

# Castro's Iron Fist Suggests a Brittle Grip on Power

By William M. LeoGrande

William M. LeoGrande is dean of the School of Public Affairs at American University in Washington.

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Why, after several years of tolerating a gradual increase in dissent, did Fidel Castro order the arrest of 75 opposition leaders? Some in Washington surmise he wanted to derail the campaign to relax the U.S. embargo because the United States is too good an enemy to lose.

Castro has proved adept at turning Washington's hostility to his political advantage over the years, but this crackdown — the worst in decades — is first and foremost a response to fears about Cuba's domestic stability. The economy is deteriorating, discontent is rising and the fledgling opposition has shown surprising strength.

Last year, the Cuban economy dipped into recession for the first time since 1994. The downturn was because of the slump in international tourism after 9/11, the drastic downsizing of Cuba's sugar industry and a fall-off in remittances sent by Cuban Americans in Florida.

In the past, economic hardship has been a bellwether of discontent in Cuba. The Mariel boatlift of 1980 was preceded by recession, as was the rafters crisis of 1994. The rafters crisis was also accompanied by a series of hijackings and the first overtly anti-government demonstrations since 1961. The recent wave of hijacking attempts — 29 in the last two months — indicates that discontent and migration pressures are rising in tandem with the economy's decline.

These developments come at a particularly dangerous time. Domestically, Castro's government has been losing its grip on civil society because of the economic and social changes forced on Castro after the Soviet collapse. Organized opposition was nonexistent a decade ago.

Last year, however, Cuba's small dissident movement surprised everyone by collecting more than 11,000 signatures on the Varela Project's petition demanding democratic reform. The dissidents' ability to mobilize people far beyond their own numbers suggests a strength greater than any opposition Castro has faced before.

Internationally, the U.S. war on terrorism has produced the policy of unilateral preemption, wherein Washington arrogates to itself the right to wage war against potential adversaries regardless of international opinion. To Castro, who has been

the object of U.S. efforts at regime change for 44 years, this is ominous.

No one in Washington thinks Cuba is currently high on the list of countries slated for regime change by force; Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld recently ruled out intervention in Cuba — unless it acquires weapons of mass destruction. But as Castro knows perfectly well, Cuba remains on the State Department's list of "terrorist states," and for more than a year, administration hard-liners have been claiming Cuba has a biological weapons program. So the casus may not be quite belli, but Rumsfeld's disclaimer cannot give Castro much solace.

Though U.S. forces have not yet embarked for another charge up San Juan Hill, Washington is committed to a rapid end to Castro's rule. Since the passage of the Cuban Democracy Act in 1992, Washington's preferred means for promoting regime change has been support for dissidents. The 1996 Helms-Burton law authorizes U.S. aid to democratic and human rights groups in Cuba, and President Bush, in his "Initiatives for a New Cuba" speech a year ago, reaffirmed that policy.

In recent months, James Cason, the new head of the U.S. diplomatic mission in Havana, has taken a much more aggressive stance in support of the dissident movement than did his predecessor. He invited leading opposition figures to use his residence and diplomatic offices for strategy meetings, and he appeared with them publicly, endorsing their work.

Perhaps Cason thought a very public embrace would somehow shield the dissidents from government reprisal. Instead, it proved to be the kiss of death. Castro's response was to decapitate the dissident movement by arresting most of its leaders and sentencing them to long prison terms on grounds that they conspired with the U.S.

Washington's embrace enabled prosecutors to portray the defendants as U.S. agents, thereby branding dissent as equivalent to treason. Not only has the government demolished the dissident movement, it has also sent a clear warning to others who might, in these hard times, be tempted to voice opposition to Castro's leadership.

With these arrests, the Cuban government is trying to project an image of strength and implacable determination to resist U.S. pressure, but the message received in Washington may be just the opposite. A regime so worried about a few dozen nonviolent opponents looks like a regime fearful of its own fragility and vulnerable to increased pressure.

Unwittingly, Castro has given the most aggressive members of the Bush administration and the Cuban American right a powerful new argument for moving Cuba to the top of the list for regime change by force of arms.

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