

Is the Cuban Regime on the Brink of Collapse?

Written by Luis Martínez-Fernández

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2025/09/14/is-the-cuban-regime-on-the-brink-of-collapse/>

LUIS MARTÍNEZ-FERNÁNDEZ, SEP 14 2025

In 2025, a multitude of internal and external factors have aligned, bringing the 66-year-old Cuban communist regime to its deepest crisis ever. What circumstances make the present emergency more ominous and potentially catastrophic than those of previous junctures? Which survival tools may no longer be available to President Miguel Díaz-Canel and other communist leaders? Since its establishment in 1959, the Cuban revolutionary regime has endured several moments of profound crisis which periodically have tested its survivability. Against all odds, it survived its vulnerable first three years (including the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion and US trade embargo); the socioeconomic challenges surrounding the chaotic Mariel Boatlift in 1980; the deep political and economic debacle sparked by the withdrawal of Soviet economic and military support at the end of the Cold War (1991-); the ensuing so-called Special Period with concomitant social unrest in 1993-94; and Fidel Castro's death in 2016. More recently, Cuba's communist government managed to survive unprecedented mass street protests in July 2021.

As a Cuba specialist who spent over a decade researching and writing a book on the Cuban Revolution, I have learned several lessons. Ranking high among them is avoiding predictions about the demise of the Cuban regime. But I see Cuba's current crisis as deeper, complexly multifaceted, and with fewer, if any, short-term avenues for improvement and survival. At the age of twenty, before I became a professional historian, when I saw TV news images and footage of the massive Mariel Boatlift of 1980, I naively believed that the 125,000-person exodus marked the beginning of the end of the Castro regime. While the boatlift was a blow to its international image (why would so many be so desperate to leave Paradise?) it actually strengthened the regime, pushing out tens of thousands of disaffected Cubans.

Then came the democratization wave of 1989-90. It began in Poland and soon thereafter communist regimes collapsed in Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania. Communist parties lost power in several other countries around the world from Angola and Mongolia to Yemen and Yugoslavia. And in 1992, the seemingly unshakeable bastion of communism, the Soviet Union, unraveled. Cuba certainly had to be next. How could its communist regime survive the collapse of its major benefactor and preferential trade partners?

It was 1989; I was in my late twenties, still in graduate school and believed that Cuba could not survive much longer. I commented to a visiting relative who resided on the island that "the regime would fall within a year." Her reaction and response surprised me. She was visibly angry and said "How can you say that? We cannot withstand one more year!" Thirty-six years later, to the disbelief of most Cuba observers, the Communist Party is still in control. I was not alone. Scores of scholars, journalists, and pundits wrote and spoke about the imminent fall of communist Cuba. Renowned journalist Andrés Oppenheimer authored the book *Castro's Final Hour* while exiled Cubans embraced Willy Chirino's song, "Our Day (Is Coming Soon)," as their anthem. That was not Castro's final hour and whatever was coming soon, never materialized.

Beating all odds, Cuba survived the so-called Special Period (1991-2000), its worst socioeconomic crisis since the Great Depression, by establishing draconian austerity measures and thanks to the flow of large amounts of exile remittances and foreign investments, as well as access to subsidized oil from the Hugo Chávez socialist regime of Venezuela. The massive exodus of *balseros* (rafters) of the 1990s and beyond also helped alleviate demographic pressures and avoid social unrest as manifested in the summer riots of 1993 and the larger "*maleconazo*" (seafront riot) the following year. The purge of several officers of the Interior Ministry and the Revolutionary Armed

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Forces—most notably General Arnaldo Ochoa, who was executed—further cemented the Castros' hold on power.

Cuba's economic recovery was painfully slow, never reaching pre-1991 levels. Disaffection persisted leading to the formation of numerous dissident organizations including civil rights groups like Oswaldo Payás' Christian Liberation Movement, independent journalists' associations, independent libraries and even clandestine political parties and labor unions. These and other opposition groups faced harsh repressive measures at the hands of the civilian so-called "Rapid Response Brigades" and state security apparatus.

For many, the Cuban regime and its leader, Fidel Castro, were one and the same, believing that Castro's demise would result in the regime's collapse, or at least profound transformations. Tired of listening to the same question again and again—"What will happen when Castro dies?"—in 2004, when I should have known better, I wrote the opinion column "The Day Castro Falls." Half-seriously, half-tongue-in-cheek, I speculated that his younger brother Raúl would find it difficult to remain in power. I should have left it at that but went on to predict conflicts between military and civilian authorities including the Ministry of the Interior, and the formation of a stabilizing military junta.

Suffering from serious, debilitating illnesses, in 2006, at age 80, Fidel Castro came close to dying, which forced him to yield temporary control to his younger brother. Around that time, a TV journalist came to my office to interview me on what he believed was Castro's impending death. Do not ask me why, but I obliged. Needless to say, the footage never aired. Castro lived another ten years, finally passing at age 90 in 2016. Neither his retirement from political office nor his death brought about confrontations between political and military authorities, much less civil war, nor regime change.

Equally peaceful and uneventful was the presidential transition from Raúl Castro to his finger-appointed successor, the obscure civilian Miguel Díaz-Canel, in 2018. He was 57 years old, born in 1960 like I was. The transition, however, is not complete as seven years later Castro has a hold on power largely because his influence over the military brass which he enriched when it transferred the lucrative management of most major businesses to high-ranking military officers. This is part of the new trend of oligarchic kleptocratic regimes (i.e., Russia and Venezuela). President Díaz-Canel, while counting on Raúl Castro's implacable support, lacks the revolutionary credentials of the so-called historic generation of the Castros, Che Guevara, and other original rebels, fewer and fewer of whom are still alive. Moreover, Díaz-Canel comes out as arrogant, inefficient, and lacking empathy for the average Cuban. He also serves as a lightning rod for the people's frustrations and anger, while the Castro clan evade accountability to some extent.

Fast Forward to 2021

In 2021, Cuba began one of its deepest economic crises ever. It was, more accurately, a crisis within a crisis. It responded, in part, to aggravated structural economic problems, increasingly inept and out-of-touch political leadership, the ravages of the COVID-19 Pandemic that severely harmed the tourism industry which for years had been Cuba's biggest revenue generator, and failed reforms hailing back to the Obama-era thaw. The crisis reflected the collapse of an implicit promise of Vietnam-like reforms: do not get involved in politics and let the Communist Party to rule, and we will deliver the economic goods. They never did.

In 2021, the economy registered a 70 percent rate of inflation and unprecedented unemployment levels. Cuba, once again, failed to pay its foreign loans and begged the Paris Club for extensions. The infrastructure, most notably power plants and the electric grid, were in shambles which along with fuel scarcity, produced prolonged, daily blackouts. The collapse of buildings due to decades of neglect became a daily occurrence: once called the city of columns, Havana has become a city of scaffoldings and ruins. More importantly, food and medicine became scarce to levels surpassing the worst moments of the Special Period.

On July 11, the unprecedented occurred. Thousands of Cubans engaged in street protests in Havana and sixty other towns and cities, which continued for three more days. There is every indication that the protests were spontaneous; they spread through social media and internet videos. Crowds demanded food and medicines which had become intolerably scarce. They shouted "Libertad! Libertad!" And insulted increasingly unpopular government officials,

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starting with the president, shouting his nickname, homophone to the Chinese beer Tsingao. Díaz-Canel immediately unleashed the state repressive apparatus. Rapid Response Brigades clubbed and beat up peaceful protestors. Heavily armed police arrested over 1,000 Cubans, many of whom eventually received considerable prison terms. This time around, the state deployed elite Revolutionary Armed Forces troops, which had never been used to repress civilians.

During the two weeks following the protests a total of five active or retired generals died of unexplained causes; another nine perished in the following twelve months, a statistical anomaly, to say the least. Another cluster of deaths of generals (five) took place in September 2024. Since then, food and fuel scarcities have worsened, and the quality of health, education, transportation, and medical care have deteriorated markedly. These problems, along with intensified repression spurred the emigration of over one million people during 2020-23; another quarter million followed in 2024, according to Cuban statistics. Three quarters of those who left in 2022-24 made it to the United States, largely by crossing the border with Mexico.

This massive migratory wave which has surpassed previous ones, has led to Cuba's demographic decline, the graying of its population, a decline in births, and an economically debilitating brain (and arm) drain. Actions by Nicaragua and the United States prompted unprecedented levels of emigration. In November 2021, Nicaragua—Cuba's long-time ally—dropped visa requirements for Cubans entering its territory. Nicaragua, thus, became the entry point from which Cubans travelled north to the US-Mexico border. The Biden administration immigration policies attracted hundreds of thousands of Cuban migrants. For one, in 2022 and 2023, the US reopened consular services, including issuing visas at its Havana Embassy. Also in January 2023, the Biden Administration expanded its Venezuela parole program to include Cuba, along with Nicaragua and Haiti. As of August 2024, 111,000 Cubans were in the United States under the CHNV Parole Program and another half-a-million under the auspices of I-220A temporary visas.

2025: Cuba on the Brink?

It is 2025 and by every measure the regime is closer to the brink than ever. Several interwoven factors have brought Cuba to this point. Some are old, structural problems that have been exacerbated such as food and fuel scarcities. Others are new, such as the second Trump administration's multifaceted strategy to push the communist regime into extinction. According to a recent report by the international Food Monitor Program, 25 per cent of Cubans admit to going to bed hungry; malnutrition diseases have skyrocketed. The survey also found that two-thirds of the population blame the government for worsening food shortages. According to the Program, Cuba—once the wealthiest and best-fed Caribbean nation—accounts for 5 per cent of the population but 40 per cent of the region's food insecurity cases.

Cuba imports 70 per cent of its food, ironically, most of it from the United States. It simply does not have funds nor credit to purchase more food. Neither does it have a functional system of transporting, refrigerating, or distributing foodstuffs. While state authorities blame the US embargo—which since 2000 exempts food and medicines—only 8 per cent of Cubans see the embargo as the main culprit. It does not help that Cuban leaders President Díaz-Canel, Prime Minister Manuel Marrero Cruz, National Assembly President Esteban Lazo, and other high ranking Party and Armed Forces members parade themselves sporting prominent beer bellies while the average Cuban becomes increasingly emaciated.

If food and medicine shortages are severe, it is worse with fuel, almost all of it also imported from abroad, largely oil from Venezuela, Russia, and Mexico. Cuba's fuel crisis intensified in 2024 stalling tractors, trucks, buses, and motor engines, large and small. I recently saw a video—not AI generated—of an ox pulling a bus. Heaps of trash and debris have accumulated in streets for months because there is no fuel to run trash collecting trucks. The island's decrepit power plants, moreover, are devastated as evidenced by routine breakdowns and the state's inability to repair most of them. Back in 2022, the desperate regime brought to Cuba a fleet of floating powerplants; in recent months, the last of these vessels has left Cuba because of the government's inability to pay for its services. Eighty per cent of Cuba's electricity is generated from oil. Oil scarcity has led to daily and multi-day, island-wide blackouts. There are instances of hospitals without power whose gas or diesel generators cannot be operated because there is no fuel. Lack of fuel has also impacted the water distribution system. Unbelievably, Cuba is also running out of drinking

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water.

Cuba, particularly Havana, is also enduring mounting incidents of old buildings collapsing, some of which are fatal. Four *Habaneros* died in July smashed by the rubble of two buildings. Each of these disasters pushes entire families to homelessness. Even Havana's most stately mansion, Aldama's nineteenth-century neoclassical palace, looks dilapidated. While Havana crumbles, the recently opened, forty-two story high Iberostar luxury hotel rises as the regime's middle finger to the city's impoverished dwellers. Desperate for hard currency, the government has instituted measures that have backfired. It now requires Cubans to pay in dollars for cell phones and gasoline. That is part of the increasing dollarization of the economy (going back to the now-defunct Cuba Convertible Peso), and how it has given rise to the class of "Cubanos con Fé" (*familia en el exterior*) while long-time regime supporters have to struggle because of the puny purchasing power of the Cuban peso. Recent orders prohibiting the repatriation of foreign investors' profits will most certainly lead to a dramatic drop in foreign investments, depriving Cuba of a source of support that had helped it sustain previous economic crises.

Díaz-Canel and other high-ranking officials (and their families) exhibit a growing disconnection—a let-them-eat-cake attitude—from the masses, manifested through the organization of extravagant events such as international gourmet festivals in Varadero and luxury cigar events, like the one that took place in Havana's Capitol Building in February 2025. The latter event disgusted singer and long-time regime supporter Silvio Rodríguez to the point of publicly denouncing Cuba's "loss of dignity." Some young members of the Castro clan, meanwhile, engage in exhibitionist behavior flaunting their wealth and their luxurious lifestyle through social media. Among them stand out Fidel Castro's grandson, Sandro, who is 33—the same age when Fidel Castro assumed political power in 1959. A self-styled influencer, Sandro plasters images of himself in luxury cars and yachts, drinking imported beers and prime Cuban cigars, and surrounded by bebies of bikini-clad young women. He owns luxury resorts and membership-only bars. Reflective of his utter lack of empathy, Sandro publicly mocks their wretchedness including the blackouts they endure daily. Unlike some Cuban hospitals, his bars and hotels have working electricity generators and fuel to run them.

Lieutenant Colonel Raúl Guillermo Rodríguez Castro, aka El Cangrejo (the Crab), who is Raúl Castro's favorite grandson and chief bodyguard, also flaunts his privileges and luxurious life including exotic travels and exuberant parties and banquets. He is presumed to have funded numerous US-based businesses. His close friend and alleged business partner, Jorge Javier Rodríguez Cabrera, who requested asylum in the United States in 2022, founded the Gran Azul corporation whose services include door-to-door deliveries to Cuba, shipping cars to the island, and travel packages. In July, ICE arrested him and placed him on expedited deportation process. Alejandro Castro Espín, Raúl Castro's oldest son, aka *El Tuerto* (one-eyed), has in contrast, evaded the public eye. But he plays key roles behind doors, particularly as Brigadier General of the Interior Ministry and Director of Intelligence and Counterintelligence of State Security. He also enjoys excellent relations with the military. These credentials and the Castro family mystique, make him a highly potential successor to Díaz-Canel.

The military leadership is the backbone of the regime. It is also the wealthiest estate because it administers—and profits from—GAESA, the military conglomerate that controls an estimated 70 per cent of the economy, including tourism, gas sales, transportation, banks, currency exchange, construction, real estate, and retail. Secret, leaked GAESA financial statements uncovered by the *Miami Herald* in 2024 showed a hard currency stash of approximately 18 billion dollars.

While average Cubans sink into desolation, Cuba's military elites and their relatives accumulate prodigal amounts of money, some of which they invest in their own private businesses and even in the United States, through front companies. Because of its increasing wealth, corruption, and its role in repressing July 11 protesters, in 2021, the Revolutionary Armed Forces have lost most of their prestige and public admiration. That said, the military would be the central player in any gradual or abrupt transition of power. They may very well become the oligarchy of a post-communism scenario, like what transpired in Russia.

Raúl Castro turned 94 in June, surpassing by almost twenty years the life expectancy of the average Cuban man. He had disappeared from the public eye in the summer of 2024 but resurfaced in late September when his public

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presence became essential to the stability of the regime. In 2025, he made few public appearances. And while speculation about his health continues, he gave a speech during the 26th of July national holiday. He was coherent and seemed fit for his age.

As the former leader of Cuba's military, he still commands the loyalty of the military brass over which he exerts major influence. Since he was also the architect of the leadership transition to civilian leaders like Díaz-Canel and Marrero, he stands as the regime's lynchpin by maintaining seemingly harmonious relations between the military and the state bureaucratic oligarchy. General Alejandro Castro could play this role as well. Raúl Castro's passing or severe cognitive decline, when it happens, will bring his conciliatory role to an end and likely be the catalyst for a scramble for power, including the increasingly unpopular Díaz-Canel, some of the Castro-family dauphines (including Raúl Castro's only son, Castro Espín), and the most powerful powerbroker, the military, which may split into hardline and more moderate officers.

And then we have the hurricanes, which historically have had devastating effects on the island. Further destruction of farms, housing, and the decayed infrastructure can trigger leadership changes, even a regime change. The communist regime may be one hurricane away from collapse.

Donald Trump's Total Pressure Strategy

Upon assuming power in January 2025, Trump announced a multipronged campaign to topple the Cuban regime. He further restricted trade with Cuba with a "total pressure embargo" as he put it. On January 20, he terminated the Biden Era immigration provisions that allowed over 600,000 Cubans to enter the United States since 2022. As it turned out, a substantial number of former Cuban government officials, some who had repressed, prosecuted, and incarcerated their brethren, are currently in the United States.

In response, Miami exiles are systematically composing online "repressors lists" with names, US addresses, and photographs, whose updates they regularly forward to Congressman Carlos Giménez and Congresswoman Maria Elvira Salazar, the White House, and ICE authorities. Exile leaders are also collecting signatures calling for a "parón total": banning all travel to and from Cuba and ending remittances to the island. It is important to note generational and class, and ideological divides among exiles. Many among those who established themselves in the past, oppose chaotic immigration and dislike recent arrivals, whom internet personality Otaola, derides as the "pan con bistec" (steak sandwich) generation because they left Cuba to eat well.

Not only has the Trump administration shut the migration valve, but it has also begun the systematic return of recent immigrants through self-deportation or forced deportation. Returning Cubans who must be fed, housed, and given medical care, are the last thing the Cuban government needs. Not to mention that they have temporarily enjoyed a capitalist economy and experienced freedom firsthand (a potent combination).

The Trump Administration has assembled a team of individuals who are aggressively working toward the regime's collapse. None more than Cuban American Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who is gingerly pushing Trump toward more aggressive actions. The United States' man in Havana is Chief of Mission of the US Embassy Mike Hammer. Appointed to that post before Trump took office, Hammer travels around the island to meet dissidents and families of incarcerated members to demonstrate the United States' support for their causes. Cuban officials have denounced his actions as provocations.

Trump (and Rubio) see the current juncture as an opportunity to enhance their legacies as those who finally rid the island of communist rule. While Cuba is a major priority for Rubio, something personal, it is less so for Trump. In the US foreign policy pantry, Cuba is small potatoes compared to Ukraine, the Middle East, or North Korea. Moreover, Trump's attention span is very short, and Cuba can become a priority—or not. Finally, Rubio has to tread lightly, as he faces the opposition of isolationists like VP JD Vance, who would prefer to see Rubio fall from grace and stumble on the way to the 2028 GOP presidential primaries.

Communist Cuba and Socialist Venezuela have had a symbiotic relationship since Hugo Chávez first took control of

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Venezuela in 1999, with the Castros' support. Trump and Rubio see both countries as a dyad, which should be tackled in tandem. On August 7, the US departments of State and Justice announced that they raised the ransom for Maduro's capture to 50 million dollars. Since then, Trump and government officials have launched unrelenting accusations of drug trafficking and have vowed to remove him from power. Two weeks later, the US deployed a flotilla of three destroyers, a submarine, and three amphibious vessels carrying 4,000-4,500 troops, half of which belong to a Marine Expeditionary Unit.

As I was writing the final paragraphs of this article (August 25), White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt announced that US troops were already in Venezuela. Trump gave Maduro an ultimatum that he had four days to resign. The smell of war is in the air. Trump, however, has been consistently averse to deploying US troops abroad. Invading Venezuela is a huge step that will not sit well with Trump's base and isolationist ideologues like Steve Bannon. Trump is probably considering a surgical strike (like in Iran) that will not require boots on the ground. But even that can get out of hand quickly. The seeming impending removal/resignation of Maduro from power does not bode well for Cuba, which would lose its closest ally. If, and when, Maduro is removed from power, Trump, Rubio, and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth would be emboldened to topple the Cuban regime by similar means.

Shrinking Survival Tool Kit

Having struck out with past end-of-regime predictions (1980, 1989-92, 2004), I will not engage in new specific prognostications. We may very well be surprised by yet another resurgence or transformation but several of the factors that kept the regime afloat for decades, have or are about to vanish. These include (1) bailouts by powerful nations (i.e., The Soviet Union and Venezuela); (2) suffocating foreign loans, much of which have not been repaid, with small chances of new loans; (3) foreign investments like Canadian capital in mining and Spanish capital in tourism; (4) mass exodus (i.e., the *balsero* crisis of the 1990s); (5) further austerity measures. Two mechanisms that are still applicable are: (6) political purges (i.e., General Ochoa in 1989); and (7) violent repression of the masses as during July 2021.

(1) Cuba is unlikely to receive support from any in its short list of allies: warring Russia, embattled Iran, and besieged Venezuela. Lacking funds to confront their own economic problems, they cannot afford to subsidize or support the sinking island. Cuba, nonetheless, still has friends (Mexico, Brazil, and Spain) that lend a small helping hand because of ideological affinities. It helps, but it cannot replace major donors like Russia.

(2) The external debt, last reported by Cuban authorities in 2020, stood then at nearly 20 billion dollars. Cuba continues to default on its debts which expand geometrically due to accruing interests and recurrent, devastating negative trade balances. In July, Economy Minister Joaquín Alonso admitted that the foreign debt continues to grow and had become unsustainable. After decades and billions of dollars in defaults, Cuba has earned a credit rating of 5, the lowest of any country in the world. Its credit lines are exhausted.

(3) Foreign investments are also drying up because investors have lost trust in a government that continues to change the rules and does not offer guarantees of long-term survival. Business-savvy Chinese are unwilling to invest in a free-falling economy. In 2025, the government authorized a mere 14 new foreign investment ventures. Even Cuban authorities acknowledge that foreign investments are unlikely to rebound.

(4) Mass exodus waves, while prejudicial to the economy, have served the purpose of pushing out thousands of disaffected Cubans, including members of the opposition. The Trump administration's Cuba migration policies have shut down the main Cuban escape valve. Cubans are now desperately seeking other destinations besides the United States

(5) Severe austerity measures, like those imposed during the Special Period and since 2019, may not be feasible given the fact that average Cubans have been squeezed to the point that they can no longer survive with even less food and medicines. Widespread hunger may lead to food riots. Or not. Cubans have become used to living with scarcity...

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(6) Political purges are still available to the regime. If, and when, the Díaz-Canel regime begins to collapse, they are likely to occur, as in past instances.

(7) As it has done during previous mass protests, the government still can harshly repress and imprison dissidents and protestors, even those suspected of anti-government stances.

In sum, there is plenty of evidence that Cuba has lost many of the means that have kept the regime afloat for decades, even if precariously so. The ship's rusted olive-color hull is full of holes and Cuba does not have the wherewithal to plug many of them—one is plugged, and two more holes open up. There is a strong possibility that some leaders will jump ship, and other generals may be forced to walk the plank. There are just not enough emergency boats. Who will captain the vessel and in what direction? SOS, Cuba!

About the author:

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