

# Cubans wary of quick change

The Miami Herald  
Sep. 14, 2006

Omar Martínez earns \$11 a month as a government sailor, putting extra food on his family's table by preparing tamales that his wife sells door-to-door.

But while Martínez wishes he could earn more and have a better life, he says he's not ready for Cuba to abandon the island's communist system and its free education and healthcare to move toward a free-market economy.

"We don't earn a lot here, but the free stuff helps offset the low salaries," Martínez said. "We have a peaceful life here. I can walk around at night. The kids can play in the street. In the United States, you earn more, but you have to pay more for everything. It's a more stressful life."

After decades of government propaganda detailing the evils of capitalism and highlighting the achievements of communism, many Cubans like Martínez seem acutely aware of their system's profound shortcomings, yet remain wary of capitalism.

Under harsh controls that punish open critics of the government and ban a free press and opposition political parties, it is difficult for the island's 11 million people to express their true sentiments. In interviews, most decline to give their surnames.

But with Fidel Castro ailing and the Bush administration offering support for a shift toward democracy and open markets, such concerns about capitalism might help explain why the island has remained calm in the wake of Castro's surrender of power to his brother Raúl, at least temporarily, for the first time in 47 years.

## 'DESIRE FOR CHANGE'

"A lot of Cubans would like to see change, but they don't necessarily want another revolution," said Philip Peters, vice president of the Lexington Institute, a Virginia-based think tank. "There's a lot of desire for change, but at the same time, there's fear that they might lose some of the things they have."

Topping the list, Cubans said, are free healthcare and education, Castro hallmarks that have given the island some of the best education and health statistics in Latin America -- although both have been eroding since the end of Moscow's subsidies.

Cubans also don't pay taxes, unless they are part of the tiny minority allowed to run such small private businesses as home-based beauty parlors or restaurants known as *paladares*, which can legally have no more than 12 chairs.

A bartender named Ernesto in central Havana expressed his concern about the prospect of capitalism: "What happens if you get sick and don't have health coverage? You could die."

## **`SELF-EMPLOYMENT'**

To be sure, Cuba does have some measure of capitalism.

After the near-collapse of the economy following the loss of massive Soviet subsidies in the early 1990s, Cuba began allowing so-called "self-employment," such as the *paladares* and farmers markets where prices are largely set by supply and demand. Privately produced clothes and paintings are now on sale at an open-air market in Old Havana.

But the self-employed Cubans must pay heavy and fixed taxes, even during slow business times, and their number has shrunk significantly over the past 10 years.

With low government wages estimated to cover about a third of a family's expenses per month, many Cubans must hustle -- mostly by pilfering from their workplaces or doing off-the-books work -- to make ends meet.

A man named César said he earns \$12 a month working in a government-owned food warehouse. Asked how he can survive on such a low wage, he laughed and replied, "Well, we don't lack for food in my household."

Antonio Jorge, a professor of economics and international relations at Florida International University, said the experiences in Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall might provide a guide for what type of economic system Cubans might favor if given a choice.

The elderly and the less-educated in Eastern Europe proved most resistant to change away from communism, Jorge said, while the younger and better-educated were more willing to embrace the new opportunities to prosper.

## **FITS PROFILE**

Ismael, for example, seems to fit that profile. He's 44 and has an electrical engineering degree from the former Soviet Union but can't find a decent job in his field in Cuba. He manages a store for \$14 a month.

"I welcome the opportunities you'd have with a capitalist system," he told The Miami Herald. "I have the background and training to do well."

But other Cubans undoubtedly feel like Georgina, a woman in her 50s who lives in Old Havana, the colonial-era heart of the capital. "I'm afraid I wouldn't cut it and would be left on the street. Here, the state protects you," she said.

## **CONTROLS MEDIA**

Cuba's government-controlled media have reinforced those fears, perennially publishing and broadcasting reports about the poverty in the United States and elsewhere.

"The Cuban media highlights dislocations from capitalism in Latin America: the strikes, the layoffs, the economic turmoil," Peters said in a telephone interview.

The years of unremitting propaganda might explain why some Cubans seem incapable of comprehending open economies, let alone grasping their problems and appreciating their benefits.

### **'INCOME INEQUALITY'**

On a recent day, a chiropractor named Vicente blasted capitalism, saying, "People go hungry in the United States, and there's great income inequality."

But he then mentioned that he has a brother in New York who emigrated in 1980 and now owns a trucking company. The brother sends Vicente \$100 a month -- making him part of the estimated 30 percent of the island's population that receives cash remittances from relatives and friends abroad.

So how does Vicente square his stated preference for the communist system with his benefiting from the remittances sent by his capitalist brother?

"He doesn't get his money from capitalism," Vicente said. "He gets it because he works hard."

Government propaganda has also exploited the fear that capitalism would allow exiles to recover homes seized by the government and then turned over to other Cubans.

"Cubans are terrified that their homes will be taken away by exiles when they come back," said Carmelo Mesa-Lago, a retired economics professor from the University of Pittsburgh. "Housing conditions may be terrible, but this is all they have."

In that same vein, a visitor might be taken aback at the meager lifestyle visible in Cuba -- the shortage of modern cars and many foodstuffs, the lack of air conditioning despite stifling heat or the kids playing baseball in the streets with a bottle cap and broomstick.

### **'BASICS IN CUBA'**

But many Cubans say they appreciate the simple life of knowing their neighbors and knowing that neighbors sitting on their doorsteps can keep an eye on their children playing in the car-free streets.

"You get the basics in Cuba," Paolo Spadoni, a visiting assistant professor at Rollins College in Central Florida, said in a telephone interview.

"Sometimes you tend to value what you have because it's what you can count on," Spadoni said.