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SUBJECT: THE U.S. AND THE ROLE OF THE OPPOSITION IN CUBA

Classified By: COM Jonathan Farrar for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: As the Raul Castro government of Cuba (GOC) appears to have settled into a position of undisputed authority internally, it is worth asking what the Cuban political opposition is doing and the role it may play in the future. Two recent op-ed pieces in the international press that have infuriated dissident leaders argue that the answers are: not much and none. Though the op-ed pieces do not

mention it, this assessment should carry the caveat that part of the reason for the relative inaction of the opposition is that the GOC is taking active steps to undermine it. Many opposition groups are prone to dominance by individuals with strong egos who do not work well together and are therefore easy targets for manipulation by the Cuban security services. The Agenda para la Transicion, which was launched with much promise one year ago, is on the verge of breaking apart. Oswaldo Paya's Dialogo Nacional has picked up some stray dissidents, but has not taken any significant action in months. Though dissidents have reacted very negatively to the articles in the international press, the fact is that they contain more than a grain of truth and it would have been better if the criticism had been taken as a wake-up call.

¶2. (C) Without some true epiphany among the opposition leadership and a lessening in official repression of its activities, the traditional dissident movement is not likely to supplant the Cuban government. The dissidents have, and will continue to perform, a key role in acting as the conscience of Cuba and deserve our support in that role. But we will need to look elsewhere, including within the government itself, to spot the most likely successors to the Castro regime. End Summary.

Public Criticism Touches a Nerve in the Dissident Community

¶3. (C) Two recent op-ed pieces that ran in the Miami press, one by Ivette Leyva Martinez entitled "the Wall of Dissidence," and the other by Fernando Ravsberg entitled "Cuba, the Dissidents and the World," argued that the dissident movement in Cuba has become as old and as out of touch with the lives of ordinary Cubans as the regime itself. The articles represented comprehensive and fairly balanced critiques of the dissident movement, and appeared at a time when the dissidents are under more pressure than ever from the Cuban government. As such, they might have generated a reform debate among the dissident leaders, but instead they simply focused dissident frustration with the Cuban exile community.

¶4. (C) In general, we would make the same criticisms of most of the official dissident movement that we have contact with in Havana. In fairness to the dissidents we would add--as the op-ed pieces did not--that being an anti-GOC activist in Cuba is enormously difficult, and that any effort to move beyond small meetings in private homes would almost certainly be quickly and firmly repressed by the security services. That said, we see very little evidence that the mainline

dissident organizations have much resonance among ordinary Cubans. Informal polls we have carried out among visa and refugee applicants have shown virtually no awareness of dissident personalities or agendas. Judging from the reactions we have heard from our dissident contacts, the most painful accusation made by the commentators was that the dissidents are old and out of touch. Many of the leaders of the dissident movement are indeed comparatively old. Long-time dissidents like Martha Beatriz Roque, Vladimiro Roca, Felix Bonne, Roberto de Miranda, Oscar Espinosa Chepe, Elizardo Sanchez and Hector Palacios are in their 60s. Others such as Francisco Chaviano and wife Ana Aguililla, Rene Gomez Manzano and Oswaldo Paya are well into their 50s. They have little contact with younger Cubans and, to the extent they have a message that is getting out, it does not appeal to that segment of society. Their very valid focus on the plight of friends and relatives being held as prisoners of conscience, and on the government's failure to uphold basic human rights, does not address the interests of Cubans who are more concerned about having greater opportunities to travel freely and live comfortably.

Dissident Movement Not a Coherent Whole

¶5. (C) Whether or not the opposition organizations have agendas that can be made to appeal to a broad range of interests on the island, they must first begin to achieve some level of unity of purpose as an opposition, or at least stop spending so much energy trying to undercut one another. Despite claims that they represent "thousands of Cubans," we see little evidence of such support, at least from the admittedly limited vantage point we have in Havana. When we question opposition leaders about their programs, we do not see platforms designed to appeal to a broad cross section of Cuban society. Rather, the greatest effort is directed at obtaining enough resources to keep the principal organizers and their key supporters living from day to day. One political party organization told the COM quite openly and frankly that it needed resources to pay salaries and presented him with a budget in the hope that USINT would be able to cover it. With seeking resources as a primary concern, the next most important pursuit seems to be to limit or marginalize the activities of erstwhile allies, thus preserving power and access to scarce resources.

¶6. (C) Younger individuals, including bloggers, musicians, and performing and plastic artists do not belong to identifiable organizations, though they are much better at taking "rebellious" stands with greater popular appeal.

However, these individuals are still tightly controlled by the GOC, eschew the label of "dissident," and do not seem to aspire to any leadership role. The international fame gained by a few, such as blogger Yoanny Sanchez, fuels further jealousy among the traditional dissident organizations and prevents them from working with the incipient networks that the younger generations are beginning to form.

Internal Divisions and Limited View Hamper Activity

¶7. (C) The current feud among the leadership of the Agenda para la Transicion is a case in point. When the organization was founded one year ago, it was ground breaking in that it brought together an unusually broad array of dissidents. The only significant groups missing were those of Oswaldo Paya, who was invited to join but refused, and the Arco Progresista led by Manuel Cuesta Morua, a group that is considered by other dissidents to be a "tame" opposition organization that is controlled by the GOC. However, after only a year in which its signal accomplishment was presenting a prize to a young graphic artist for designing a logo for the organization, the Agenda para la Transicion seems close to flying apart. The crux of the dispute appears to be a power struggle between Hector Palacios and several followers on one side and Martha Beatriz Roque and Vladimiro Roca and some of their followers on the other. But the main problem lies in the fact that, while the concept of unifying the opposition under one umbrella organization has a great deal of merit, the members have not been able to overcome the challenge of keeping several very strong and uncompromising personalities working together. The splits that would be natural among the members of such a group are aggravated by active measures being taken by Cuban state security, which works to coopt certain members and infiltrate the organization with its own agents whose job it is to stoke any discord that exists.

¶8. (C) Oswaldo Paya and his supporters, who now include former Agenda member and lawyer Rene Gomez Manzano and dissident economist Oscar Espinosa Chepe, continue to be a very sober and serious force. Paya has outlined great plans to organize his "National Dialogue" in the same way he did the Varela Project in the late 1990s with grassroots support throughout the island, but there is little activity apparent. The fact that 41 of the 54 prisoners of conscience arrested in the Black Spring of 2003 and still being held are Varela Project volunteers clearly weighs heavily on Paya. Therefore, much of his focus has been on defense of human rights and demands for the release of political prisoners. While these are laudable goals that must be pressed forward,

as noted above, they have little resonance within Cuban society and do not offer a political alternative to the government of Cuba.

Incipient Political Parties in Cuba

¶9. (C) The COM met on March 31 with the leaders of several self-professed political parties, most of them in some way claiming to be a successor to the old Cuban Liberal Party. These individuals at least claim to have political objectives. Each of the groups presented a platform, all of which were very similar. But they were also quite impressive, attacking tough issues like constitutional reform, the status of the armed forces and security forces, and domestic and international economic policy. However, when the COM asked representatives of each group to explain how they would appeal to the Cuban public at large if there were open national elections tomorrow, none had a good answer, and it was apparent that they had not given a great deal of thought to that possibility. The groups expressed their thanks to USINT for bringing them together in such a forum, and seemed prepared to contemplate the function of grassroots politics in their planning. There is as yet no indication that there is any general movement in that direction, however.

Relations with the Exile Community

¶10. (C) A consistent problem, and one that is becoming more acute as the eventual end of the Castro brothers' regime comes into sight, is the relationship between the on-island opposition and the exile community. Even though much of their resources continues to come from exile groups, opposition members of all stripes complain that the intention of the exiles is to undercut local opposition groups so that they can move into power when the Castros leave. The islanders accuse Miami and Madrid-based exiles of trying to orchestrate their activities from afar, and of misrepresenting their views to policy makers in Washington. Ironically, the "exile community" in many cases includes former dissidents who only just recently were able to get off the island. Their closeness to the remaining dissidents on the island does not appear to keep them in the latter's good graces. Instead, they are almost immediately lumped into the "them" that defines the exile community for the on-island opposition.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) COMMENT: Various dissident leaders have maintained their focus on specific issues like treatment of political prisoners, and such work is valuable and worthwhile. This is especially true of groups like the Damas de Blanco, whose very narrow focus on the plight of their imprisoned family members has made it one of the most effective organizations on the island. It is the dissident movement that holds the GOC accountable for its violations of basic human and civil rights. From our standpoint, however, there are few if any dissidents who have a political vision that could be applied to future governance. Though the dissidents will not acknowledge it, they are not widely known in Cuba outside the foreign diplomatic and press corps. A key factor that contributes to this is the GOC's focused effort to keep dissidents divided and unable to reach out to ordinary Cubans. We have no doubt that, as alleged, the dissident movement is heavily penetrated by state security. This penetration allows the government to play on the egos and personal feuds that are normal in any society, and exacerbate the divisions that would exist naturally among the dissidents. Unless the GOC relaxes its suppression of opposition organizations, and the dissidents themselves become more capable of cooperative behavior, it is unlikely that they will play any significant role in whatever government succeeds the Castro brothers. Nevertheless, we should continue to support the good work being done by the dissident movement in promoting observation of internationally recognized human rights and making public the plight of political prisoners.

¶12. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: We believe it is the younger generation of "non-traditional dissidents," XXXXXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXXX that is likely to have a greater long term impact on post-Castro Cuba. However, the most likely immediate successors to the Castro regime will probably come from within the middle ranks of the government itself. We do not know yet who might eventually rise to leadership positions in place of the old guard from within the government. The recent purge of younger officials like former Vice President Lage and former Foreign Minister Perez Roque must have given pause to any in that cadre who had considered thinking out loud about the future. Still, we believe we must try to expand our contacts within Cuban society on leadership and democracy initiatives as broadly as possible. We also must continue to open up Cuba to the information age through measures such as those announced on April 13, to facilitate and encourage the younger generations of Cubans seeking greater freedom and opportunity. End Comment

FARRAR