added that the Venezuelan authorities failed to acknowledge the extent and severity of the health and food crisis that had driven millions of people abroad since 2015 (in Nebehay 2019).

At the same time, Colombia and Guyana politically distanced themselves from Venezuela. Colombia left the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and became the main supporter of Venezuela's radical opposition, allowing this group to operate from its territory. Relations between Venezuela and Colombia deteriorated, and diplomatic relations eroded to such an extent that observers speculated about possible armed conflict between them. With Guyana, the situation became worse due to the end of a long extended bilateral negotiations between Guyana and Venezuela regarding Venezuela's claim to part of the Guyanese territory, the Esequibo, under the Geneva Agreement of 1966. This dispute passed to the jurisdiction of the International Court at the Hague.

Venezuela-U.S. Relations

Venezuela's relations with Washington also continued to deteriorate. Given the radicalization of the domestic political process and the international alliances President Maduro's government established, contrary to the interests of the U.S. government, the United States broke diplomatic relations with Venezuela in January 2019. The United States has confronted Venezuela in several ways. One, it formed a coalition of hemispheric governments willing to confront the country by raising the costs of its actions. Two, it developed a comprehensive sanctions plan directed at representatives and institutions of the regime. Starting with President Maduro himself, the sanctions reduced the financial and credit capacity of PDVSA and other institutions, stopping Venezuelan oil shipments to the U.S. market, at the same time that it banned U.S. financial transactions using the Venezuelan cryptocurrency, the Petro. And three, via a media campaign, the U.S. supported Venezuela's radical opposition, which argued for a U.S. military intervention in Venezuela. More sanctions in favor of a negotiated regime change, or a hemispheric mili-

tary action led by the United States are possible. As President Donald Trump put it, “all options are still on the table.”

As we showed earlier, trade relations between the United States and Venezuela deeply deteriorated. After several decades as Venezuela’s main trade partner, Washington moved away from Caracas for political and ideological differences. Since early 2019, the U.S. government broke diplomatic and economic relations with Venezuela. In August 2019, it opened a Venezuelan Affairs Unit inside the American Embassy in Bogotá, Colombia. Moreover, the U.S. recognized the parallel government of Juan Guaidó (President of the National Assembly elected in 2015 under the control of the opposition) as the legitimate representative of Venezuela to the U.S. Moreover, it applied multiple sanctions to the Maduro government and to PDVSA, which also impacted two-way trade flows. In the first half of 2020, U.S.-Venezuela trade amounted to \$0.574 billion—an insignificant figure given that it had reached over \$55 billion under Chávez in 2011. In that year, oil exports to the U.S. amounted to \$44 billion and the U.S. was Venezuela’s leading trade partner. In the second half of 2020, it is estimated that trade between the two countries will not exceed \$0.28 billion (U.S. Census Bureau 2020). In 2019, Venezuela exported 500,000 bpd of oil to the U.S.; in 2020, exports of oil to the U.S. were zero. Venezuela’s break with the United States has been slower and more complex than with Cuba, as it involved oil shipments to the American market by PDVSA’s subsidiaries, including CITGO. That relationship no longer exists (Bull and Rosales 2020). With the arrival of Joe Biden to the White House, one could expect that U.S. relations with Venezuela would change. But there is not any indication of a less confrontational policy from Washington.

Crisis of Political Legitimacy: Dual Power

Neither the Venezuelan government nor the opposition have demonstrated the will to engage in a negotiated agreement that would overcome the deep political and economic crisis in Venezuela. Meanwhile, the international democratic community presses for a political solution but lacks the capacity to carry it out.

On January 10, 2019, the situation was further aggravated by Nicolás Maduro’s inauguration before the ANC. Days before, members of the Lima Group, the United States, and several European countries stated that they considered Maduro’s claim of victory illegal and ratified that they would not recognize his mandate. At the same time, they urged that the executive power be delegated to the person elected President of the National Assembly, as stipulated in the Constitution. On January 23, 2019, Juan Guaidó was sworn in as Interim President of Venezuela.

This proclamation resulted in a dual power scenario and in the deepening of the political crisis. Various options were proposed to make this transition effective, including a humanitarian mediation and even a direct U.S. military intervention. Fifty seven governments recognized Juan Guaidó as President of the AN and the only legal and legitimate head of state. To counter the trend towards military intervention, Juan Guaidó called several political rallies and toured several South American countries, where he was welcomed as President of Venezuela. Guaidó tried to direct the humanitarian aid (food and medical supplies) sent by the U.S., Canada, and other countries to the western border at the Tienditas bridge (connecting Cúcuta, Colombia with Ureña, Venezuela). Initially, Venezuelan troops blockaded the bridge, but, eventually, the Venezuelan government accepted the arrival of humanitarian aid channeled through the Red Cross and the United Nations.

Despite the blockade, President Maduro felt confident that he had sufficient internal and external support to remain in power. He refused to surrender power, believing that his time to exit had not yet arrived, and portrayed himself as “the victim of imperialist aggression.” He also relied on the support of China, Russia, and Cuba, among others. Cuba’s counsel was fundamental at this moment, as it has been since 1999. Cuban advisors played a key role in handling the media with their social psychological and conflict management skills. Cuba, the main objective was to avoid the United States invading Venezuela; other issues were secondary.

Meanwhile, shipments of crude oil from Venezuela to the United States dropped from 650,000 bpd in

December 2018 to 200,000 bpd in April 2019—two-thirds less in slightly over a year. Furthermore, the U.S. government began to deposit the money from oil purchases in a trust for Guaidó's government. As PDVSA moved its foreign offices from Lisbon to Moscow, the U.S. put its letters of credit for Venezuelan oil purchases on hold. Moreover, Maduro knew that by the end of the year he would no longer have enough resources to remain in power unless he received substantial help from China, Russia, Iran, and Turkey. Oil tankers carrying Venezuelan crude were stranded in the Gulf of Mexico; bilateral contracts were frozen; and there was a ban on the sale of U.S. oil derivative products to Venezuela. CITGO, the U.S. oil company owned by PDVSA, passed into the hands of the Venezuelan opposition. It was expected that PDVSA would collapse without CITGO. Given this, some analysts expected Maduro's government to suffer a similar fate.

In short, the Venezuelan crisis resulted from four interrelated conditions. One, the growing number of illiberal regimes worldwide that supported Venezuela (Weyland 2013). Two, the world's multipolar geopolitical re-arrangement in which the United States, China, and Russia compete with each other through other countries. Three, the economic and social crisis that polarized Venezuela and rendered it politically fragile, with a situation of dual power played out on the streets. And four, and last but not least, neither an enabling environment nor a negotiator—a person or entity who has the patience and skills to bring groups in violent conflict with markedly different perspectives to the negotiating table and, ultimately, drive them to an accord. Such was the role, for example, that former U.S. Senator George Mitchell played in Northern Ireland. At present, the chances for a peaceful and democratic solution to the Venezuelan crisis are slim.

In the new millennium, Venezuela is part of a democratic regression worldwide that has manifested itself in the growing violation of human rights, the regression rule of law and separation of powers, and the violation of the full electoral and institutional process in a democratic polity. These are considered funda-

mental in solving the problems of representation, pluralism, and participation.

Under Chávez and Maduro, Venezuela has been a serious critic of globalization, Western values, and liberal capitalism, participating in an anti-Western alliance with countries such as China, Russia, Cuba, Turkey, and Iran, but also building new alternatives with like-minded countries (such as members of ALBA). Thus, from the perspective of the West, Venezuela now threatens the West's geopolitical security.

The architects of the Russian revolution were familiar with situations of "dual power," in which two powers coexisted with each other, competed for legitimacy, defined themselves as the nation's legal government, failed to recognize each other, and were supported by different foreign governments (Lenin 1964; Trotsky 1992). Maduro's regime considers the provisional government led by AN President, Juan Guaidó, illegal and illegitimate. Guaidó, in turn, defines Nicolás Maduro as an "usurper" of the President's office. At the same time, there is rampant deinstitutionalization, as corruption, drug trafficking, smuggling, guerilla warfare and the crime-driven economy have replaced the institutional channels and public actors recognized by the law.

Nonetheless, Venezuela's case remains, thus far, unique in that there has been no civil war; each political actor is recognized by part of the international community; the government retains a monopoly over the military's legitimate use of violence; and there is not a state of generalized rebellion. Moreover, the armed forces have not yet tipped the balance, as they did at other times in Latin America. Most of the military power, especially the top brass, remains united and obedient to Maduro's regime. Only if the military's allegiances were to split could this situation of dual power change (Hirst et al. 2020).

At the same time, ordinary Venezuelans must dedicate their daily lives to surviving, confronting the social calamities that are now a part of their daily life, bearing the high cost of living and in some cases planning to leave the country. Survival prevents them from engaging in open, political confrontation with the government.

President Maduro has been playing for time at a very high cost: the U.S. government has been enforcing an economic embargo that deepens day by day with the application of new punitive measures. President Trump's sanctions clearly intended to squeeze Maduro's government: banning access by the Venezuelan state and individuals to U.S. credit, including credit cards issued in the United States; suspending American flights to Venezuela; sanctioning third parties that trade with Venezuela, including Russian and Indian companies; and prohibiting further financial, oil, gas and minerals transactions.

This was the status quo when the COVID-19 epidemic arrived. Though the numbers of infections are not high by international standards, the number of coronavirus infection cases are increasing in Venezuela. As of August 2020, there were 95,500 cases and 834 deaths. Political life continues to be torn in two. The opposition group surrounding Guaidó is ever more radicalized, labelling the Maduro regime as "dictatorship," "genocide," "usurpation" and the opposition as "rebellion" and "legitimate defense." However, most of the opposition simply does not know what to do: whether to support a mass insurrection or military outbreak, participate in parliamentary elections in December 2020, or simply wait for better times to come (Lander 2018; Jácome 2018). The government, for its part, cannot hide the health crisis that grows exponentially, the lack of discipline of the people in the face of successive calls for a quarantine, and the extraordinary development of an informal economy. The government is also failing to provide basic services, ranging from water, electricity, gas, and gasoline to health services and identity services (such as passports, identity cards, death, and birth certificates, as well as public registry, notaries, and courts). This has resulted in a parallel society that, together with the circulation of the dollar, serves as a buffer against the severe crisis. However, that cushioning is not effective enough in the face of the massive spread of COVID-19, the reduction of public revenues, and the commercial and financial effects of international sanctions. These sanctions are not only against PDVSA and its subsidiaries and the public, but also against companies, entrepreneurs, and financial services that have a link with the regime

(Magdaleno 2018). The U.S. and its allies are, thus, effectively boycotting Venezuela's regime, increasing the burden of continued destabilization, so as to deem Venezuela a failed and outlawed state. Some of the opposition believes that this will serve to justify an invasion combined with a popular insurrection—though a military operation against the regime (in April 2019) and a frustrated naval operation (in May 2020) failed.

Why is Venezuela in a state of inertia now? First, the regime feels supported by foreign governments, by the armed forces, by the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV) militancy itself and by the paramilitary groups that support *el Chavismo*. Second, the regime has still shown itself able to contain the protests of the people with its repression and surveillance. Moreover, many Venezuelans are not politically active, but simply try to survive the crisis and the pandemic, ignoring the political reality, feeling estranged from the political actors (Vera 2018).

As for the opposition, it is deeply divided among those who accept the electoral legitimacy of the regime, those who remain open to a new negotiation, and those who are in favor of a military invasion from the outside. The segment of the opposition that until recently agreed with the view that the regime could place some deputies in the new National Assembly is not representative and lacks the trust of others. The segment of the opposition that remains open to negotiation (represented by Guaidó) has the advantage that it is recognized as a true opposition, has international support, and manages its own finances, though it is struggling for the country's representation amidst the governmental duality. However, this segment has devolved a very sectarian position, rejecting outright participation of the regime in the parliamentary elections and in any peaceful negotiations (such as the talks sponsored by Norway). Most negative about this line has been its lack of a firm position. They openly call for a military invasion by the United States and its allies, as the only solution possible to the present stagnation. Thus, at present there is neither a negotiation, nor a civil war, nor a military insurrection from within, nor a mili-

tary invasion from without. Everyone is waiting for “something” to happen (Magdaleno 2018). And the international support for each of these internal actors has declined, as foreign governments have now turned to confront the pandemic within their borders.

Data from the 2020 national survey on living conditions (Encuesta Nacional de Condiciones de Vida - ENCOVI) conducted by the Andrés Bello Catholic University indicates how Venezuela has regressed in all its social indicators. It ranked the country among the five poorest in the world, with 80% of its people unable to cover the basic food basket, 51% of the population lacking adequate protein intake, 30% of children suffering from malnutrition, and 44% of adults lacking employment. In addition, the population fell to 28 million, given the exodus of millions of young Venezuelans. In the meantime, the vast majority of Venezuelans struggle in the face of the crisis or accommodate themselves to it. To subsist is to wait for government aid or humanitarian aid (Vera 2018).

Many analyses about Venezuela are superficial, as journalists unquestioningly accept the government’s or the opposition’s propaganda and have no contact with the poorest social sectors. This makes it impossible to observe how Venezuelans move in a parallel country, which continues to grow day by day. If there is no gasoline, they get it on the black market; if they buy it at subsidized terms, they resell it. If there is no electricity, they use domestic gas or firewood for cooking. If they hold a formal job where they earn little, they seek to supplement their income from reselling food and gasoline. They also engage in illicit activities: drug trafficking, theft, contraband, or resale of stolen goods, such as automotive parts, jewelry, clothing, and electrical devices. They also profit from buying and selling dollars. This “parallel country” particularly grows within the lower middle class and working-class, peasant, and rural sectors. When they leave the country and try to argue that they are refugees that were forcibly displaced, the receiving countries view them with suspicion (Lander 2018). Thus, the notion that Venezuela is asleep is false. Venezuela may appear to be asleep since there are not many people on the streets, engaged in small protests

and there is some circulation of goods and services as in any normal country, within the restrictions derived from the pandemic. Most Venezuelans are engaged in solving everyday problems by alternative routes to the formal economy (Magdaleno 2018; Bull and Rosales 2020). But, in truth, the lethargy and social anomie are due, rather, to the control the government has over the movements of the people, quenching demonstrations with repression (including bloody, cold executions of alleged criminals) as the majority of the people daily seek alternatives to the crisis. Therefore, the protest rates are low. The regime still has the capacity to prevent and suppress any initiative against it.

The contradictions between the two parallel governments are intensifying. On the one hand, Maduro’s regime insists on not negotiating with the opposition and holding several elections. On the other hand, Guaidó’s provisional government uses the thesis of administrative continuity, upholding the idea that it is a provisional government for as long as Maduro’s “usurpation” continues. Maduro has developed a strategy that allows him to sustain himself in power, gradually opening up the regulations derived from the COVID-19, and insisting that Guaidó’s initiatives are illegal and supported by only a small group of conservative governments. Guaidó hopes that around the time of the parliamentary and others elections, a popular uprising and a military insurrection can take place simultaneously.

Diplomatically, despite Guaidó’s recognition by some 60 governments, including the U.S., the Maduro government is still in power. The victory of Bolivia’s Movement to Socialism (Movimiento al Socialismo) Party and its candidate Luis Arce for President in October 2020 gives Maduro oxygen. It also reinforces the new coalition of centrist-leftist governments of Mexico, Argentina, and now Bolivia that are friendly toward Maduro’s regime. As a result, a peaceful and prompt solution to the Venezuelan crisis is not possible at present. Everything seems to indicate that not until the parliamentary election, will there be pressure on Maduro and new possibilities for a political negotiation will appear. Meanwhile, the political vacuum further separates the skeptical

citizen from the political life and reduces people's attention to public affairs.

Venezuelans have become accustomed to the chaotic situation and cope with it according to their social class. Upper-middle class citizens with greater purchasing power have entrenched themselves in their homes; they have sufficient dollars to maintain high levels of consumption, buying in supermarkets and fancy mini-markets with a large supply of imported products. The middle class and lower middle class depend on the growing foreign exchange market, the remittances that arrive from family overseas, on their savings and on selling their own goods, especially since they cannot cope with the situation with their completely devalued salaries or pensions. They try to restrict their consumption. Their opposition to the regime continues to grow.

The lower class has suffered the most, lacking not only food but also water and electricity, employment and a fair salary. They have taken the path of emigration. Thus, 80% of the more than 400,000 people who have left Venezuela since April 2020 come from this sector. It is projected that by December 2020 there will be an additional one million new emigrants.

The lowest class depends on government assistance and international aid. They have the most contact with the informal and criminal economy, as they trade with dollars and engage in the sale and resale of food, as well as engage in trafficking drugs, stolen goods, and smuggling.

Thus, Venezuelans have adapted to this kind of "parallel economy" where wage earners lose but those in the informal sector win. The government is aware of this and therefore has no plans to combat the dollarization, because it has neither enough foreign exchange nor the capacity to reform the monetary policy. Thus, they turn a blind eye to what is happening. In fact, banknotes in bolivares are scarce, as are low-denomination dollars and the government allows the free circulation of dollars.

But there is another layer of businesspersons, contractors, high officials, and toll collectors who benefit through corruption, their official contacts, and their commercial ties, especially those with links to the oil

market and mining activity. Taking advantage of the chaotic situation, they climb socially and corruption endures.

In a highly polarized society, two different narratives exist regarding current events in Venezuela. To the advocates of the Venezuelan revolution, the fault lies with the United States, the oligarchy and the Venezuelan Right, together with the Latin American and European Right, all of whom have not let up in their attempt to destroy the achievements accomplished by Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution and Maduro's government. To the enemies of the Bolivarian Revolution, the revolution is now at its lowest point. The economic situation has come to the point of its hurting the most the working people and the poor—the very people who were the base for the revolution (Bull and Rosales 2020; Marsteintredet 2020).

FUTURE SCENARIOS FOR BOTH REVOLUTIONS

What are the possible scenarios for Cuba and Venezuela at this juncture?

For Cuba, a first scenario would consist of maintaining the status quo inherited from Fidel and Raúl Castro, in which the highly centralized state and the power of the Communist Party remain unchanged, controlling domestic politics while supported by unconditional international allies, such as Venezuela. The dismal economy makes this scenario unlikely.

A second scenario would foresee structural changes in the economy but without changes in the political institutions: the Sino-Vietnamese path. The Communist Party would reach the conclusion that economic reforms must be deepened, allowing private foreign investment and *cuentapropismo* with a delimited amount of private property to diversify the market of goods and services, but without contemplating a political reform. This is roughly the present trend.

A third scenario would come about if the Cuban revolution were to emerge from the general crisis of its economy and the pandemic with a leadership vacuum in the government, while the United States government punishes Cuba for supporting Venezuela. This could even be accompanied by a social explosion, in which most Cuban citizens would protest,

asking for regime change and an open economy. Cuba's current situation makes this scenario unlikely.

For Venezuela, a first scenario would entail President Maduro staying in power through applying more coercive mechanisms, with a low probability of regime change. The economic crisis would worsen; the opposition would increase significantly, both internally and internationally; and, together with the Catholic Church and other sectors of civil society (trade unions, NGOs), they would continue to criticize and challenge the regime through international and domestic initiatives. This is the present trend.

A second scenario would be based on the possibility that Maduro's government might lose definitively its internal and external support, ushering in regime change. For example, a political transition might take place via a new presidential election under the surveillance of the international community. This scenario could occur.

In a third scenario, a military coup might take place, together with humanitarian assistance, backed by the United Nations, or backed by an American-led military intervention. This scenario is unlikely.

Still an Alliance

Despite their ups and downs, Venezuela has continued to support Cuba, and Cuba has continued to support Venezuela. On January 1, 2018, on the 59th anniversary of the triumph of Cuba's revolution, Nicolás Maduro issued a *comunicado*, congratulating Cuba on its achievements. He emphasized that the two revolutions were linked "by the emancipatory legacy of Martí and Bolívar, and they have sealed their indissoluble alliance with Hugo Chávez and Fidel Castro's historical embrace. The union of our revolutions yielded historic fruits in the construction of ALBA, Petrocaribe, and the Latin American Economic System (Sistema Económico Latinoamericano, SELA). It has been at the vanguard of the struggle for a multipolar world and will continue to grow deeper" as their new economic, political, social, and cultural projects will result in the well-being of the rest of the world (Maduro 2018).

However, 2017 saw Venezuela's GDP contract by around 20%, while inflation rose to 2,500%. Venezuela continues to rely not only on its oil reserves but

also on its substantial natural resources in iron ore and natural gas, as well as its economic collaboration with and assistance from Cuba, Russia, and China. It hopes it will get through the current difficult stretch until the time when the price of oil rebounds on the world market. However, as economist Anabella Abadi-M. (2017) has underscored, the present economic crisis in Venezuela is not the result of the fall in the world market price of crude oil but predates it. Thus, an unexpected increase in the price of crude oil would give Venezuela's government much needed oxygen, but to really overcome the present economic crisis would require profound reforms of the economic model.

Despite their unwavering mutual support, tensions and conflicts now exist between Venezuela and Cuba. The sources of conflict are various. One, the amount of oil that Venezuela sends to Cuba declined steeply in 2019—from 110,000 bpd in 2012 to only 43,000 bpd in 2019—close to a 60% decline. Moreover, shipments of Venezuelan oil now seldom arrive on time. Two, the number of Cuban professionals under contract to work in Venezuela is now only 22,000 workers, down from 51,000 at its peak. Third, Venezuela's investments in Cuba have stopped completely. Fourth, two-way trade between the two countries has declined substantially. While in 2014 the two-way exchange of goods surpassed \$7.3 billion, by 2016 it was only \$2.2 billion. In 2018, Venezuela again became Cuba's largest trade partner. Since then, China has alternated with Venezuela for that position. Last, Havana worries about the deteriorating relations between Caracas and Washington, while in Latin America aversion to Maduro continues to grow.

In 2018, Raúl Castro recognized the critical situation in which the Cuban economy found itself, given the destruction brought by hurricane Irma, the low world price for nickel and sugar, the lack of financial liquidity, the low productivity of Cuban enterprises, the economic crisis in Venezuela, and the deterioration in its relationship with the United States. In 2019, the Cuban economy grew by only 0.5%. The United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America (Comisión Económica para América Latina

y el Caribe, CEPAL) projected that the Cuban economy would decline by -3.7% in 2020 (according to The Economist Intelligence Unit, by -8.3%) (Mesa-Lago 2020).

A real political reform is not on the agenda, only a continuation of current policies and political structure. And the government continues to lack an economic policy strategy that can lift it out of stagnation. As Mesa-Lago (2019b) recently characterized it, the condition of the Cuban economy is dismal. In his analysis of the economy after six decades of revolution, Mesa-Lago showed that it has always been an economy dependent on external partners: first on the United States (52% of total exports); then on the USSR (72% of exports), and then on Venezuela (44% of exports). At its peak in 2012, Venezuela's annual trade of goods and services with Cuba was \$16 billion or 21% of Cuba's GDP. By 2017, however, it was half that amount, \$8 billion or 12% of GDP. Carmelo Mesa-Lago and Pavel Vidal-Alejandro (2019) assess this decline to be one of the key causes of the economic crisis at present in the island.

Similarly, sugar used to be the mainstay of the Cuban economy (75% of exports and 22% of GDP). Sugar was replaced by exports of human services—health workers (80% of exports and 12% of GDP), treating these professionals as a commodity. The one bright spot is remittances, which increased from virtually none prior to the special period to the current \$3.5 billion, the second most significant source of hard-currency revenue, after the export of professional services. And population growth fell from 2.1% to -0.2%, through a combination of low fertility and migration. In fact, the island has the oldest population in the Western Hemisphere (Mesa-Lago 2020, Mesa-Lago and Pérez-López 2013).

These were profound changes. Constant has been Cuba's "incapacity to generate appropriate, sustainable growth, and to finance imports without substantial foreign aid-subsidies," Mesa-Lago (2019a) underscored. Even focusing on just the new millennium, an abysmal picture is evident. In 2006, Cuba's GDP growth was 12.1%; by 2009, it had declined to 1.4%. It remained quite low thereafter, fluctuating around 2.0%; it declined to zero in 2014,

up to 4.4% in 2015, and again declined thereafter, reaching close to only 1.0% in 2016 and 2017. The inefficient nature of the economic model—centralized planning and state enterprises that predominate over the market, together with collectivized agriculture—can be seen in that if one takes 1989 (before the Soviet Union disappeared and the start of the "special period") as the base year, most economic indicators are now below that base. For example, in 2018–19, the output of sugar was 82% below that of 1989. Likewise, in the key sectors of agriculture, cattle, and fishing, output in 2018 was well below the 1989 level.

Throughout this paper, we focused on the changes in Cuba's and Venezuela's economies, their economic history over the course of the two revolutions. This is particularly apt since in both societies their socialist and communist ideology resulted in a massive restructuring of their economic life. As Sewell (2010:147) pointed out, the historical study of economic life has had a strange career. Precisely in the years since 1980, when globalization, deindustrialization, repeated financial crises, and soaring economic inequality should have made obvious "the need for a deeper historical understanding of modern capitalism's dynamism and perversity, historians have largely abandoned the historical study of economic life while economists turned economic history into a branch of mathematical development economics." Sewell concludes that at this time, when transformations of economic life are indeed having powerful, even determinative effects on our own contemporary history, historians (and, we would add, other social scientists) can "construct a more powerful and meaningful history by re-embracing the study of economic life." Sewell concluded that we should use the analytical tools of history to investigate the *longue durée* of capitalism. We concur, and add that we should also use the analytical tools of all the social sciences "to investigate the constraints, the compulsions, the enablements, and the long-term dynamics" (2010:166) that shaped not only capitalist societies for the past four centuries but also socialist and communist societies for now over a century. We hope our study contributes to this goal.

In the end, Cuba's and Venezuela's contemporary crises run so deep that we cannot say (as people often do, when alluding to a particular crisis) that they are at a crossroads. The image simply no longer applies. Rather, we think that a better image is to note that they are standing at the edge of a precipice. This leaves us with a question: How is it possible for their governments to continue to hold onto power in the face of these deep-seated crises? The answer must be that they cannot.

Many argue that both governments could engage in economic reforms that would encourage their citizens' economic enterprises. Yet economic improvements may only come about as the result of a political transition. In this regard, Efraín Velázquez's (2021) recent call for a multilateral approach seems

sensible, including international actors close to Cuba and to Venezuela, such as Norway, Spain, Turkey, Russia, and China. Such was the case in the mid-1980s of the Contadora-Esquipula experience—a multilateral initiative launched by Colombia, Mexico, Panama, and Venezuela to deal with the military conflict in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala, that sought to limit U.S. military presence and perspective in addressing the problem. Over numerous meetings, such a multilateral group did not call for total surrender of forces opposing regional governments, as has Donald Trump's administration, but brought new, positive proposals to the table to solve the violent Central American conflict. Together, they achieved peace in Central America and could reach peace in Cuba and Venezuela.

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