

Racism in Cuba: A Task of *Democratic Change*

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One of the most interesting themes and, at the same time, most difficult and controversial is trying to seek solution for social stability in the transition processes of countries from the former socialist block and continues to be that of ethnic minorities. In East Europe, we see problems facing the country and the treatment of gypsies in Slovakia or Romania by society and a strong presence of Romanians in Hungary and vice versa demanding their rights. The same occurred in Moldavia, where they endure a separatist enclave. The three republics of the Baltic One: Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia have reached a social consensus for the continuance and inclusiveness of naturalization of Russians who currently enjoy similar and equal rights as the nationals. Also, it can be confirmed that the same thing happened with the German minority population that resides in the Czech Republic. However, this is not the case for the Crimea tartars that reside in the Ukraine.

Since slavery under the Spanish rule, all through the pro-independence fight and four decades of communist rule, the racial theme has been a constant one. It has had a constant presence that runs deep and has never been resolved. In Eastern Europe discrimination was against ethnicity or nationality, however, in Cuba the problem will have taken a racial turn and not dealing with ethnicity or nationality. In Cuba this problem leans towards the racial and is not recognized in part by the authorities on the island, opposition groups, dissidents or the exiled community. The conscience and urgency to confront with courage

and decisiveness the solution, or at least to attempt to confront this social problem, which includes democratic societies, has cost a lot of years and a lot of patience to educate the population.

Today, the racial composition of Cuba demonstrates that approximately 62 percent of the population is black or racially mixed. Thirty 30 percent of the sixty percent identifies themselves only as black. When slavery was revoked on the Island by Decree in 1886, many of the slaves already had been united with the pro-independence movement and swelled the mambí army.

At the beginning of the 20th century, a racial war shook the country. During the republican period, there was a racial undertone in Cuba's social, political or economic demonstrations. There were public places and clubs for whites and others for blacks. There were segregated parks. Living spaces for blacks were in marginal areas, without achieving marginality. Blacks had an extensive presence in the country's political life since there was a black mayor in Santiago of Cuba and representatives consisted of mulatos and a racially mixed president. When Fidel Castro came into power in 1959, he spearheaded the order of racial equality.

The questions which surfaces in regard to racial theme in Cuba are – Is there racial discrimination in Cuba? Yes. Has the race situation changed on the Island as compared to before and after 1959? The quick response is no. In 2003, at closing of the Congress of the Cuban government, officials had not recognized the errors of their administration. They affirmed that they had not achieved success in

eradicating differences in the economic and social status of blacks in the country. Currently, Cuban laws are benevolent about the punishment imposed on those who incite discrimination, spread ideas based on racial or ethnic superiority or hatred. Those who discriminate would be condemned the same as those who criticize the country's highest authorities.

According to the Penal Code or Law 62 approved in 1987 in Article 295.1 and 295.2, the penalty is deprivation of liberty for six months to two years or fines from 200 to 500 pesos. Also, Article 144.1 of the penal code establishes that disrespecting an official is punishable. The penalty is one year in jail and a fine of 100 to 300 pesos. But, Article 144.2 is specific in signaling out that if the disrespect occurs against the President of the Counsel of State of the National Assembly or members of the Counsel of State of Ministers and Representatives, the penalty is one to three years in jail. Also, this punishment is harmonious or compatible to the penalty in Article 204, if an individual defames, denigrates, or goes against the institutions of the Republic, political organizations (PCC), social organizations (CDR, FMC, UJC, CTC, OPJM) or heroes and martyrs of the country.

Could there be challenges facing blacks when the democratic changes come to the island? Undoubtedly, yes and one must recognize the challenges and analyze them. Although there is no exact data on the percentage of whites, blacks, mulattos or racially mixed persons on the island, specialists agree that the most exact figures were published in the "Cuba News Magazine", published by The Miami Herald in 1992. According to Arming H. Carry, a specialist, in 1992, 53 percent of the population was white, 35 percent black and 12 percent racially mixed. Here it is necessary to note that inside the Cuban population the phenotypes of racial definition vary in different classifications according to the skin color that can range from blue-black, telephone colored, to coco timba, cabeza de puntilla, mulatto, paper bag colored mulatto, jabao and reddish color. The percentages mentioned could vary and may have changed in a decade, with the tendency to go down

among whites who continue to emigrate from the country and, thus, augment the percentage of mulattos and blacks in the population.

If we analyze the maximum structure of the Cuban government, particularly the Counsel of Ministers, we see that is composed of a President (Fidel Castro), a vice first president (Raúl Castro), four vice presidents, a secretary and 27 ministers, 4 presidents of Institutes (Sports, Physical Education and Recreation; Civil Aeronautics; Hydraulic Resources and National Bank). In this long list of officials only one is black, Alfredo Morales Cartaya, the minister of Work and Social Security. In the Presidency of the National Assembly of the Popular Power the three highest positions (president, vice president and secretary) are all occupied by whites. On a lower scale of the hierarchy Institutional, the presidency of the 14 provincial governments and special policeman of Island of the Youth, only one president of a territorial agency is black, Alberto Olivera Fist, who heads the province of Holguín.

The political direction of the country, the Communist Party of Cuba, and specifically its Central Committee, since founded in 1965, includes a scarce but not null, presence of blacks in the elitist political command club. In October 1965, when composition of the Central Committee was read, the most noteworthy black representation was that of Juan Almeida, who has remained at the top, like a symbol. In the last Political Bureau, the top of the partisan direction which was formed in the Fifth Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba in October 1997, counted 23 members. Only four (Juan Almeida, Esteban Lazo, Juan Carlos Robinson Agramonte and Pedro Sáez Montejo) were black and one (Blas Roca) was mixed.

During the Second Congress, in 1980, the Political Bureau consisted of 16 members and was integrated. Two persons, a black (Juan Almeida) and mixed (Blas Rock) were in the previous appointment. Six years later, in 1986, the Third Congress consisted of 14 members. Juan Almeida appeared again and, with the death of Blas Rock, Estebán Lazo got appointed. The Fourth Congress took place in 1991 and the Political Bureau was expanded

to 23 members. Juan Almeida and Estéban Lazo continued in their positions but united with Pedro Ross, a mulatto.

If we analyze the presence of leaders in the working sector of the country, we see that majority members of the Secretary National of the Head Office of Workers Cuba are white. In spite of blacks, mulattos and other mixed raced groups comprising the majority of the working class, you can count the small number of blacks on one hand. The leaders of the communist party in the 14 provinces and the special policeman of Island of Pines consists of only three blacks. They are Pedro Sáez Montejo in the City of Havana, Savior Antonio Váldez Table in Camagüey and Pedro Jiménez Thorny in The Tunas.

If we start with the premise that this discrimination is part of a racist culture and was inherited from colonial times, the question becomes: why it has not been possible to eradicate racism after two generations of “revolutionaries” educated under Marxism-Leninism, when supposedly, it was a system inherited from a capitalist society. Perhaps there have been few or inefficient social plans developed in the last four decades.

In December 2002, the reputable international press in Cuba divulged the existence of a report that was distributed on the island for internal review by investigators and governmental officials. The report disclosed a study that was conducted by The Center of Anthropology, a scientific institution with the Science Department, Technology and Environment. The study results reflect a small part of the problem. In testimonies from journalists who visited the island, they noted the way racism is cruelly practiced, where the official politics of equality disappears when it leaves the text books of social proclamations or the state meetings. Also, in the journalistic series published in respect of the Inter-American Company of Press in 2003 under the title “A Black Man in Cuba” and divided into seven chapters with alluring titles such as: A black leader/chief or Be careful with the blacks! The series demonstrates more than a clinical picture of the race problem on the Island. It is an accusation on the impressive racial inequality that persists.

In stopovers and nocturnal visits to the capital neighborhoods of Colon, San Leopoldo, Key West, Jesus Maria, or Belen in Havana, they affirm that there is the notorious strong presence of neighborhood drug cartels on the streets of Mount and Cienfuegos. Close to the Capital of Havana there is a zone of tolerance for prostitution. All of these areas are populated mostly by blacks. Other questions that arise concern the reality of black population that has carried the larger number of marginalized and degraded population in comparison to whites.

On average, elites schools and pre-university such as the Vocational School Vladimir Ilich Lenin, the IPEUC Ernesto Che Guevara, the ESBE Revolution of October or Cesar Escalante in the capital, the majority of the students were white, with the exception of one or two children of black generals such as Juan Almeida, Calixto Garcia, or of ministers. Now the quantity of slums in the country have increased. Havana is the symbol of similar social. disproportion.

In a recent article, Oswaldo Payá Sardiña of the Christian Liberation Movement indicated that there is an invisible sign in the historic Helmet of the capital that says: “Habanero (person from Havana), this Havana is not for you. It has been prostituted and given out to foreign pleasure and you only are a curtain in the background. And if you are black, or dress poorly, already know that on any corner a police officer will ask you for your identification, and your money has no worth, resign yourself to look at these despotic beings that are now superior to you.” In addition, it is evident that black Cubans, have minimal access to the tourist sector. The Center of Anthropology report also emphasized that white people are 80% of the personnel that labors in the tourist sector and receives 1.6 times more than blacks and 1 time more than the racially mixed. Blacks are only 5% of the employees in the privileged economic sector.

One must emphasize, as did Cuba Mario J. Viera González, a journalist from the Cuba Voice, that as many whites as blacks suffer from the tourist apartheid. Therefore, neither black nor white Cubans are allowed inside of

Cayo Coco or Cayo Largo the most famous and tourist attractions on the island. Being that the Cuban State is the only employer on the Island, the journalist Claudia Marquez in an article about racism was asked if perhaps it is the Cuban State who applies the discriminatory politics, and in this manner institutionalizes the racism. In a magazine of exiled Cubans that is published in Puerto Rico under the title of "Letter of Cuba" they denounce the situation of Juan White Hernández, a Gastronomic worker of the Hotel Tortoise, who lost his position in the reception area of the hotel because he was black. He was the only black that worked in this tourist facility. He had seven years of experience and spoke three languages but according to the accusation the management of the hotel dismissed him to avoid complaints from the tourists. Perhaps it was preferably to employ a gaudy girl, who even though she has tanned skin, healthy teeth, and could smile and say beautiful words, although only in Spanish. White, with a similar surname she could have expected a better destiny in the Cuba of Castro. The information from "Letter of Cuba" affirms that now Juan Blanco works as a guard in the Cárdenas cemetery. In September 2001, days prior to the Summit against racism, xenophobia, and South Africa, the poet and Cuban dissident Raúl Rivero, indicated in an article published in The New Herald, the absence of the names of Cuban political prisoners. He did not know then that some months later he himself would be added to that list. Among the ones that they were then and others that now remain behind bars on the Island for political reasons, many of whom are of the black race like, Vladimiro Roca, Oscar Elías Biscet, Néstor Rodríguez Lobaina, Francisco Chaviano, Jorge Luis García "Antúnez" or Bernardo Arévalo Padrón. Rivero recalled that it was necessary for some of the non governmental organizations (such as, The Martin Luther King Memorial Center) of Cuba that attended, they showed the percentage of black or racially mixed people that comprised the penal population on the Island or are managers of Cuban/foreign businesses. The sociologist Enrique Patterson, perhaps one of the few Cuban scholars who has placed this theme

in a perspective as a debate, when interviewed in the magazine in the network Cubaencuentro, already launched the challenge to create conditions so that the Cuban black could participate from now on in a process of transition in the same conditions that the rest of the racial groups or sectors of the society. He has been a voice in the desert, clamoring for rights. According to Patterson, it is a mistake that the opposition on the island still has not presented racial demands as they have with politics or economics. In the series of reports of the Pan-American Company of Press one of the themes that stands out is the deployment of Cubans to fight in Castro's wars in Africa. Blacks were preferentially selected with the argument that the enemy could not accuse Castro of sending soldiers to Angola, Mozambique or the Congo. The pigmentation of the skin was a kind of camouflage so as not to distinguish between Caribbean and African. Before such massive aid there was a proportionally high number of black Cubans who died in those adventures on the African continent.

Ironically in 1999 in one of its interventions before the 54 General Assembly of the United Nations, in New York the Cuban ambassador Bruno Rodríguez in his speech referred to the penal population in the United States as the biggest of the world and that 50 percent of was composed of the black race. He repeated the same argument repeated it again al another year, in the 2000 before the 55 General Assembly. The penal population in the Island oscillates between 80 thousand and 100 inmates, according to data of the Cuban Commission of Human Rights and National Reconciliation. Of that figure, 88% are black or mulatto, of which the Cuban diplomat did not reference at the time. Perhaps he forgot to state that the crimes that the blacks, mulattos and racially mixed commit on the island are the most violent and spectacular, while the whites steal to be enriched, with "white collar" crimes. Still crimes are classified according to racial features. The Cuban opposition leader, Félix Bonne Carcassés, in a message that was sent to the Black Caucus in the U.S. Congress, questioned if they had at some point asked about

the Cuban penal population. The majority of the people on the streets who are required by the police to demonstrate their identity cards are of the black race. The Revolutionary National Police (PNR) yearly has recruitment campaigns for new police officers among the black population. The 2005 convocation has been slighter especially since standards have been lowered to a 9th grade education for potential recruits (in a country where the majority of those born after 1959 have finished the 12th grade), and the maximum age was increased to 40 years old. Yet the police are urged to have good diction. These are the agents of the force that detain those who do not possess an identity card and on many occasions also beat them up. The general complaint is that they do not treat whites in this manner. Does this create a big division in the black population? Yes, and there are thousands of examples that appear daily. In a report about the Island entitled "Asere (Homie), in Cuba they do not let you live," Manuel Vazquez Portal, in one of his brilliant touches about everyday life in Cuba, affirms that just being black, can cause you to end up in jail two or three times a day, only so that the police can prove that you are not delinquent and when they do they do not say sorry for the aggravation. Professor Luis Aguilar León, in one of his weekly articles in the *The New Herald*, declared that the premise, heard so many times in official Cuban propaganda and repeated to the society abroad, is that the blacks support Castro is false, or according to his expression: a "stoning ideology." The idea of racial equality was spearheaded by the Cuban government for more than four decades and this has become an affirmation without right to debate. The eradication of racial prejudices was proclaimed and the racial happiness achieved by decree. Nobody has the right to question if equality exists or not, least of all blacks. It is what Patterson, in his interview, called Cubaencuentro "the ideology of the jailer," where by the supposed one that gives the rights to blacks, which they seem not to deserve, and in case of infidelity (of the black towards Castro is always considered to be political) the right exists to take back their rights due to their disloyalty. This is the

example of the members of the 2506 Brigade, where some 50 blacks were integrated and disembarked in Cuba in April of 1961. After the failure of the invasion, the thousands of detainees were transferred to the sports complex in the capital, and there, Fidel himself interrogated them. To one of the brigade members, Tomás Cross, a black career soldier, Castro asked why would a black be with counterrevolutionary whites, didn't he know that blacks could now go to the beaches that had belonged to the whites, Tomás responded that he didn't participate in the invasion so he could swim on the beaches. Another point that makes the black situation in Cuba more difficult is the almost total absence of family bonds with the majority white exile community. The study carried out in Cuba puts forth that among 30-40 percent of whites are receiving remittances from the outside, while among the black population the figure oscillates between 5-10 percent. In very few cases, black Cubans who have relatives in Miami send dollars and are responsible for remittances. For which the Black Cuban community does not benefit from those million of dollars that yearly come into Cuban homes creating more patterns of discrimination, isolation and misery.

Racial discrimination will be an important theme that at the moment of democratic change will confront the protagonists involved in this process. One of the fundamental needs of the period of transition and of consolidation of the democracy is the creation of mechanisms and judicial instruments so that minorities are not discriminated against. It could be that they will have to resort to a kind of affirmative action or minority rights until the society has matured enough to accept the black, mulatto, and mixed race and recognize him by his merits and human condition and not by the color of his skin. The task remains ahead and the debate has to begin.