

A review of *Democracy Delayed. The Case of Castro's Cuba*, by Juan J. López  
(Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

In my estimation, this is a fine book, well researched, cogently argued, and elegantly written, even as I remain unpersuaded that the thesis presented therein is correct.

First, some background. Cuba or rather the Castro regime represents what statisticians call an "outlier," that is, a case that deviates from the normal pattern of like-cases. Unlike its communist sponsors in the former Soviet empire, the Castro regime did not fall with the toppling of the Berlin Wall. This fact presents a puzzle, a challenge to political scientists which cries out for an explanation. In *Democracy Delayed*, Prof. López offers a voluntarist explanation, one reducible to human choices, and hence one with practical applications. Accordingly, based on his finding, Prof. López proceeds to make policy recommendations to the United States government and the Cuban-American community designed to promote the collapse of the Castro regime.

The thrust of Prof. Lopez's argument goes something like this. Castro's dictatorship has not collapsed because, unlike what happened in what was Czechoslovakia, the former East Germany, and Rumania, the people have not taken to the streets in large numbers. Although Cubans desire a change of regime toward democracy and capitalism, they have failed to turn out *en masse* to demonstrate against the dictatorship not so much because they are afraid but because they have a low level of political efficacy. This lack of political efficacy is due to a dearth of information about the activities of pro-democracy groups and spontaneous outbreaks of protests. Castro's absolute control of the country's media apart, this lack of information is in turn primarily a function of the ineffectiveness of Radio Martí and the unwillingness of the U.S. government and the Cuban American community to support the work of pre-democracy activists, especially the production of *samizdat* literature. Therefore, if Washington really were interested in bringing down the Castro regime, then all it has to do is to make certain changes in policy with regard to Radio Martí and Cuba's opposition groups. If only Radio Martí were given the resources to overcome jamming; if only its broadcasts disseminated information about outrages perpetrated by the regime and outbreaks of discontent that periodically dot the Island; and if only dissidents were given resources to support themselves and communicate with each other and to take their messages to the population more effectively, then Cubans, upon being better informed about the courageous resistance of dissidents and spontaneous demonstrations which presently go unnoticed, will acquire a greater sense of political efficacy. Given some appropriate catalyst, even one prompted by the activists themselves, large numbers of people will take to the streets to demand political change. Faced with mass protests, the regime will not be able to repress them. If the armed forces refuse to shoot at the crowds, or Army or security units desert to the protesters, the regime will collapse, much as those of Eastern Europe did in 1989.

In support of his hypothesis, Prof. López systematically compares the Castro regime and hard-line analogues once ensconced in Prague, Berlin, and Bucharest on a number of variables extracted from the democratic transition literature, including economic deterioration, ideological decay, corruption, strength of civil society, incidence of protests, public discontent, and the level of repression. He argues that on none of these variables is the Cuban case all that different from the others. (Sui generis explanations, such as the Gorbachev factor, are also discarded.) By contrast, according to Prof. López, the one variable that sets Cuba apart is the aforementioned

lack of political efficacy and its immediate cause, namely the population's lack of information about courageous acts of resistance by pro-democracy activists and spontaneous acts of protests by ordinary laborers, consumers, or neighborhood residents. Having, in his estimation, found the answer to the puzzle, Prof. López determinedly presses its implications for policy. Along the way, he skewers the U.S. government for "preferring stability over democracy" in Cuba, proponents of lifting the embargo for allowing themselves to be blinded to the political consequences of their proposals by "the glitter of promised profits," Cuban-Americans for their "strategic myopia," and the Cuban Catholic Church for its "accommodationist" stance toward the Castro regime.

As I said at the outset, I am unpersuaded by Prof. López's book. For one thing, I would have to see the result of a comparative analysis of an even longer inventory of causal variables, singly and in combination, than the one included here. Historical parallels need exploring, too, since this is not the first time that Cuba has been an outlier. In the first third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, while just about all Spanish colonies in the Americas broke away from Madrid, Cuba did not (and neither did another island, Puerto Rico). The geographic insularity of an island may have something to do with the survival of the regime in both historical periods, enabling it to block diffusion effects which, as Prof. López acknowledges, played a part in Eastern Europe. Also, I am skeptical that lack of political efficacy trumps fear of the regime in inhibiting political protests, or that all that is required to increase the former and reduce the latter is for the United States and Cuban-Americans to implement Prof. López's recommendations. Moreover, Prague had experienced the 1968 spring and East Germany had been rocked by protests in the 1950s. These were instances of mass protests which achieved some success, thus laying a precedent for future activity. Furthermore, I am not even convinced that there are no significant differences between the Castro regime and those to which it is compared. The founder of the dictatorship, Fidel Castro, is still alive and remains in charge, but in all three of the East European regimes there had already occurred at least one change of leadership (within the Communist Party, to be sure) by 1989. In short, in my opinion much more comparative analysis, even of a raw empirical nature, remains to be done before one can be confident that every variable or combination of variables that can plausibly be considered as having an effect on the non-transition in Cuba has been taken into account.

That said, with the publication of *Democracy Delayed* Prof. López has performed a valuable service to scholars (I will leave to the policy practitioners to comment on those aspects of his study most relevant to them). In the fashion advocated by the philosopher Karl Popper, Prof. López has proposed a bold conjecture with sufficient argument and evidence behind it to lay claim to a serious hearing. At its best, the book is a model of systematic and rigorous comparative analysis that imaginatively gathers evidence from a variety of sources to establish patterns and identify deviations therefrom. The book is the work of a serious scholar, a disciplined thinker, a meticulous researcher.

If something of this quality had been published in the early 1980s with the object of understanding why El Salvador or Guatemala had not yet followed Nicaragua's revolutionary lead in order to hasten a similar outcome in those countries, I have no doubt that it would have enjoyed wide acclaim, adopted as a required text in courses offered at many campuses, and its

author hailed as both a great scholar and a brilliant strategist. Such is the leftist bias that pervades the field of Latin American studies. (See my "Dictatorships and Double-Standards: The Latin American Studies Association on Cuba" and "The Latin American Studies Association vs. the United States: The Verdict of History" both available elsewhere on this site.) But Prof. López book is titled *Democracy Delayed* not *Revolution Delayed*, and the object of his analysis is not a right-wing regime in El Salvador or Guatemala but Castro's Cuba. All too few professors are willing to risk academic ostracism or worse by challenging this regime on intellectual grounds, let alone by investigating how, as a practical matter, it would be possible to bring about or accelerate its demise. Prof. López has done it, and he has done it well and courageously.

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