

Communist leaders fail to attract younger Cubans

Cuban leaders are desperately trying to win over disinterested young people across the nation.

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PASSING TIME: Youngsters hang out in Havana recently. Studies found that 60 percent of Cuba's unemployed are young people, and they are losing interest in education.

As a 24-year-old Havana potato vendor who makes \$10 a month -- double if he finds side jobs -- Ricardo doesn't have anything against communism or Fidel Castro.

He would just like some extra money to replace his shabby tennis shoes or even buy a car. A diabetic who appreciates Cuba's free healthcare, he says that even with the boost to his \$6-a-month wage from last year, his income just isn't enough.

"The only bad thing here is the salary system . . . With capitalism, we'd have to work harder to pay for everything. I'd have to pay for my medicine," he said before adding, "I'd like the same system, but I just want to earn more."

Therein lies the problem for the Cuban government, which acknowledges that it has largely failed to capture the hearts of the nation's nearly five million Cubans under the age of 30. In a country where 70 percent of the 11 million people has known no other leader except Fidel Castro, the government is keenly aware of the challenge that lies ahead.

With the 80-year-old Castro ailing and his 75-year-old brother Raúl now in charge, government leaders know that many of Cuba's young people are looking forward to a new leader who can at least help them buy new shoes.

In a speech last year, Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque -- age 41 -- noted that 1.5 million of today's young adults were 10 years old when Cuba's economy virtually imploded with the end of Soviet subsidies in 1991, so they know little of the island's pre-Castro struggles.

They don't know, Pérez Roque said, what it is to pay half your salary for rent or to go to college only if your parents can afford it.

"We have a challenge," Pérez Roque said. "These young people have more information and more consumer expectations than those at the start of the revolution. . . . Sometimes I am sure that when you speak of [free healthcare and education], many of them say, 'Oh, please, don't come to me with that same old speech.' "

Many young people, he added, turned to "negative" activities.

A 2000 report by the Center for Youth Studies in Havana said 60 percent of the unemployed are young people. Blaming the U.S. trade embargo, another of the center's reports last year acknowledged that youths were losing interest in education and sometimes turned to prostitution because of the "imbalance" between what they want and what they can afford.

"There's a lot of disenfranchised youth," said Damián Fernández, on temporary leave as director of the Cuban Research Institute at Florida International University. "They have been bombarded with

propaganda of the state that they failed to believe. They don't want more voluntary work and more sacrifices."

Last year, Castro unveiled a new "social work" program -- 28,000 young people in matching T-shirts who have descended upon the nation's fuel pumps and oil refineries to crack down on widespread theft. Like the youths sent to the countryside in the 1960s to teach peasants how to read, Castro considers them as the next generation of socialists who will save his revolution.

"The government tries to combat all this tuning off with more rhetoric and more indoctrination," Fernández said. "It seems counterproductive."

Fernández said more young people are joining the Union of Young Communists, not for political allegiance but opportunism. The government says about 600,000 people are members of the party's youth branch.

"From the crib, the government dedicates itself to prepare young people to satisfy its projects," said Liannis Meriño Aguilera, director of a dissident news agency, Youth Without Censorship. "I call it fatal indoctrination through manipulative organizations. People like me who don't join are marginalized."

Meriño, 22, said young people feel they can't plan for the future with so few professional options.

"The problem with Cuban youth is very far from politics," she said by phone from the eastern province of Holguín. "This current communist government is not going to solve it. If it hasn't resolved it in 47 years, why would they be able to do it now?"

Ahmed Rodríguez, 21, co-director of the news agency, says he knows how the government can convince today's young adults.

"If the government wants to capture the hearts of the young people, all it has to do is give higher salaries that cover living expenses, democracy and freedom," he said flatly.

SPEAKING OUT

Rodríguez's and Meriño's views are unusual in that it's rare for young people to openly declare themselves in opposition to the government and risk sanctions. Several young people interviewed in Havana mostly talked about the struggle to make ends meet.

"Young people want to be able to live off their salaries," said Rodríguez, who lost his \$10-a-month job in the tobacco industry when he joined the dissident movement. "We can't buy things, we can't go out with our girlfriends.

"What are you going to do with \$10?"

Cuba's ideological struggle with youth is nothing new. In the past, Castro has cracked down on aspects of youth culture such as rock 'n' roll, long hair and tight jeans. In the late 1980s, one group of disenchanted young people dubbed *frikis* grew so disillusioned that they deliberately injected themselves with the AIDS virus, reportedly so they could live better in well-stocked health facilities set aside for AIDS patients.

The ruling Communist Party first censored rap music, but then embraced it and even organized an annual rap music festival.

In 2000, when the government was locked in a custody battle to win back rafter Elián González, Castro launched the "battle of ideas," an ideological campaign to reinforce the values of communism among the island's younger generation.

"The battle of ideas cannot be lost, and it will not be lost," Castro has said.

YOUNGER LEADERS

In recent months, the government has made efforts to promote a younger class of revolutionary leaders. A recently created Communist Party Secretariat has several members in their 40s, born after the revolution's triumph in 1959.

Elsa Falkenburger, Cuban program officer at the Washington Office on Latin America, said those new leaders are bound to make changes to benefit the nation's young.

"As things progress from Fidel to Raúl to whoever comes after, there's a different feeling," Falkenburger said.

"There is a different generation that can't help but bring that perspective, in choosing which policies they hope to see for their future."

Dissident Damarys García Antúnez, 24, said most young Cubans are taking a "wait and see" attitude with the government's new leadership.

"These are decisive moments for Cubans. The young people are trying to see what change this will bring for their lives," García said by phone from the central city of Villa Clara. "That change is within us. We have to take the step forward and show we can do it."

"We need young people to wake up."