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"... and having done all ... stand firm." Eph. 6:13

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Cuba's Next Transition Must Rebuild More than Its Economy



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COMMENTARY

Cuba is again in darkness. Failures of the national electrical grid have disrupted homes, hospitals, and businesses, while shortages of food, fuel, and medicine deepen an already severe crisis. These breakdowns reveal an exhausted political and economic system. They also expose a deeper danger: If change comes to Cuba, repairing power plants, opening markets, and rewriting laws will not be enough.

Cuba must also rebuild its human infrastructure — the trust, leadership, civic responsibility, and independent institutions that allow a free society to function.

Cuban intellectual Dagoberto Valdes has called the underlying harm “anthropological damage”: the erosion of initiative, mutual trust, and personal responsibility that prolonged authoritarianism can produce. The phrase must never be read as an insult to Cubans, whose courage, faith, creativity, and perseverance are extraordinary. It describes what

an oppressive system does to people when fear and dependence become instruments of government.

Since 1959, the Cuban state has sought to control nearly every sphere of national life. Independent associations, schools, media, professional groups, and religious communities have been restricted, monitored, or absorbed into official structures. In such an environment, silence becomes self-protection. Concealment becomes a survival skill. Neighbors hesitate to trust one another. Families learn not to discuss sensitive matters. Initiative can invite punishment rather than reward.

These habits do not disappear when a constitution changes. A transition from communism to democracy, from central planning to a market economy, and from repression to the rule of law would be historic. But ballots alone cannot create trust. Enterprise cannot flourish without responsibility and cooperation. Courts cannot sustain justice if citizens expect favoritism or revenge. Civil society cannot be rebuilt by decree.

The experience of parts of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union offers a warning. Elections, privatization, and new institutions were indispensable, but they could not by themselves repair social habits damaged by decades of authoritarian rule. In several countries, democratic disappointment, corruption, and nostalgia for authoritarian certainty followed. Cuba should not repeat that mistake.

Nor should concern for human infrastructure replace debate over material hardship, sanctions, humanitarian access, or economic reform. But Washington's recurring argument over whether to tighten or loosen pressure addresses only part of the challenge. No policy imposed from abroad can manufacture the habits that sustain liberty. They must be cultivated within Cuban families, congregations, workplaces, and neighborhoods.

That work must begin before a political opening, not after it. Cuba will need leaders who can help people move from fear to trust, dependence to initiative, isolation to cooperation, and grievance to reconciliation. Preparation should include civic education, leadership development, trauma care, ethical entrepreneurship, human rights training, and the strengthening of independent community institutions.

Cuba's churches are uniquely positioned to help. Despite surveillance and restrictions, Catholic and Protestant communities remain among the few institutions with deep local roots, moral credibility, and networks reaching across the island. They feed families, care for the sick, accompany prisoners, and sustain hope where public systems fail. Their greatest contribution, however, may be forming people who can use freedom responsibly, defend their neighbors' dignity, and pursue justice without revenge.

Churches cannot carry this responsibility alone. Independent civic groups, professional networks, educators, entrepreneurs, and community leaders will also be essential. Faith leaders and civic leaders alike need practical preparation for public service, trauma care, reconciliation, democratic institutions, and human rights. They must be ready for difficult questions: How do victims and former collaborators live together? How does a society recover truth without perpetuating hatred? How can young Cubans believe their future is worth building at home?

The United States, democratic allies, foundations, and Cuban communities abroad should invest now in independent, Cuban-led religious and secular institutions. Those who care about Cuba's future should help develop today the leaders and networks Cuba will need tomorrow. This means sustained support, not plans improvised after a crisis. Assistance should strengthen local leadership rather than impose a blueprint from Washington or Miami. Cuba's renewal must belong to Cubans.

No one can predict whether change will arrive suddenly or unfold over years. But Cuba's current crisis makes one truth unavoidable: A failing system can collapse much faster than a healthy civic culture can be built.

Cuba will need electricity, food, investment, and democratic institutions. It will also need truth, trust, conscience, responsibility, and hope. These are not secondary concerns to address after transition. They are the foundations on which a successful transition will depend. The work of rebuilding them must begin now.

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