

Cuba: It's a matter of time

by GWYNNE DYER

Fidel Castro and his Communist band of brothers have had a good long run in power (66 years), but they have run out of road.

Most of the relatively small Cuban middle class fled to the United States after the 1959 revolution, but the new regime certainly had mass popular support for at least the next quarter-century. Then it began to erode, but only quite slowly at first.

The Castro brothers and their allies always faced huge economic problems because of the US trade embargo, but things got much harder after the old Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, eliminating about 85 per cent of Cuba's foreign trade.

The ensuing 'Special Period in Time of Peace' spanned the 1990s and brought great hardship to ordinary people - rationing, blackouts, even severe food shortages - but the economy stabilized (at a permanently lower level of prosperity) by 2000.

At that point 40 per cent of the population would probably still have fought to defend the regime, at least if the enemy was the United States. The enthusiasm was gone, but Cuban nationalism has always been a powerful force.

However, the institutional rot in a ruling party too long in power continued, and after another 25 years of scraping along the bottom many Cubans are in despair: 2.75 million (out of 11 million) have left the country since 2020. Would those remaining really resist an American invasion? That may be what's coming next, if you believe the current American rhetoric.

Since the recent US raid on Venezuela to kidnap that country's president, Washington has redoubled its threats against the Cuban regime. US Secretary of State Marco Rubio (the American son of Cuban exiles) said that if he were in the Cuban government he'd be 'concerned?', and President Donald Trump said Cuba 'will be falling pretty soon.'

Many of Trump's scattershot threats are just idle bad-mouthing of perceived enemies, but he may be serious this time. Cuba imported half its oil from Venezuela and another quarter from Mexico, but both countries have yielded to Washington's demand to stop selling it to Havana.

Trump has also promised to put higher tariffs on any other country selling oil to Cuba, and the US Navy is seizing tankers bound for Cuban ports. It amounts to a total energy blockade of the country, and the result is hugely damaging. Rolling power cuts are shutting industries, transport and even schools for much of the time.

Cuba is sliding rapidly back into the utter desperation of the 'Special Period', but it would still be a big risk for Donald Trump to stage a full-scale invasion of the island. There are undoubtedly several million Cubans who would still resist that, and they are the ones who have the guns.

A more likely outcome is a deal of the sort that Trumps likes, as close as possible to the Venezuelan template. Find the people in the existing Cuban regime who are willing to sell out if the price is right, and make a deal that gives Trump the final say but protects their privileges and a good deal of their power. Meet the new boss, same as the old boss.

It would be a squalid end for an era in Cuba that started with high hopes and big ideas, but that was probably inevitable because like most Communist regimes it was ruthless and repressive. That formula usually works in the short term, but it generally fails in the long run. Indeed, sometimes you can see the upside and the downside of the package at the same time.

Early in the Special Period I took a large chunk of my extended family to Cuba. Six of us were straggling along the Malecón in Havana when two young men on a bike sliced my mother-in-law's bag off her shoulder with a knife. The younger men in our party gave chase, of course, but the thieves were soon out of sight.

No matter! There was a genuine 'hue and crime': people at windows and balconies all along the street shouting 'they went thataway?'. Then we caught up with the bike ' because the police had already stopped it and taken the thieves away. They returned her bag, containing her passport and money.

The next day a different thief grabbed that same bag, knocking my father-in-law to the ground. He was only slightly injured, but they took him to the police station and held him there pretending to investigate. I had to bribe the chief detective \$100 to get him out.

Social solidarity one day, brazen criminality the next. But I fear that the solidarity is now mostly gone.