

Beyond the SON and Sand



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Photographs of Cuban dissidents are displayed in the window of the Cuba tourist office in Paris, which was occupied by the advocacy group Reporters sans frontières, April 4, 2003. (Photo: AFP)

We are standing on Raúl Rivero's balcony, smoking pungent Cuban cigarettes, watching the sun set over the dilapidated rooftops of El Cerro, a central, working-class neighborhood in Havana. Cuba's capital seems much like the cliché: Loud music blares from every window and porch; women dance between potholes and debris; men lean against elegant, decrepit, European-style facades. Boys play baseball in empty lots, hitting cloth-and-tape balls with wooden sticks, and running bases between the famous jalopies of Cuba—these particular ones jacked up on blocks, cannibalized for parts, and rusting in peace.

“Cubans love Havana,” Rivero says in his raspy voice, “and Havana gives it back. It is not cruel to its people.” A hefty man, white hair, big paunch, he could pass for a retired truck driver. “Havana is noble, old, beautiful, and open. It has the heart, the soul, and the indomitable attitude of the great port cities.” Rivero, a poet and journalist, goes on. “But it has been hijacked. It has become a sort of dreadful Pyongyang, dead and deserted at night but for a few pockets of fun and luxury reserved for foreigners and the rich. And we have become a nation of servants who sing and dance at tables for them.”

Rivero is also a political dissident, openly critical of the communist regime that Fidel Castro has so craftily kept in place since 1959. “The socialist revolution has been a failure, and everyone knows it, but nobody says so publicly,” he says. “The regime survives because it is a police state. The government controls information. And it controls the citizens too, by instilling fear. We are kept hostages in our homeland, and have been promised a bright future that keeps being postponed.”

As I express surprise at hearing such hard criticism of a political regime known for silencing its critics, he shrugs. “I am just describing the situation,” he explains. “But I feel less pressure now than, say, five years ago. The stranglehold the government had on the city is loosening.”

Then Rivero adds a statement that is prophetic: “But you never know here. Things in Havana are never quite what they appear to be. Never.”

Indeed. Since March 19, Rivero has been a political prisoner. Not long after our encounter, he was arrested and thrown in jail. Rivero was part of a group of 78 dissidents charged with sedition and threatening national security who were rounded up while the world was looking the other way, at the invasion of Iraq.

The arrests, occurring after the regime had conceded a measure of liberties to citizens, are further examples of the baffling contradictions of this town: It's an Old World city in the New World, has a socialist economy that runs on U.S. dollars, is a tourist haven in a police state, and sells nostalgia to visitors—while promising citizens a better future.

This latest sweep against dissidents sent ripples through diplomatic and intellectual circles. At first, though, the street in Havana seemed to take it all in stride. “We have seen that happen before,” said a friend who lives here. “Besides, we knew it was coming. The heat had been on for a few weeks. First, they cracked down on drugs in nightclubs, then on *jineteras* (Havana's famous hookers), then on all those trying to make private money. It figured the dissidents would be next.” Then, weeks after the rest of the world learned about it, the news broke in Cuba of the dissidents' sentences—up to 28 years in jail—following lightning-quick trials. *Habaneros* were stunned into silence.

Havana is too beautiful, too romantic, and just too plain cool to look or feel like a gulag. Waves crash and spill over the Malecón, the spectacular, if derelict, ocean drive, next to fortresses from which real cannons have shot at real pirates. The city has a rich Spanish colonial heritage, vast expanses of ornate buildings. Many are crumbling or have collapsed.

Other things one does not see in Havana also create a powerful impression. Very little electric light at night, so the stars shine between rooftops. Few major arteries, and very little traffic. No neon signs, floodlit gas stations, or fast-food joints, and none of the smoked-mirror, postmodern towers that make the world look the same from Kuala Lumpur to Istanbul.

Instead, Havana has the old American cars—it's impossible to ignore a sprawling, red-and-cream '58 Edsel convertible—and the soundtrack: mambo, salsa, cha-cha, and son. Much of it was long-dead folk stuff for locals, but the music is now *de rigueur* in every cafe and park, thanks to the planetary success of the Buena Vista Social Club.

For tourists, Havana is pure '50s revisited, and they love it. Close to 2 million tourists visit Cuba annually, mostly from Canada and Europe. Many escape from resorts in Varadero or Cayo Largo for only a day or two in Havana, so they can be excused for believing that their salsa-dancing, rum-soaked, retro-cool good time was the real thing. Hang in a bit longer, though, and you will hear “Guantanamo” played once too often; your gaze will meet that of a Cuban who will tell you, silently: Welcome to Havana, where real life is not as it appears.

In their day-to-day existence, *habaneros* don't smoke US\$10 Cohiba cigars and don't drink rum-and-mint mojitos in celebration of Ernest Hemingway. Instead, they smoke cheap, strong Viceroy cigarettes, drink straight brown rum, and listen to kitschy Latino pop on Miami radio. Mostly, they spend their days hatching plans to lay their hands on dollars—real, post-revolutionary, certified yanqui dolares.

The collapse of the Soviet empire a decade ago left Cuba's economy in dire straits. Castro's response was to speed up the development of joint ventures with foreign capitalists. Only the state has the right to play the capitalist game. Cuba deals with investors and visitors at an artificially inflated exchange rate of one peso equaling US\$1. But for ordinary Cubans, the rate is

25 pesos to the dollar. Cuban nationals and foreigners live side by side, but are not to mingle. Highway tolls are US\$2 for *extranjeros*, two pesos—8 cents—for locals. The few Cubans who could afford hotels are not allowed to go to them. Foreigners are forbidden to frequent the so-called peso bars or to hire the jalopy taxis reserved for locals.

But one part of this system went awry. In 1993, the government made it legal for ordinary Cubans to hold U.S. dollars. The response was an instant black market. “Laying their hands on dollars has become a constant obsession, almost a national sport,” says a French diplomat. “They can be very clever at it.”

They may be clever, but they’re not crooks. At least that’s what my new buddies, Peter and Ernie, tell me as we drink espressos and rum in a peso bar. (Their real names are Pedro and Ernesto, but it’s cool to sport an English name in Havana.) “We are not criminals,” says Peter. “Everywhere else, ours would be considered normal business. You just can’t feed your family otherwise.” Adds Ernie, “We have a saying here: He who steals from a thief gets 100 years of leniency.” They tell me how Cuba’s underground economy works. “Simple: Things fall off the truck,” says Ernie. “The rest can be had *por la izquierda*—through the left hand.”

Cubans are always stealing from their employer, which is almost always the state. Bags of cement, rice, coffee, kegs of rum, cooking oil, steak, or lobsters (reserved for tourists) fall off the truck and are retailed on the street. The “left hand” provides by diverting services from their initial purpose. A driver filling up his truck will fill an extra jerry can on his employer’s credit card. Cabbies who pick you up on the fly don’t start the meter. Private cars play taxi. The teacher calling in sick to serve as interpreter for foreigners, the cop ignoring the *jinetera*. Customs officials who don’t inspect the bags of visiting Miami Cubans for forbidden items like computers, books, or satellite dishes.

Clandestine bars, restaurants, rooms by the hour or day, tourist “guides,” hookers—all are doing booming, illegal business in hard currency. “‘Black market’ does not have the connotation we give it back home,” says one Canadian living in Havana. “In Toronto, we think drugs or hot stereos, but here, someone says, ‘Psst! Wanna buy potatoes?’”

Because money fuels individualism—and that’s anti-revolutionary and seditious in Cuba’s official books—many say the introduction of the dollar marked the beginning of the end of the Castro regime. Oscar Espinosa Chepe, an economist and dissident, told me before he, too, was arrested in the March roundup, that so-called dollarization has divided Cuba into haves and have-nots. “If you are an honest party member, you are poor,” he says. “If you have an uncle in Miami, or take your clothes off for tourists, you are rich. That is quite removed from the initial, revolutionary ideal.”

A maid, a whore, a potato smuggler are much richer than a teacher paid 400 pesos—US\$16—a month. Back to black marketeers Peter and Ernie. Peter used to teach Russian—not a hot subject nowadays—and Ernie was a technician. Cuba’s self-congratulatory education system has produced tens of thousands of such skilled workers who now work in the alternate economy. Ernesto says: “We have been promised a shining future for too long. Now we are just longing for The Change.”

In Havana, no one ever mentions the name of Castro in public, or says he wishes the president would die soon. Instead, people casually refer to waiting for The Change—and it is understood that The Change will not happen until the Lider Maximo, now 76, joins Lenin, Stalin, and Che, wherever they may be.

How does one bring change in a self-proclaimed revolutionary, but totalitarian, regime? “We go about it by peaceful means,” answers Oswaldo Payá, currently the most famous of Cuban dissidents—which explains why he was spared in the March sweep.

Payá is the leader of the Varela Project, a petition making the rounds in Cuba, demanding such rights as freedom of association, freedom of the press, and free elections. Despite a blackout in the media and systematic police obstruction, the petition has made progress all over the island. “We know the majority of citizens secretly wants change,” Payá says. “Now, thousands have...signed their names on a public document.” Payá said this during an interview days before the March sweep. Now, most of his supporters are behind bars.

Change, Payá had added, will come about without social disruption only if it happens alongside a process of national reconciliation. “Remember,” he says, “that each Cuban family has one member in the Communist Party and one in exile, one black marketeer, and one dissident or political prisoner.”

Reconciliation has become the keyword, and signs of it have started coming from an unexpected source: the angry, influential community of exiles in Florida. Recent opinion polls there suggest that, for the first time, a majority of Cuban-Americans thinks Cubans should sort out their own future, rather than sending in the Marines.

According to many Cuban dissidents, Castro wants to see the U.S. economic embargo of Cuba maintained. “The embargo was a mistake by the Americans,” said Espinosa Chepe. “It has become Castro’s alibi to justify the repression, and his economic failure.”

Before the arrests, many investors and diplomats familiar with Cuba said that the notion of a peaceful transition to a sort of state-run capitalism, in a more open democracy, was being upgraded from mere objective to distinct possibility. Many were betting on it, investing the time and energy to establish networks that would be ready to kick into action when Cuba rejoined Spaceship Earth. But the sweep of the dissidents has put a damper on their hopes—not much business is happening at the moment, they say. The Change will have to take place first.