

Is Cuba On the Verge of a New Special Period?

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Photo: Juan Suárez

HAVANA TIMES – “A new Special Period is on the horizon” is the word on the street. People are afraid because in spite of current shortages and how hard it is just to get by, many people remember that that was a particularly dark time in modern day Cuban history.

Nobody was expecting it that time. In spite of foreign wars, repression, absolute censorship, limited freedoms and living in constant fear, the poorest Cubans still managed to live off their wages up until then. The country was traveling on board a Soviet ship, which suddenly sank and everything came crashing down as a result.

The world saw it coming, but in a Cuba cut off from the rest of the world, almost nobody knew about the Perestroika or Glasnost, the last death rattles of the then USSR. because Soviet publications had been censored in Cuba in the late '80s. We were cruelly trapped.

I was only 16 when I heard the euphemism “Special Period” for the first time, and later on, the fearsome zero option.

Nearly everything disappeared. Literally. People began to go hungry. A horrible hunger that led to suicide, a spike in crime, widespread polyneuritis (popularly known as the "Very Very, caused by zero protein consumption), a scandalous spike in prostitution, with foreign tourists, and a mass exodus of migrants which reached its peak in 1994 with the rafters' crisis. Things got worse every year after that.

Between hunger, widespread shortages and blackouts, it became clear that the Cuban economy had only survived because it was a parasite of the Soviet giant, and that promises made decades ago about transforming Cuba into a developed and prosperous nation, never went further than a huge chaotic mess.

Now, without its natural market just 90 miles north, it became clear just how inefficient the system was. That's why, in the summer of '94, people hit rock bottom and their despair was so great that thousands took to the Malecon in Havana and neighboring areas on August 5th, to protest the only way they could: they shouted anti-government slogans, breaking anything they found in their path and looting stores.

Thanks to his leadership and totalitarian grip on society, the charismatic Comandante knew how to come safely out of that storm and the crisis, leaving many Cubans who used to sing Willy Chirino's memorable tune "Ya viene llegando", with the frustration of their dreams being thrown out of the window. The national economy opened to foreign investment and new suppliers appeared later on in the geopolitical scene, such as China and Venezuela.

However, if anything positive came out of that "Hellish Period", it was that many blind Cubans could finally see the light, and the gradual decline of the regime's control became clear. So much so that they had to make small concessions and change their discourse.

They began to call the exiles they used to call "Miami's worms" "community"; Christians and other religious people stopped being the enemy, and entrepreneurs no longer had their goods confiscated and were no longer called the mini-bourgeoisie, and became "the self-employed" instead. What's more, they now use concepts such as Rule of Law and Civil Society. And, the combination of this new politics and the control they still have has ensured that they remain in power and continue with the same agenda.

But now, without the Revolution's leader, and amidst a completely different and adverse context, I wonder: Will this government survive a hypothetical Special Period? I think not.