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Time for a Freedom and Solidarity Agenda for Cuba

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May 20 marks 110 years of Cuba's independence from Spanish rule and America's temporary occupation of the island. It also marks more than 53 years since Cuban revolutionaries—led by Fidel Castro (1927–) and his brother Raul (1930–)—toppled the Batista regime and installed a one-party, Communist dictatorship on the island. The revolutionary generation of the Castro brothers is on the verge of extinction. A difficult period of succession or transition looms. Failure to stand with the advocates of genuine economic and political change in Cuba and to press for a policy of true transition and genuine democracy could condemn yet another generation of Cubans to lives without freedom, opportunity, or hope.

Designing a Succession Scenario. The object of the Cuban

regime under Raul Castro is to engineer a succession capable of carrying Cuba's revolutionary model forward into the post-Castro era. The succession model will reserve political power and central control of the economy for the dictatorship and its supporters while reducing the scope of the state's role in the economy. The regime calculates that it will be able to survive future economic tests by allowing a closely regulated private sector comprised of small-scale farmers, service providers, and the self-employed. There are currently 181 carefully prescribed categories, none of which involves larger enterprises, information technology, or professional services.

The Castro regime also looks to foreign investment, concessional loans, remittances from the U.S. (now estimated to be as much as \$500 million annually), and future oil revenues to help it survive. The future of the subsidy provided by Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, estimated to be as large as \$9 billion to \$10 billion annually, is rated uncertain, given Chavez's current battle with cancer. The regime has also hinted that emigration to the U.S. and other countries may also be another tool for alleviating pressure because of Cuba's persistent

economic crisis. It also hopes the Obama Administration will further loosen trade and travel restrictions to shore up the system.

While Raul Castro's economic reform measures appear substantial in comparison with the failed policies of the past, their potential for ensuring a smooth succession are dubious. Core problems that negatively impacted Cuba's economic performance for decades remain. The persistent enemies of future Cuban prosperity are: a complete lack of economic freedom; an inefficient, antiquated command economy; a parasitic, rent-seeking, military-dominated bureaucracy; massive corruption; and the lack of an independent judiciary, rule of law, or sanctity of contract.

No Political Reform. On the political front, there are no signs of a democratic transition or any liberalization. In January 2012, Raul defended Cuba's one-party dictatorship, saying, "Giving up the principle of one party would simply amount to allowing the party or parties of imperialism on national soil." Marino Murillo, a vice president and key economic figure, did not parse words. In March 2012, during the Pope's visit, with many optimistically envisioning a changing polity, Murillo stated,

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“In Cuba there will not be political reform.”

The regime’s unwillingness to make political liberalizations is most evident in the severe repression that faces all members of the opposition. During the first four months of 2012, there have been 1,915 politically motivated arrests. Most bothersome to the U.S. government is the arrest of Alan Gross, the USAID subcontractor arrested in December of 2010 for providing communication equipment to Jewish groups. The Cuban government clings to power through its iron fist and is ultimately petrified of Cubans exchanging information with the outside world.

A Policy of Solidarity with the Cuban People. The fundamentals of U.S. policy toward Cuba must continue to aim to restore the Cuban people economic, political, and human rights that empower them to determine the island’s future destiny. Economic and political freedoms cannot be divorced. In short, U.S. policy must look to transition, rather than succession and permanence, for Cuba’s persistently totalitarian model. U.S. policy should therefore:

Pursue a policy that offers no accommodation and no appeasement of a dictatorial regime in Cuba. The Obama Administration must uphold the right of the Cuban people to democracy and refrain from measures that enrich the Castro regime and its loyalists without empowering the citizens of Cuba to take charge of their country.

Back genuine economic transformation. The less continuity Cuba has with the Communist system, the greater the likelihood of robust economic, social, political, and cultural development. Economic and political freedom must move forward together.

Continue to challenge Cuba’s information blockade. Explore creative strategies and technologies aimed at ending censorship and informational controls in Cuba.

Establish clear and consistent yardsticks for democratic change, to include:

■ **Independent political parties.**

The Cuban Communist Party monopolizes all government positions, judicial offices, and public services. While a small number of non-Party members have been permitted to serve in the National Assembly, the Communist Party must approve their candidacies. Independent political parties like the Cuban Social Democratic Party are considered illegal, as well as all other political associations and coalitions. Opposition members are harassed and persecuted.

■ **Free and fair elections.** While Cuba technically holds periodic local and parliamentary elections, the elections are shams, because only Communist Party members are allowed to run, along with a small handful of approved independent candidates. Opposition candidates are not permitted on ballots, nor are citizens afforded the opportunity to contest. The political system must open to provide for the legal existence of opposition parties and permit free and fair elections administered by an independent electoral body and open to international and domestic observation.

■ **Freedom of information and expression.** In Cuba, the government keeps strict control of all forms of media and communications, including radio, television,

newspapers, and the Internet. Independent information that threatens the regime is considered contraband and deemed illegal to produce or receive. Equally, the Cuban government regularly arrests, detains, and harasses independent, peaceful activists, such as the Ladies in White, who seek to express their discontent with the regime. The Cuban government treats independent journalists and human rights activists with notable harshness. While the Castros have permitted a small amount of expression via online blogs, the vast majority (roughly 95 percent) of Cubans neither see that commentary nor create it themselves: Internet penetration in Cuba is estimated to only be between 3 percent and 5 percent, and the hourly cost for a connection often exceeds the average Cuban’s monthly salary.

■ **Freedom of association.** In March of this year, more than one thousand Cubans reported cases in which state security and police prevented or disrupted civil society meetings, using house arrests, short-term detentions, and checkpoints around planned meeting sites. The government continues to regularly employ organized mobs to humiliate activists and interfere with peaceful assembly. Private enterprises in Cuba are strictly limited by law, and the single trade union system persists with neither genuine collective bargaining nor the important right to strike.

■ **Respect for human rights.** The Cuban constitution makes dissent a crime. Through the “Dangerousness Law,” the regime can arrest and imprison people

who have not committed a crime, but who are suspected of planning to commit a political crime in the future. It is through this law that most political prisoners and dissidents are sent to jail. Not only do all existing political prisoners and dissidents need to be released, but the Dangerousness Law needs to be abolished. International organizations such as Amnesty International and the Red Cross should be allowed to regularly

observe human rights conditions, and other global organizations should be allowed to test Cuba's rule-of-law standards against international standards.

Bringing Cuba into Prosperity.

As the U.S. grapples with the persistent challenge of setting a course for the future in its relations with Cuba, it should pursue policies that will assist and welcome a free, democratic, and prosperous Cuba into the

ranks of market-friendly, democratic Western Hemisphere states.

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