

# Civic Transition

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The totalitarian spell that managed to reduce most Cuban citizens to thinking like a single, solitary mass since the 1960s is growing weaker day by day. Evidence of this can be found in the increasing actions and impact of some members of Cuba's both tolerated and officially denied civil society.

Those impersonalized individuals from the popular mass who exchanged their liberty for apparent security and responsibility for unbridled hedonism, decorum for apathy, and all ethical norms for a dual morality (which is its total absence), that is, those who expect everything "from above," have begun, little by little, to get involved in a process we could call a civic transition.

In this transition, individuals and groups take on missions that include from taking care of pets, to getting involved in children's education, to even trying to force government leaders to change their decisions in favor of those they govern. In all these circumstances, people have stopped being passive objects and begun acting individually as active social subjects.

Everyone from the self-employed to those who are involved in all sorts of community projects, are included among these new sub-

jects, or old ones with new behaviors. Even many dissidents have begun to act on behalf of popular exigencies. These are not precisely political exigencies, but rather more related to the wants and unsatisfied needs of common, ordinary people. In other words, most Cubans.

It is common for the groups that are participating in this active transition to have established themselves, have views, and pursue projects in which their members or followers cease functioning within ideological or political frameworks and work with a collective identity. Old mobilizing strategies are being replaced by a pragmatic, universal way of seeing-judging-acting, so as to eliminate traditional shortcomings in results—according to the groups' shared vision. Among the groups involved in this civic transition are the *Observatorio Crítico* [Critical Observatory], the *Asociación Jurídica Cubana* [Cuban Association of Jurisprudence] and, the most recently created *Observatorio de Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuales y Transgéneros de Cuba* [Cuban LGBT Observatory].

For many years, promoters of numerous community projects whose only goal is to

heal the social wounds around them—be they natural, interpersonal, or having to do with cultural and creative freedom, and in every case “political” or concerned with anything and everything officialdom has condemned—have come together in the *Observatorio Crítico*. Some may or may not approve of this strategy, but what is certain is that they are there, especially young folks, bringing together multiple and diverse projects from all corners of Cuba. Their progress is weaving together diversity on behalf of a common good that cannot be efficiently worked towards if it is disconnected from the populace or locked up in these very groups, or worse yet, causes rivalrous discord amongst them, which is one of the weaknesses that has plagued Cuba’s dissidents in their long and valuable struggle—in spite of it all.

In 2011, the *Observatorio Crítico* organized a yearly meeting of representatives from more than 40 community projects so they could share their creative experiences in dealing with the definitive problems of the underdogs, problems that only they could try to solve or alleviate while being free of the tutelage of those “on top.” The *Observatorio Crítico* functions like a facilitator for these projects, and has no intention of trying to control them, much less subjecting them to hierarchizing structures that are totally inappropriate for a modern civil society.

Despite the fact that the *Corriente Agramontista* [Agramontist Current] came into being in the nineties, and it brought together (and still keeps together) scores of prestigious Cuban attorneys willing to serve justice beyond the limits allowed by a partial and dependent judiciary, the rise of the *Asociación Jurídica Cubana* [Association of Cuban Jurisprudence] in 2010 does not represent a division or duplication of functions, but rather a response that is in keeping with a moment

in time in which practice is forcing the dictatorship to change its form. This is due to a combination of external and mostly internal factors, and has allowed more freedom to individuals who by their actions have helped fill a void created by the imbalance between the population’s growing needs and the totalitarian government’s waning ability to satisfy them. Reducing prohibitions on nationals and increasing “beautiful” showcase examples for the benefit of international public opinion does not indicate an essential change in ideas and convictions in Cuba’s leaders, as in the case of the New Testament’s Saint Paul. No. It is more about inevitable adjustment, so that those in power don’t tumble from it, as happened in the socialist camp. In Cuba, it may not be tumbling, but it is slowly sliding downward, as if trying to hold itself up high on a well-greased pole. What the ‘gerontocrats’ who are still grasping at the reins of power are doing is choosing the lesser of two evils or, better said, delaying the inevitable. It is within this framework that the *Asociación Jurídica Cubana* has managed to progress in its effort to become legal, to the point that it was officially recognized, because there is no longer any other group that fulfills the same function.

At the Sixth Communist Congress, Raúl Castro may have called on good Cubans to beat down the opposition, in typical fundamentalist fashion, but staying in power also requires the government to send out “rational” messages, as in the case of the *Asociación Jurídica Cubana*’s legalization, and in allowing the existence and functioning of the *Observatorio Crítico*.

Another of the groups participating in this civic transition is the *Observatorio LGBT de Cuba*. Quite against the grain of the official *Centro Nacional de Educación Sexual*

(CENESEX) [National Center for Sex Education], this *Observatorio*'s essential difference is its self-proclamation as a defender of human rights, in all their universality, interdependency, and inseparability. While the population at large ironically judges the CENESEX to "defend rights only from the waist down" because it focuses on sex, the *Observatorio* holds that no Cuban, and particularly members of the LGBT community, "should have to prove his or her humanity, or demand his or rights, because those should be universally acknowledged and applied by the judiciary and institutions, and in social practices."

The aforementioned three groups have in common the fact that their methods involve not confrontation, but constructive action within the limited parameters the political system allows. They do not identify with the government, but instead try to change it from within, from its objective or subjective core, entrenched, as it is, in notions of morality, legality and other "socialist" factors. As such, they would seem to be following the old adage "if you can't beat them, join them." Their strategies do not compete with other forms of struggle in which other oppositionist groups engage. In reality, they complement each other, just as different groupings within one same armed force do.

Unlike in other groups or institutions devoted to specific goals like taking power, or defending freedom of expression and other rights while not taking into account how important individuals are for these projects to be effective, human beings are at the core of the aforementioned three. They are their motivation, substance and objectives. All three ac-

cept international notions of democracy and human rights as generalizations. In and of themselves, these two things are nothing and only make sense when they are promoted and defended for this or that real person, when their theoretical and practical underpinnings result in the thoughts and actions of all of a society's members, from the lowest to the highest.

If the totalitarian system has "socialized marginality," as exile intellectual Enrique Paterson so aptly pointed out, the case at hand involves groups that are trying to socialize leadership, action and civic responsibility through the education, commitment, and conscious and responsible actions of individuals, so that in the future people will be ready to exercise the fundamental rights and freedoms they currently lack.

All three groups continue their efforts to change reality through individuals, either by preparing them for Cuba's inevitable, future civil society, by teaching them to live in a state of law, or by promoting a culture of human coexistence in which differences distinguish but do not divide people. In such a society, men and women would be seen as unique, but never as unequal in their dignity and rights.

Even if many Cubans outside Cuba, as well as public opinion and the international media, are struck by the timid and incomplete economic reforms officialdom has implemented, they should not underestimate these organizations and their impact. They can be part of a transition to a civil society, a painful process not unlike childbirth, which will lead to inevitable economic, political and social transition in Cuba.