

himself, were openly made. I remember one man in Havana asking me what I thought of Australia's then prime minister, John Howard, and his decision to join Washington in the invasion of Iraq. He was amazed to hear that I had expressed public opposition for years and suffered no personal consequences as a result. Wasn't I scared, he asked?

As I walked around Havana's outskirts, smelling the burning corn, people would sometimes stare and point at the Westerner with the dark beard. I wanted to engage with them, and some were more forthcoming than others. Women popped their heads out of small windows as they tied up washing to wispy ropes while muscly, shirtless men stood around talking to friends on uneven concrete paths. Children played baseball with balls made out of plastic refuse. Neighbourhood after neighbourhood looked and felt decrepit, with faded, coloured revolutionary murals on large and small walls. Many of these areas shared one telephone in a hallway. An entire floor of people had to make do (though I noticed modern landline and mobile phones for sale in a Havana communications centre).

Not unlike Wim Wenders, with his Cuban love letter, film-maker Oliver Stone made a 2003 documentary about the island. *Comandante* was a glowing portrait of Fidel Castro. It made for fascinating viewing but avoided the daily realities of Castro's Cuba. As I walked around the dirty but lively neighbourhoods, I wondered how the residents would honestly view a film that admired Castro primarily for his defiance of Washington. Stone was too smitten to see past his admiration.

Confused communism

When I travelled around the country away from Havana, it soon became clear that the countryside was no less vibrant. The landscape often reminded me of Sri Lanka, with lush greens enveloping wooden houses, ramshackle highway general stores and horse-driven ploughs on massive farms. I remember speaking to a man in the small northern town of Varadero who told me that he rarely travelled more than a few kilometres from his home, but he felt he knew about everything that transpired in Havana from the state-run newspaper. For him, Fidel Castro was the best thing that had ever happened to Cuba. This man was seventy years old.

The desperation of average citizens was apparent everywhere. In central Havana, many people with whom I spoke were calling not for a revolution or the overthrow of Castro but for political reform and a chance to improve their economic lot. On a number of nights thousands of Cubans gathered in major squares to watch baseball on massive screens, drinking, flirting, screaming and dancing unlike in any other one-party state I have visited. Perhaps it was a welcome escape from the stresses of daily life, but a number of older Cubans told me that they prayed for Fidel Castro's health and hoped he would reappear in public soon.

A couple once approached me and asked me to drink mojitos with them in a local outdoor bar. I agreed, curious as to their motives, and the young woman, with long, braided hair, gold-capped teeth and hairy arms, started looking at me seductively, holding my hand, rubbing my arm and asking, 'You like to salsa?' These were her only words of English. Her male partner then led me to a local kiosk and asked me to buy some milk powder for his baby. I suspected he was lying, and I refused to purchase the milk, but I wondered afterwards whether I was being wilfully blind to the country's hardships, even if the whole scene felt like a setup. Other Cubans approached me while I walked around Havana, keen to talk with an Australian. Their two constant questions were: What do you think of George W Bush and what do you think of Hugo Chavez?

A United Nations envoy praised Cuba in November 2007 for adequately feeding its people—'We cannot say that the right to food is totally respected in Cuba, but we have not seen a single malnourished person,' said Jean Ziegler³¹—though he urged reforms to reduce the country's dependence on food imports. Many young Cubans, watching illegal satellite channels like MTV and dressing like American hip-hop stars, told me that they simply wanted the freedom to engage with the world. Away from the dissidents, I met very few people who expressed strong feelings of admiration towards Castro, though they wondered what would happen the day after he died. Sitting in a central park in Havana one day, a pasty-looking unshaven man in his sixties sat on a bench beside me. He was wildly gesticulating. I soon noticed he was unable to speak due to a gaping hole in his neck, I presumed from smoking. 'I need a machine for talk,' he wrote in my notebook. He started

whispering, in broken English, about the need to find a new direction for the country. When I asked him his thoughts about Castro, he just shrugged and started feeding the birds gathering around us. He almost begged me to visit his home and continue our conversation.

Castro biographer and editor of *Le Monde*, Ignacio Ramonet, claims that 'the loyalty of the majority to the revolution is unquestionable'. While he rightly chastises Washington for its 'devastating commercial embargo', he refuses to acknowledge the legitimate desires of young Cubans who bristle at their government's restrictions on freedoms and liberties enjoyed by comrades in countries like Venezuela, Brazil and Bolivia.³² Unlike many Latin American countries, however, Cuba is still widely respected across the region because Castro survived half a century of American meddling and fared far better than the US-backed dictatorships of Chile and Argentina.

Economic prosperity is not the only benchmark by which one can judge the effectiveness of a regime. For example, Ramonet conveniently ignores the regime's brutal repression of gays, lesbians and transsexuals—the 1980s onwards saw a gradual loosening of social restrictions on gay people, including representations in state-produced cinema³³—though Castro's niece, Mariela Castro, director of the National Centre for Sex Education, attempted to rectify this stain in 2007 by proposing legal reform to recognise sexual difference.³⁴ The Cuban Parliament was likely to pass a law in mid 2008 to give gays, lesbians, transvestites, transsexuals and transgender people the same rights as heterosexuals, allowing unions between same-sex couples and funds for gender reassignment treatment. Havana saw the country's first public gay community meeting in May 2008, with Mariela Castro joining leaders in a conference to mark the International Day Against Homophobia. Cuban state television allowed a screening of the acclaimed gay cowboy film, *Brokeback Mountain*.³⁵ It was a small sign that Raul Castro was less dogmatic in old age than his brother.

The dissident life

I arrived at the home of Elizardo Sanchez in the outer suburbs of Havana.³⁶ He lived alongside a wide boulevard and his house was the

personification of 1970s kitsch, with multiple, various-sized figures of Mary Magdalene and John Paul II scattered throughout the modest abode. On his walls hung photos of a younger Sanchez meeting former US president Jimmy Carter, US senator Ted Kennedy, former Spanish president Jose Maria Aznar and former communist dissident and president of the Czech Republic Vaclav Havel (who urged Europe in early 2008 to be more forthright in its condemnation of human rights abuses on the island and support its 'democracy movements').³⁷

Sanchez was a university professor in Marxist philosophy in the early years of the revolution but he soon became a political activist, founding the Cuban Human Rights and National Reconciliation Commission, an advocacy group for political change. (Because the government controlled all levels of employment, he lost his post soon after 1968 as 'there was small-scale "cultural revolution" ... against thinkers who questioned the orthodox, Stalinist approach of the time'.³⁸) He has spent years in prison for defying one-party rule. Sanchez, relaxed and chomping on a cigar, remained disarmingly laid-back during our interview. Dressed in stylish brown loafers, ironed shirt and pressed pants, he seemed in good physical shape. He was the snappiest dressed dissident I'd ever met and was able to converse in a language and tone that Western journalists would understand. Although this was refreshing, I wondered if I was getting the sanitised dissident view.

We were joined by fellow dissidents—including journalist Ana Leonor Diaz, and Hector Palacios, recently released from prison and on probation (he told me that he was an early 'comrade' of Che Guevara before disagreeing with his methods). During my visit, a delegation from the Japanese embassy arrived to speak to Sanchez and Palacios, the latter looking frail and needing a walking-stick, his time in jail having taken a noticeable toll on his health. Other dissident friends wandered in and out throughout the day and I was informed that virtually all of them had spent years in jail for speaking out. Leading Cuban-American writer Samuel Farber argues that most of the Cuban dissidents 'across the board ... all assume that the market is a force of nature. It's not even discussed, it's taken for granted.' Although he called Sanchez a 'moderate social democrat', he claimed many others in the opposition were 'centre-right'.³⁹

These dissidents were neither revolutionaries nor recipients of American funds (so they said).⁴⁰ Diaz was a large and vivacious woman, her English translations pushed out between sucking on multiple cigarettes. The others looked worn down, fighting a lonely path of resistance against Castro and lacking the basic tools of the modern activist—a broadband internet connection and a mobile phone. Sanchez had said to *New Internationalist* in 1998 that ‘despite the peaceful nature of our work the government refuses legal recognition of our group’. ‘We’re prohibited from having a computer, a fax machine, a photocopier and other office equipment.’⁴¹ He told me his home had been raided countless times over the years. Sanchez believed that the government would lose if free and fair elections were held, but ‘personally, I believe we shouldn’t have elections in the short term. We need a gradual and orderly transition.’

All three dissidents were highly critical of Castro and his leadership—dubbed the ‘Taliban style of totalitarianism’—in Cuba. Sanchez argued in 1998 that the country had developed ‘a hybrid between the totalitarian model of Eastern Europe and the *caudillismo* (strong-man) model of Latin America. This explains the strength of the Cuban government and its enormous capacity for social control.’⁴² Sanchez showed me posters of detention centres both before and after the 1959 revolution. There has been an explosion of repression, literally hundreds of prisons for a variety of ‘crimes’. All three were against the crippling US embargo and the Bush administration’s clumsy attempts to isolate Castro.⁴³ They were equally wary of Chavez, fearful that he was providing the regime with a new lease of life.⁴⁴

As I spoke with the dissidents it became clear that they received Western journalists fairly often. I felt comfortable around them. I was asked about Australia, though little was known except that the Melbourne-based publisher Ocean Press printed books about Castro and Che Guevara. They were unimpressed with this and wanted to know why a country on the other side of the world would embrace a ‘dictator’. I was offered glasses of water and nuts and everyone present answered questions with a familiarity that often predicted my questions. None of the dissidents drank anything harder than chilled water, though it was only early afternoon when we met. I sensed no arrogance or presumptions on their part, nor claims that they spoke for the Cuban people. They were angry, passionate and even reflective. Diaz said they

felt abandoned by the West, Europe and America especially. She understood why Washington had maintained a futile embargo for so long—political posturing and appeasing the extremist Miami Cubans—but she told me that the 2003 Iraq War had given the Castro regime the perfect cover to increase repression ‘while the world was focused on destroying another country’. Dozens of journalists and dissidents were imprisoned in 2003 and sentenced in one-day trials for ‘destabilising the country’. Many remain behind bars in atrocious conditions, their drinking water contaminated with faecal matter.⁴⁵

The internet was an important, though largely untapped, resource to challenge the regime but access was both prohibitively expensive and restricted. Of over 3000 journalists who work openly for the government, Diaz said, only 150 regularly used the web. ‘They belong to the government party and they are allowed to get access to the internet at home with a server that is provided by the Cuban Government,’ she said.⁴⁶ Some sites were inaccessible and an internal intranet was widely used by the authorities. (I was regularly surprised during my visit how many Cubans used email, but it was usually a Cuban address, and not Yahoo, Hotmail or Gmail.)

A growing number of young, elite Cubans are covertly surfing the web, passing sensitive information to friends via flash drives and downloading the latest American television shows.⁴⁷ The Cuban Union of Writers and Artists opened an internet forum to gather opinions about its annual congress in April 2008.⁴⁸ An internet phone link in early 2008 allowed students in Miami and Havana to converse as they railed against ‘tyranny’ and ‘repression’. Such events, while undoubtedly important in any democracy, did not indicate that widespread discontent existed on the island but highlighted the desire of some Cubans to discuss issues ignored by the state media. One young man articulated the challenge: ‘We, the youths of Cuba, want change. The gerontocracy is in power and the other side is youth, each time more powerful.’⁴⁹

Washington has undoubtedly contributed to the country’s internet difficulties, however. In December 2006, according to the regime, America sent a message to all the US internet service providers naming six countries that they were instructed not to deal with—including Cuba⁵⁰, whose government has been forced to use satellite links with regional countries.⁵¹