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TO WHAT EXTENT DID CUBANS  
SUPPORT FULGENCIO BATISTA'S COUP  
D'ETAT IN  
MARCH 1952

*Presented to the Department of Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American Studies, University of Nottingham for the award of Masters by Research (MRes) in Hispanic and Latin American Studies.*

Robert G. Kiteley (BSc Econ). December 2013

*El gobierno ha de nacer del país. El espíritu del gobierno ha de ser el del país. La forma de gobierno ha de avenirse a la constitución propia del país. El gobierno no es más que el equilibrio de los elementos naturales del país.*

José Martí, Nuestra América (1891)

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

There was no more exciting place to be on January 1 1959 than Havana, Cuba. It was the defining moment in the life of a nation, when all that came before it seemed to be a prelude. Fidel Castro led a revolution which had captivated an entire population and had swept a brutal tyrant from power. In the emotive moment of revolution, and, the significance of what happened next, an objective portrayal of Fulgencio Batista y Zaldívar has somehow been lost to the annals of history.

Batista is second only to Castro when it comes to being the Cuban leader who possessed all-encompassing and complete political dominance on the island. Despite his relevance, he remains a one-dimensional caricature. Popular culture perpetuates the impression that Batista was no more than a uniformed puppet of imperialism, friend to the American mafia, and brutal exploiter of the Cuban people. In Mario Puzo's *Godfather Part II*, Batista (who had promised that he would not tolerate guerrillas in the casinos or swimming pools) is portrayed as the archetypal dictator who permitted organised crime to control Cuba's lucrative hotel and gambling concessions. This portrayal of pre-revolutionary Cuba (with its misrepresentations and simplifications) is too often blindly accepted as fact.

The iniquities of pre-1959 Cuba are too often simplistically blamed on the vague notion of the tiranía. This is an opaque explanation which does nothing to account for the complexities of the period. The exhibits of Cuba's Museo de la Revolución focus almost entirely on the insurgency of the 1950s and post 1959 history. Visitors are invited to enter 'Batista's office' (portrayed as a kind of den of iniquity or lair of a tyrant). The office had been used by many presidents, including Gerardo Machado (who was possibly the most tyrannical Cuban leader). It was also used by presidents who been democratically elected in the most honest elections in Cuban history. Yet the museum places Batista on its Muro de los Cretinos and thanks him for making the revolution possible.

Batista, the great usurper of Cuban history seized power in an almost bloodless golpe de estado in March 1952. He had toppled a discredited political system which he had initiated himself twelve years earlier. Despite the opposition that developed later on, in March 1952, most Cubans met the madrugón with apathy and relief, rather than outrage and resistance. This thesis is not an attempt to rehabilitate Batista, however, the one-dimensional caricature that we have inherited is superficial and discourages an accurate explanation of what brought him to power for the second time in 1952. As inconvenient as it is to the revolutionary narrative, it is time to question why it was that almost nobody resisted.

There is no vast body of literature on the subject of Batista. However Frank Argote-Freyre's (2006) relatively recent biographical study does examine his personal and political life until his election as president in 1940. Otherwise, there are also some earlier biographical studies: Edmund Chester (1954), Raúl Acosta Rubio (1943) and Ulpiano Vega Cobiellas (1955), but these are little more than pro-batistiano propaganda pieces, written by his friends. The rest of the literature overwhelmingly ignores his first tenure in power between 1933 and 1944 (when he claimed to be a revolutionary and enjoyed his greatest popularity). His second tenure between 1952 and 1958 is uniformly referred to in terms of the repression and opposition to the Castro led rebellion. The batistianos are always 'the other', and never 'the subject' of historical study.

Whilst Batista may have become the ostentatious protector of the wealthy later on, he had been born into abject poverty and his story is the personification of the term 'rags to riches'. Son of a Cuban War of Independence veteran, he was born and raised in a bohío in the small eastern town of Banes, Holguín on January 16 1901. His humble background and physical features played a constant role in his life and political career at a time when issues of race and class were so contentious. His opponents exaggerated his African features and disparagingly referred to him as El Negro. He had spent his youth cutting sugar cane, picking oranges, and working on the railroads before joining the army as an enlisted soldier at the age of 20. Within three years he had learned the art of stenography, and had become a stenographer to President Alfredo Zayas. He subsequently rose through the ranks methodically; to be sure, the first half of his life gave no indication whatsoever as to what the second half would bring.

The historical context of his first tenure in power (the first Batistato) is investigated in the second chapter of this thesis, and, consists of three primary components. Firstly, it examines Batista's remarkable rise to a position of power in 1933. He had come to power by leading a rebellion of enlisted men who toppled an elitist and corrupt officer corp. This study will examine the extent to which he really was a revolutionary in the 1930s as he claimed to be. Secondly, this research considers the extent that was a genuinely popular 'populist' leader during this first period. Thirdly, it looks at how and why sought to engineer a transition to genuine democracy in the late 1930s. It examines how he was democratically elected to the presidency in 1940, and, whether he left power in 1944 as a relatively popular president. Clifford (2005) argues that, by the time he left office he had: "won the confidence of the wealthy élite, labor and many other groups" (Clifford, 2005:65). Argote-Freyre concurs that Batista had "gained enormous national and international credibility" (Argote-Freyre, 2006:286) for his acceptance of the presidential election result of 1944 (in which his candidate Carlos Saladrigas lost), and his conduct as an international statesman during the Second World War.

The military undoubtedly facilitated the coup and were (and always had been) Batista's primary sponsors. This study probes the origins of this support, and, specifically considers the significance of the *revolución de los sargentos* which first brought him to power in 1933. The marginalisation of officers during the eight years of Auténtico government between 1944 and 1952 is further investigated in chapter four. The Auténtico presidents who had succeeded

Batista were products of the middle-class student struggle against Machado; whereas Batista had been a humble soldier, born into poverty, and had risen to become Jefe del Ejército and president. Most studies focus on the military (rather than civilian) support for the golpe de estado: Mills (1960), Perez (1976), Pérez-Stable (1999), García-Pérez (1999) and Skierka (2004). These studies argue that officers supported the coup as they sought to renew the pre-eminence of the military in Cuban political life (which had been diminished under consecutive Auténtico administrations). Louis A. Perez's (1976) study is perhaps the most exhaustive investigation of the Batistiano army. His research examines the effects of pistolero (political violence) on the increasing discontent amongst officers in 1952, and, explores the notion that Batista relied on the support of the army rather than any civilian support (Perez, 1976:132).

This thesis examines the rise of autenticismo, which became the dominant political doctrine in Cuba during the 1940s. This is investigated in chapter three, which focuses on the two Auténtico Party governments of Ramón Grau San Martín (1944 until 1948) and Carlos Prío Socarrás (1948 until 1952). Much of the literature compartmentalises twentieth century Cuban history into three parts: the Plattist Republic (1902-33), the Batista era (1933-58), and the revolutionary post-1959 period. But this actually fails to account sufficiently for the almost eight years that Batista was not leader (between 1944 and 1952). This period saw two non-batistiano presidencies and should be treated as a distinctive era in itself. Whilst this period is generally under-researched in the historiography, a few studies do address the Auténticos in some depth. The most complete account is Ameringer's study, *The Cuban Democratic Experience*. Jorge Domínguez (1978) and Samuel Farber (1976) also offer valuable analysis of the loss of legitimacy and discrediting of the political system during these years.

Studies tend to offer broad, cryptic generalisations of the 'the Cuban people's' reaction. Ruby Hart Phillips (1959) talks of a "mixture of confusion, resentment and hope" (Hart Phillips, 1959:260), others refer to "passivity and confusion" (Ameringer, 2000:181), "complacency" (Falcoff, 2008:23) and "stunned acquiescence" (English, 2008:108). Damián Fernández (2000) concludes that "the coup generated more apathy and cynicism than popular opposition" (Fernández, 2000:76). The research in this thesis challenges these vague explanations.

Any support that Batista may have had outside of the military is explored in the fourth chapter of this thesis. This study charts Batista's journey from his return to politics in 1948 until his discarding of the constitutional process in 1952. It explores the response of Prío and the deposed politicians. Pérez-Stable's (1999) argument that "the Auténticos were spineless in defending their constitutional claim to power. They had breached their legitimacy while in office, and because of it, representative democracy passed away ingloriously" is explored (Pérez-Stable, 1999:52). This thesis equally considers the reactions of groups such as the students, Communists and trade unions.

Batista was a fascinating and complex figure who was pivotal in shaping Cuban history. He was the orchestrator of massacres of army officers, he was a

social reformer, he was a friend to the United States whilst simultaneously allying with the Communist Party, and he led a transition to genuine democracy and presided over one of the most progressive constitutions in the world at the time, before dismantling these achievements a decade later. There are many faces of Batista, he a complex and multi-layered historical character which cannot be simplistically dismissed as just 'the tyrant who preluded the Cuban revolution'; it is time to challenge the one-dimensional assumptions of the historical narrative that we have inherited.



## CHAPTER TWO

### THE FIRST BATISTATO

#### *THE KING IS DEAD, LONG LIVE THE KING*

Between 1933 and 1940 Fulgencio Batista used the iron fist of the armed forces and the velvet glove of populism to successfully “repress, co-opt, balance and neutralize such disparate groups as traditional politicians, sugar interests, organized labor, communists, radical nationalists, and the United States” (Whitney, 2001:179). Batista had dramatically come to a position of power in 1933 as a result of the *revolución de los sargentos* which significantly altered the status quo in Cuba. The *clases populares* (the masses) would now have to be courted rather than ignored by those in power.

Between 1933 and 1940, Batista held power (but not political office) in Cuba as *Jefe del Ejército* (Army Chief). This chapter will explore the first *Batistato* and how it came to result in two significant achievements: (a) the formulation of implementation of the progressive Cuban Constitution of 1940, and (b) the transition to a relatively representative democracy.

This chapter investigates the extent to which Batista was a populist leader, who utilized populist policies (particularly) between 1937 and 1940 to ultimately triumph in the presidential election of 1940. Whilst it was not a completely free and fair election, it was, up until that point, one of the fairest presidential elections in Cuban history. It was followed four years later by a presidential election which ranks amongst the most transparent in Cuban history.

#### **Background to revolution: Sergeant Batista and September 1933**

Batista had enlisted in an elitist Cuban army in 1921. Twelve years after enlisting, sergeant Batista led the army’s enlisted men in a revolt against an elitist and corrupt officer corps. The officers had historically discriminated against enlisted soldiers. Enlisted men were obliged “to leave a public place when a senior officer arrived” (Argote-Freyre, 2005: 41). Enlisted men would travel third class whilst officers travelled first class. It was not unusual for the Cuban treasury to fund more army positions than actually existed, with the extra funds siphoned off by high ranking officers such as generals and colonels (Ibid). The officers had succeeded only in ingraining frustration and animosity amongst the enlisted men by 1933. Argote-Freyre argues that this hostility directly resulted in the revolt of the Sergeants, and was not a product of any desire amongst the enlisted men for political change.

Batista had not actively fought against the *Machadato* (as the leaders of the students Antonio Guiteras or Ramón Grau San Martín) had done<sup>1</sup>. It is known, however, that Batista had been passing information to the secret underground organization known as the ABC<sup>2</sup>. He had joined the group in August 1931, the group was an anti-Machado revolutionary organisation which operated clandestinely as a secret society. The group was organized into cells which operated independently of each other; cell leaders could only communicate with a limited number of other cell leaders; its members were therefore largely unknown to each other. This strategy insulated the individual cells and guarded against the possibility of widespread government infiltration (Argote-Freyre, 2006:53).

Batista probably joined the ABC: “motivated as much by a desire to survive the chaos of the Machado years as by any driving revolutionary spirit” (Argote-Freyre, 2006: 40). He was a member of a cell composed of military men which provided intelligence to an underground anti-Machado radio station and opposition newspapers (Ibid). The ABCs principal membership was affluent, conservative and middle class. The poorly educated young sergeant must have felt somewhat out of place. However, Batista’s position as court stenographer at Campamento Columbia meant that he had access to sensitive information and intelligence relating to the highest levels of the military<sup>3</sup>. Batista would frequently be present at the trials of anti-Machado men, which would have made the young Batista a valuable asset to the ABC (Ibid).

By August 1933, Machado’s position as president had become untenable. Former Cuban President and anti-Machado figure Mario García Menocal wrote in *The New York Times* of the “violence and insecurity to life and property” (*The New York Times*, February 7 1933) under Machado, arguing that: “one would have to go back to the Venetian rule of the Doges for such barbarism” (Ibid). Machado’s repugnant regime ended with his resignation from the presidency on August 12 1933. His resignation followed an intense two-year period of protest and armed struggle against his regime as a result of his decision to unconstitutionally prolong his presidency into a second term. The complete withdrawal of support of the regime by the United States and its ambassador (Sumner Welles) signalled the demise of the brutal and chaotic Machado government (Argote-Freyre, 2006:45).

Carlos Manuel de Céspedes was subsequently installed as president by elements of the Cuban elite (with the support of United States) (Argote-Freyre, 2006:53). Céspedes lacked popular support in the country and presided over a weak government riddled with indecision (*Diario de la Marina*, August 13, 1). Hugh Thomas (2001) concludes that the government was “without substance” (Thomas 2001:421). Even Céspedes’ supporters at the conservative newspaper

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<sup>1</sup> Refers to the Presidency of Gerardo Machado (May 20 1925 until August 12 1933)

<sup>2</sup> ABC refers to a call sign rather than an acronym.

<sup>3</sup> The Camp Columbia barracks in Havana was the seat of the military high command and until 1959 the nations most important military base.

*Diario de la Marina* gently mocked the new President. Its daily cartoon portrayed a theatre goer asking Céspedes: “dígame, señor acomodador, hay por ahí algún programa?” (*Diario de la Marina*, August 24:3). The cartoon implied that Céspedes had no plan or programme of government and lacked direction.

Since before the fall of the *Machadato*, Batista had begun to forge alliances within the ranks of increasingly disgruntled NCOs (Non Commissioned Officers). He forged alliances with leaders such as Pablo Rodríguez, who had been president of the enlisted men’s club since 1927 (Argote-Freyre, 2006:57).

A funeral held on August 19 1933 proved to be the decisive moment in Batista’s rise as leader of the NCOs<sup>4</sup>. The funeral was held for three soldiers, whose bodies had been discovered in the torture chambers of the Atarés fortress, following the collapse of the *Machadato* (Argote-Freyre, 2006:58). Many Cuban people looked towards the Cuban military (which had been riddled with *porrista* elements<sup>5</sup>) with great hostility following the demise of Machado. The reputation and prestige of the armed forces was at an all-time low. Angry mobs began lynching suspected *porristas*, fearful soldiers and police officers stood by; a British official observed that “the bodies of the most famous *porristas* were even dragged in triumph through the streets” (Thomas, 1971:384). The discovery of the tortured bodies of the three soldiers in the Atarés fortress strikingly demonstrated to the nation that not all soldiers had supported the *Machadato*.

The officers exacerbated the tense situation by omitting to send a representative to the funeral of the three soldiers. Batista delivered a fiery speech which denounced *porrista* elements of the military and rallied against the attitude of the officers (Ibid). Batista had impeccably vocalized the feelings of the majority of enlisted soldiers (who had not supported Machado and did not wish to be associated with his crimes). Batista’s popularity soared. He had succeeded in positioning himself as the leader of the enlisted men, by deflecting the Cuban people’s anger away from the enlisted soldiers and towards the officers.

At the same funeral, Batista met and befriended the influential editor of the *La Semana* newspaper, Sergio Carbó. This friendship in the weeks leading up to the events of September 4 proved to be the invaluable link in what became the unlikely alliance between Batista’s NCOs and Grau’s students (Argote-Freyre, 2006:59). In the days following the funeral, the number of conspirators grew and multiplied several times over. The years of frustration and hostility on the part of the enlisted men towards the officers had culminated in a fever of mutinous sentiment. Batista and his allies worked quickly to ensure the loyalty

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<sup>4</sup> Non-Commissioned Officers

<sup>5</sup> Machado’s secret service who murderously enforced his rule

of enlisted men in as many military installations as possible throughout the country (but particularly in Havana). Batista later wrote that:

“Escogi un hombre de cada puesto o compañía y luego otro en quien pudiera confiar y así sucesivamente hasta que solo fuera menester dar la señal de que hora determinada había llegado” (Vega Cobiellas, 1955:32)

On the evening of September 4, Batista and hundreds of enlisted men met at Campamento Columbia under the pretence of drafting a letter of complaint to the officers (Argote-Freyre, 2006:67). But the real purpose of the meeting was for Batista to order his NCOs to seize command from their Officers (Argote-Freyre, 2006:68).

Within hours, Carbó had arrived at the meeting alongside Grau and the DEU (Directorio Estudiantil Universitario) leadership. Batista was soon persuaded to adopt their programme of government, and make permanent the revolt. Sergeants, corporals and privates subsequently seized control of almost the entirety of the armed forces within hours (Argote-Freyre, 2006:70). This sustained revolt is unique in military history anywhere in the world.

The following day, as Batista consolidated his command of the armed forces, Grau and the DEU marched on the Presidential Palace and peacefully relieved Céspedes of the Presidency (Argote-Freyre, 2006:65). The *revolución de los Sargentos* bought Batista to a position of power and influence just twenty three days following the fall of Machado. Batista triumphantly declared that: “Se trata de un movimiento exclusivo de sargentos, cabos y soldados, avidos de limpiar el uniforme que vestimos de las manchas que piensan sobre él” (*Diario de la Marina*, September 5 1933, p.1).

Charles Ameringer (2000) argues that the *revolución de los Sargentos* was not revolutionary at all, and had simply replaced the officers with Batista’s NCO friends, in the process “transforming the army into a mercenary organization” (Ameringer, 2000:22), loyal to Batista. The army had been politicized to the extent that Grau was doomed as president before he even took office

The radical ‘100 day government’ was weak and soon found itself isolated. The United States envoy Sumner Welles believed that many members of Grau’s student group (the DEU) were Communists (Ameringer, 2000:10). To further complicate the situation, several hundred officers had spent weeks holed up in the United States owned Hotel Nacional under the command of Dr Horacio Ferrer<sup>6</sup> (Kapcia, 2002:287-288). Batista’s soldiers had attacked the hotel on October 2, and despite surrendering after hours of bombardment, scores of unarmed officers had been murdered in cold blood and the United States held the Grau government responsible (*Los Angeles Times*, October 3 1933). Rumours persist that Batista ordered his men to open fire on the officers, but

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<sup>6</sup> Ferrer had been the Secretary of the Army and Navy prior to the revolt of September 4

there is no compelling evidence to confirm this. It has also been said that soldiers killed the unarmed officers in confusion after believing they were being fired on. Whatever the case, this episode demonstrated to Sumner Welles it was Batista and not Grau whom commanded the authority and strength necessary to ensure stability in Cuba, and the protection of US interests (Kapcia, 2002:289). In a meeting with Batista on October 5, Welles stated that the “Grau government did not meet any of the conditions necessary for recognition by the United States” and that he (Batista) was the “only individual in Cuba today who represented authority” (Ameringer, 2000:9). In October, *The New York Times* reported that Cuba was so volatile that Grau was living virtually as a prisoner (*New York Times*, October 3 1944). By January 1934, protests had become widespread; students who had previously supported the Batista-Grau alliance now chanted “¡Muera Batista!” and “King-Kong, que se vaya Ramón!” (*Bohemia*, January 14 1934:20). On January 18 Batista pushed Grau and his government aside with the support of Welles’ most accommodating replacement Jefferson Caffery (Ameringer, 2000:11). Summing up Grau’s 1933-1934 Presidency, *Bohemia* wrote that:

“La permanencia del Dr. Grau San Martín en el poder, significaba la anarquía y disolución de la República. El gobierno no estaba haciendo revolución, sino perturbación” (*Bohemia*, 1934, January 21:37).

Batista was able to push Grau aside with ease, Grau’s government had been the “self-proclaimed vanguards of popular struggle” who had “found themselves holding state power but did not have the means either to lead or to control the very people they claimed to represent” (Whitney, 2001:179). Grau was replaced by *El Presidente Relámpago* Carlos Hevia<sup>7</sup> (*Bohemia*, January 21, 1934:22), who was the first of a long succession of puppet presidents installed by the *Jefe del Ejercito*. The following exchange appeared in the magazine *Bohemia*, which depicted one such president, Carlos Mendieta<sup>8</sup>, being quizzed by a citizen:

“De su gobierno lo que más que ha gustado es el programa . . .”  
 -Si, ya comprendo; sobre todo en lo que refiere a la constituyente . . .”  
 -No, Coronel, me refiero al programa de los carnavales . . .”

(*Bohemia*, February 4 1934:25)

The suggestion being that Mendieta (like Batista’s other puppet Presidents) was only good for organising the carnival as opposed to any serious programme of government.

### **Preparing for Office: Batista the Populist**

Robert Whitney (2001) argues that in the 1930s Batista was a populist in the purest Latin American tradition. In order to interrogate this argument it is

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<sup>7</sup> Nicknamed ‘The Lighting President’ by the Cuban press as a result of the brevity of his Presidency which lasted 48 hours

<sup>8</sup> Served as President between January 18 1934 and December 11 1935

important to consider the definition of populism, as the concept is contested in academic debate.

Antoni Kapcia (1986) defines populism as a political response to emerging crises in Latin America in the 1930s and 1940s, a response conceived to resolve as many immediate needs as possible by the greatest number of participant's possible (Kapcia, 1986:56).

Torcuato Di Tella (1965) considers populism to have been an anti-status quo ideology which attracted the support of anti-establishment middle classes as well as urban and/or rural working classes. Alan Knight (1998) argues that populism was more a political strategy than an ideology. Knight argues that populist leaders aimed to build rapport with the masses by giving a voice to the powerless against the powerful. Knight sees populism as having been an alternative political strategy to the traditional democratic political parties. Ernesto Laclau (2005) questions if populism is definable at all, by arguing that definitions of populism are no more than lists of potential characteristics. Laclau argues that in some cases characteristics will exist that will be missing completely from other cases. Laclau argues that the academic debate does not currently possess the ontological tools to offer anything more than vague and generalist descriptions of populist case studies.

It is clear that characteristics of populist movements and/or governments are not static and are dependent upon historical and geographical realities. Other than Batista, there are other (perhaps more genuinely) populist models in Latin America, such as Getulio Vargas in Brazil (1930-45, 1950-54), Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico (1934-1940) and Juan Perón in Argentina (1946-52, 1952-55, 1973-74). The concept of populism in Latin America is closely associated with ideas of nationalism, mass participation, the forging of alliances across class divides, social reform and strong charismatic (often militaristic) leadership. According to Paul Cammack (2000),

“Populism’s key point of reference was the developmentalist alliance between the state, the working class and the industrial bourgeoisie which promoted import-substituting industrialization in the wake of the depression. At the institutional level, it placed emphasis upon the prominence of the leader, the relative weakness of parties and the legislature, and the use of corporatist institutions to organize business and to mobilize and control labour.”

(Cammack, 2000: 151)

Kapcia argues that populism in Cuba was different to elsewhere in Latin America. In Cuba the bourgeois lacked genuine economic (and thus political) power. This pattern had been established by the 1903 Reciprocity Treaty with the United States (Kapcia, 1986:33). The treaty had restricted Cuba’s foreign

trade and economic structure domestically. It had equally resulted in relative economic prosperity and security (especially in the sugar industry). The treaty restricted diversification of the economy and the development of industrialization. By the late 1930s Cuba was heavily dependent on the *zafra* and on foreign capital, whereas in other Latin American countries (such as in Mexico, Argentina and Brazil), populist leaders could call upon a means of production owning bourgeois who possessed genuine economic power. Therefore whilst Batista succeeded in initiating “the mechanism of populist mobilization” (Kapcia, 1986:57), he could not transcend the mobilization phase and push for industrialization, diversification of the economy and ultimately genuine economic independence.

Populism has been widely accepted as possessing anti status-quo, anti-elitist attributes. Latin American populists were known for encouraging mass participation, advancing social reform and promoting nationalist sentiment. These leaders were often charismatic and possessed strong oratory ability. Five-time populist Ecuadorian President José María Velasco said “Give me a balcony and I will become president” (*The Economist*, April 15 2006). Populist leaders sought to capture the support of *clases populares*, often across social, economic and political divides. Supporters often come from largely unorganized groups amongst the masses.

Kurt Weyland (2001) helps us to clarify the common characteristics found in populist movements. He focuses on populist movements and their charismatic leaders, in which “the connection between leader and followers is based mostly on direct, quasi-personal contact, not on organizational intermediation” (Weyland, 2001: 13). Weyland argues that the “relationship between populist leaders and their mass constituency is un-institutionalized and fluid” and that the people’s “loyalty can evaporate quickly if the leader fails to fulfill popular expectations” (Ibid). Weyland argues that these leaders’ support is often fragile and that populists often seek to create a close and intense relationship with their supporters using great personal charisma. He identifies two ‘versions’ of populist movements: those which are well organized structurally and those which are pragmatic and constantly changing. His study makes a further distinction:

“Populist leaders appeal either to the people, an imagined singular actor, whom they convoke to collective manifestations in public, or to the common man and woman, a plurality of actors” (Weyland, 2001:15).

Economically, populists in Latin America have generally pursued industrialization and substitution of foreign imports by domestic produce. They have sought to increase state control or influence over vital sectors of their national economies, for example in the case of Cárdenas’ nationalization of the Mexican oil industry in 1939. Similar action would have been impossible in

Cuba in the 1930s considering its economic dependence on the *zafra* (annual sugar crop) and the United States as a customer and trading partner. It was unthinkable that Cuba could prosper or even exist without United States trade and political support. Even if Batista had wanted to copy Cardenas' example, unlike Cárdenas, who initiated a thriving industrialized and diversified economy, Batista had many more limitations as a result of the pattern set by the 1903 Reciprocity Treaty.

Far from wishing to antagonize the United States, Batista cultivated excellent relationships with successive US Ambassadors (Sumner Welles, Jefferson Caffery and Butler Wright), which demonstrated his wish to seek the support of Washington.

Populists often aimed to introduce generous social welfare policies (such as Batista's *plan trienal* which is examined later in the chapter). They often encouraged their supporters to unionize, as Batista did by permitting his Communist allies to establish the CTC (Confederación de Trabajadores de Cuba) in 1939. Unions under populist leaders were frequently influenced or guided by the state and were often used as a tool for mass mobilizations (such as political rallies). Like Batista, other populist leaders (such as Cárdenas, Vargas and Perón) often emerged from and had the support of the military.

Whilst Grant Watson, of the British embassy, marveled at Batista as an "advanced social reformer" (Whitney, 2001: 149), it was not until 1937, that Batista really made the transition to populist. The *coronel* (colonel) spent the majority of 1934-1936 violently oppressing opposition.

Batista relied on his second-in-command, Lieutenant Colonel José Eleuterio Pedraza, to lead the pacification of opposition to his rule. Pedraza had been one of Batista's closest conspirators and was feared for his brutality (Argote-Freyre, 2006:148). Argote-Freyre notes that the first and second *Batistato* frequently relied on military men, feared for their brutality, to enforce the regimes rule. Batista preferred to maintain a distance from the violence that occurred under his command, and Pedraza was the first of his enforcers (Ibid). Opposition journalists were often seized in the dead of night and tortured, using what became known as the *palmacristi* treatment<sup>9</sup> (Argote-Freyre, 2006:156). To break strikes, military governors were assigned to each province, curfews were enacted and the right to congregate in groups of more than three people suspended. The death penalty was enacted and "bullet-riddled bodies of political opponents began to appear in empty lots in and around Havana" (Argote-Freyre, 2006:173). This manner of public terror would also become a common trait of the second *Batistato* in the 1950s

Between 1934 and 1936 Batista consolidated his position by murderously oppressing opposition, and it was only after 1937, when this process had been successfully completed, that he began to turn his attention towards enacting

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<sup>9</sup> Forced to consume large quantities of Castor oil, this would result in several days of debilitating stomach cramps, dehydration and diarrhoea



populist social policies, which would ultimately lead him to the Presidential palace as a democratically elected President.

Batista's populist agenda began in earnest in 1937. In January, in an attempt to attract the support of the rural working classes, Batista orchestrated the mass deportations of illegal foreign (Caribbean) workers (mostly rural workers of British West Indian, Jamaican and Haitian descent); the rural guard was called upon, particularly in sugar growing regions, to expel the illegal workers. Deportations continued into the following year:

“Secretary of Labor Portuondo Domenech yesterday said approximately 50,000 Haitian cane-field laborers would be repatriated during the remainder of this year. Repatriations will begin April 15, he said. Approximately 25,000 Haitians were returned to their country last year”.

(*Diario de la Marina*, April 6 1938:1)

Simultaneously sugar mills were encouraged to replace deported workers with workers of Cuban descent. Whilst it was true that of a general population of 4,000,000 there were 300,000 unemployed Cubans (Whitney, 2001:155), the vast majority of the unemployed resided in cities. The policy resulted in an exacerbation of an existing labour shortage in the *campo* (countryside). Whilst sugar mills requested hundreds of workers from government labour exchanges in Camagüey and Oriente, the foreign workers who would have previously filled the quotas no longer resided in Cuba (Whitney; 2001:155). A campaign against voluntary idleness was initiated in the east of Cuba; for example, on February 10 1937, police in Santiago rounded up 100 men from various bars and brothels, before dispatching them to the nearby mills to work (Whitney, 2001:156). Even so, this campaign could not round up enough workers to meet increasing labour demands. Many sugar mills decided to ignore the policy, and so illegal workers did continue to work in Cuba after 1937, albeit in much fewer numbers. Whilst the deportations did stoke nationalist fervor and increased support for Batista in the cities, in the *campo* the practicalities of his policies were highly questionable and hardly popular.

In the same year, the colonel presented his populist agenda in a paper entitled *Líneas Básicas del Programa del Plan Trienal*; this *plan trienal* (three year plan) outlined his social and economic programme. *Diario de la Marina* refers to “El magno plan del coronel Batista”, adding that “Ese es el motivo que obliga a pensar en las condiciones económicas ambientes y en el que podemos llamar el orden moral-social” (*Diario de la Marina*, July 2 1938, 1). The plan promised to secure “la protección franca al pequeño colono” (Ibid); it addressed the tobacco and coffee industries and promised to search for quick solutions to problems affecting *campesinos* (rural Cubans) in particular. The plan promised to address the issue of a new Cuban constitution, as well as the organisation of the national bank, a bank which promised not to rely on “capitales naciones ni extranjeros” (Ibid). The conservative newspaper *Diario de la Marina* applauded the plan, concluding that “El ilustre autor e impulsor de esas propincuas reformas sociales y económicas, acogidas con general aplauso por la opinión pública” (*Diario de la Marina*, July 2 1938:6).

The *plan trienal* promised to address issues of land redistribution and radical social reform at every level, and was said to have been “so extensive in ambition as to be nicknamed the 300 year plan” (Thomas, 2001:439). Grau’s nationalisation of labour decree from 1933 (known as the 80% law) was reinstated and claimed by Batista as his own; this law required 80% of any company’s employees to be Cuban; the legislation demanded that any industrial enterprise with more than 90 employees must fill their executive positions with Cubans. The plan demanded the return of the eight hour working day, the minimum wage, social security, pensions, worker compensation, maternity leave and paid vacations. These reforms were extremely progressive for 1937.

But the plan was not universally welcome, and foreign business interests in Cuba became nervous. A British government report on labour conditions noted that “foreign capital and foreign labor are thus united in their condemnation of the present Cuban policy” (Whitney, 2001:153). Journalist Ruby Hart Phillips observed that: “Batista, desiring the support of Cuban labor, watched passively as labor laws were tightened until it became impossible for an American to obtain employment” (Whitney, 2001: 153).

In order to pay for the implementation of his social programmes, Batista increased taxation on foreign companies (both the Cuban and American chambers of commerce condemned the increases) (Ibid). In a memorandum the Cuba Cane Sugar Company complained that the bill was “ill-suited to meet specific needs of the varying cane zones; as (the legislation) was conceived in haste through political pressure” (Whitney, 2001: 162). The sugar industry was overwhelmingly dominated by foreign interests; 69 sugar mills were US owned and produced 56% of all Cuban sugar, 36 were Spanish owned and accounted for 17%, and the rest were British, Dutch and French owned (Thomas, 2001: 440). The reforms were met with hostility by the sugar industry, which convinced Batista to decree that the sugar industry would only be required to ensure that 50% of its employees were Cuban, as opposed to the 80% in alternative sectors.

In September the Sugar Coordination Bill was passed. The law concerned smallholding *colonos* (sugar-cane growers) “who normally produced less than 30,000 *arrobas* (335 tons) of sugar” (Thomas, 2001: 440). These *colonos* would be able to retain 52% of their crop and sell it for profit on the open market. They would be obliged to set aside a section of their land to grow alternative crops; this was an early, albeit modest and half-hearted, attempt at crop diversification. The ultimate objective was to initiate a model of profit sharing between sugar producers and workers. Whilst the law was difficult to implement, the rhetoric alone was sure to deliver the support of these smallholding farmers. The term *colono* does not, however, necessarily refer to only smallholding cane farmers:

“A large farmer operating thousands of acres of land with wage labor and a small farmer working his cane lands only with family labor were both called *colonos*.” (Ayala, 1999:121).

*Colonos* played a central role in the Cuban economy and were truly representative of the essence of *Cubanidad*. Batista must have believed that, by championing their cause, he would be able to ensure popularity and a reputation as a man of the people.

In December 1937 the bill for the colonization, reclamation and distribution of state lands was passed. This legislation allowed unused or unregistered land to be turned into smallholdings and given to agricultural workers. At least 50,000 of the poorest workers would benefit, and, true to his word, by early 1938 more than 33,000 acres of land had been redistributed (Whitney, 2001:158).

“In line with Colonel Batista's Distribution of Land Bill the Treasury Department yesterday announced more than 330,000 acres in Santa Clara province would be claimed by the government. A large part of the land, it was revealed, has been developed for a number of years by squatters.”  
(*Diario de la Marina* April 10 1938:21)

Other than these reforms, an amnesty of all Cuban exiles was decreed, which included “members of the Machado regime, even Machado himself” (Thomas, 2001: 440). The debts of the Machado years were finally recognized; this was significant as it had been an issue of contention and had complicated international trade since 1933. Batista founded the Comisión Nacional de Transporte, which proved to be highly popular. He also supported mortgage credits for *los humildes* (the poor) for the first time. Batista was a classic example of a Latin American populist after 1937. In 1933 he had given a voice to oppressed soldiers, after 1937, he had also sought to speak for *colonos*, *clases populares* and *los humildes*.

### **Transition to Democracy and the Search for Allies**

A series of elections in 1936, 1938 and in 1939 had preceded the presidential election of 1940, which ushered Batista in as an elected President. There had been a presidential election in January 1936 (which had been the first national election since Machado's victory in 1928) which saw the Batista-backed Miguel Mariano Gómez run for office representing a *coalición tripartite* comprised of the Partido Liberal, Unión Nacionalista and Acción Republicana parties (López Civeira, 1990:44). This coalition triumphed over the former president Mario García Menocal, who represented the Conjunto Nacional Democrático opposition group (Ibid). The election was deeply flawed and was not free and fair at all. The leading opposition groups, Grau's Auténticos, Joven Cuba and the ABC, all refused to participate (Thomas, 1971:434). Despite the Secretary of the Interior's assertion that “the elections have been the most honest ever held in Cuba” (*The Washington Post*, January 13 1936), they were actually characterised by fraud, violence and bloodshed (*The Sun*, January 11 1936). Perhaps the most progressive aspect of the election had been that women were allowed to vote for the first time (Ibid). Gómez was impeached by December of the same year, after clashing with Batista on several issues and not fully appreciating the role of the President, and not fully understanding who was really in control of Cuba (Argote-Freyre, 2006:223-229). The Vice-President Federico Laredo Brú inherited the Presidency and

continued the tradition of deferring entirely to the will of the *Jefe del Ejército* (Thomas, 1971:437).

Congressional elections two years later passed without igniting much excitement at all in Cuba. All 450 candidates supported Batista and his puppet government (*The New York Times*, March 5 1938), and no more than 40 per cent of the electorate voted (*The New York Times*, March 6 1938). In the magazine *Carteles*, a cartoon depicted a *campesino* asking a companion “por quien voto'UD . . . en esta elecciones?”, the response was “¡ah, pero, hubo elecciones!” (*Carteles*, March 13, 1938:20). The following week, the magazine published a cartoon which depicted a suspicious wife sarcastically accusing her husband of being as “pura y honrada como las últimas elecciones” (*Carteles*, March 20 1938, 20). *The New York Times* concluded that the “the man on the street . . . expressed no curiosity as to the winning candidates” (*The New York Times*, March 6 1938).

Whilst the elections of 1936 and 1938 had been as corrupt as any in Cuban history, elections held for a Constituent Assembly in November 1939 were surprisingly honest, and up until that point were the single most honest national elections in Cuban history; these elections were a dress rehearsal for the subsequent 1940 Presidential election. The winning candidates would be responsible for preparing and delivering a new Cuban constitution in 1940. Batista apparently presumed that the support of the Communist-controlled CTC, as well his own support following two years of progressive social reform would be enough to guarantee his candidates electoral victories in free elections (Thomas, 1971:447). In the event, Grau's coalition of Auténticos, ABC, Democrático Republicano and Acción Republicana triumphed by winning 41 seats; the Batista-backed candidates won 35 seats (Ibid). Despite this set-back, Batista was determined to run for the Presidency and win in 1940. On December 6 1939 the colonel formally resigned as *Jefe del Ejército*, becoming a civilian presidential candidate (Argote-Freyre, 2006:267).

Batista knew that his ambitious social reforms would not be enough to ensure success at the ballot box. He realised the necessity of building a popular front, as Cárdenas had done with the labour movement in Mexico. The colonel proved that he was the ultimate pragmatist with an entirely flexible political ideology, when he engineered an alliance with the communists in 1938.

The Communists had been outlawed and persecuted by Batista since 1933; they had been refused entry into Campamento Columbia to participate in the events of September 4 1933 and had been brutally oppressed ever since (Argote-Freyre, 2006:72). From mid-1937 they had operated by proxy (via a front party called the Partido Unión Revolucionaria). This group was led by the poet Juan Marinello, and other leaders, such as the writer Salvador García Agüero and the leading intellectual Antonio Macías (Thomas, 2001:439). Student Communists joined the Ala Izquierda Estudiantil. Whilst retaining admirable discipline and support of many workers, *los rojos* (the communists) had been a fairly benign threat to Batista, since their failed participation in the general strike of 1935. The strike, which was due to discontent about

educational conditions, initially captured the support of many, and in March 1935 had effectively paralyzed the country:

“The national lottery was suspended for lack of a workforce. Trolley car and bus services in Havana were interrupted, as was truck traffic throughout Cuba. The few truckers who took to the roads found them laced with large quantities of nails. The lack of available transportation limited food and gasoline deliveries. Graphic artists went on strike, closing most of the nation’s newspapers. Doctors, tobacco workers, barbers, soap and shoe factory workers, all refused to work. From March 7 to March 11, when the strike reached its maximum effectiveness, virtually no one worked at his or her job. If the military did not run it, it did not run” (Argote-Freyre, 2006:172-173).

The strike was convincingly and violently broken by Batista’s military who declared war against the strikers by orchestrating a murderous campaign of terror, attacking strike leaders and publicly deposing of their bodies to send a message of fear. Argote-Freyre observed that violence was a common Batista tactic when under pressure:

“this sort of desecration became a trademark of Batista regimes under extreme pressure, and the tactic was employed with great frequency in the late 1950s as the revolutionary movement against the Batista government gained momentum” (Argote-Freyre, 2006: 174).

Communists had placed much faith in the success of the strike, and its failure damaged their credibility greatly. In order to find an explanation for their surprising willingness to enter into an alliance with Batista we must consider the international context of the Communist movement by the late 1930s. Following the Seventh Congress of the Communist International (Comintern) in 1935, Communist groups around the world were directed to seek alliances with social democratic anti-fascist parties. The emergence of global fascism had resulted in communist groups seeking to form the broadest possible anti-fascist alliances which were deemed necessary. In Chile the Socialist, Communist and Radical Parties formed a successful Popular Front; similar alliances occurred in Peru, Chile and Mexico (Whitney, 2001:166). The Comintern believed that conditions in Latin America were not yet conducive for revolution. According to Marxist doctrine, socialism can only come after capitalism, and, as the Latin American economies were seen to be feudal in character in the 1930s, it was thought that the best way to strive for eventual communism was to encourage the development of liberal capitalism.

It would be fair to say that the Communists had much more in common with Grau and the Auténticos than with Batista. However, at the time of the 1933 revolution, Juan Marinello had labeled Grau “a social fascist” (Whitney, 2001: 167), which had resulted in personal animosity between Grau and the Communist Party leadership. In 1938, Marinello did meet with Grau in Miami to explore the potential for a political alliance but the animosity could not be overcome (Ibid).

By mid-1938, both the Communists and Batista desperately needed allies. The Communists sought to leave the political wilderness in which they found themselves following the failure of the 1935 general strike. In the context of the ongoing Spanish Civil War and rise of global fascism, the Communists were concerned that fascist elements could gain a foothold in Cuba; this anxiety prompted many in the party to push for the formation of an anti-fascist front as a matter of urgency. Batista meanwhile needed political allies in his quest to become President in 1940. By May 1938 the publication of the Communist daily *Hoy* was permitted under the stewardship of Aníbal Escalante. On September 13 the PCC (Partido Comunista de Cuba) was legalised and thereafter a marriage of convenience was sealed.

In January 1939 Communist leaders succeeded in establishing the CTC (Confederación de Trabajadores de Cuba), with the support of Batista and his puppet government (led by Federico Laredo Brú). A gathering of one thousand and five hundred delegates in Havana elected Communist leader Lázaro Peña as CTC General Secretary (Whitney, 2001:169). Robert Alexander (2002) said that Peña was: “totally imbued with Marxist doctrine and knew well its objectives, but knew how to pursue them with tact and suaveness which provided a great advantage for Communist control of the CTC” (Alexander, 2002: 83).

The guest of honour at the CTC inaugural meeting was Labour minister Portuondo Domenech, as well as influential Mexican union leaders, Vicente Lombardo Toledano and Fidel Velázquez. Joseph Kowner represented the Congress of Industrial Organizations of the United States (Ibid). The inaugural meeting called for a number of reforms:

“a daily minimum wage of \$1.50 for industrial workers and \$1.20 for those in agriculture; the policy that parts of the Ley de Coordinación Azucarera favoring the sugar workers but put finally into practice; the establishment of social security funds for workers in all branches of the economy; the elimination of decreed and laws of the 1934-1936 period that limited the free functioning of unions, collective bargaining, and the right to strike. There was also a resolution calling election of a constitutional assembly “with free and sovereign character” (Ibid).

The Communist-controlled CTC became the darling of Batista’s Ministry of Labour, which was a remarkable turnaround, especially considering the intensity of Batista’s repression in the preceding years. Communist control of the CTC would endure until Grau wrestled control from the Communists in 1947.

Thomas argues that Batista’s alliance with the Communists was not unique to Cuba, but was part of a wider “continent wide swing” (Thomas, 2001:445). His study points out that whilst Batista was making peace with the PCC in Cuba, the Peruvian strongman Manuel Prado was granting Communists a strong influence over his country’s labour movement. In Chile, Aguirre Cerda worked closely with Communists and even offered them a seat in his cabinet. In Mexico, Cárdenas worked closely Lombardo Toledano and Mexican

Communists (Ibid). It is clear that, whilst the alliance was remarkable, it was hardly unique in the context of international events. This political maneuvering was a testament to Batista's ideological flexibility in the pursuit of electoral victory. Batista later argued that the alliance was a result of his desire to build an anti-Nazi coalition in Cuba (Batista, 1964: 15).

In the years prior to the 1940 Presidential election, the worst kept secret in Cuba was that Batista was firmly in charge and not the puppet civilian presidents. *Diario de la Marina* applauded his pet projects on a daily basis, whether concerning the opening of a new boy's reformatory, or the holding of a cocktail party in his honour by industrialists or army officers (*Diario de la Marina* April 10 1938:1). Batista's declarations on everything from problems of water supply and sanitation to budgets, poverty, the economy and the price of sugar was constantly applauded by his supporters in the press (*Diario de la Marina*, April 22 1938, 1). On the same day as attending his induction to the Association of Spanish-American War Veterans as an honorary member, alongside the US ambassador, the colonel declared that:

“Considero de una imperiosa necesidad humana y nacional el que los poderes públicos intervengan en la cuestión y conjuren por medio de una actuación rápida y eficaz la situación de centenares de indigentes, cuyo espectáculo de miseria resulta hartamente doloroso y escalofriante”  
(Batista, *Diario de la Marina*, April 22 1938:1).

Batista frequently declared his intention to uphold justice, humanity, liberty and democracy (*Diario de la Marina*, April 25 1938:1), he spoke of leading a *revolución sin agresiones* and a *revolución de ideas*. In 1938 Batista spoke with the same revolutionary zeal as in 1933, he spoke about defending “propiedad contra las monopolios y acaparadores y contra las emboscadas del radicalismo que os la quiere arrebatar, estamos nosotros” (Ibid). His revolutionary rhetoric could have belonged to Castro's revolutionary government after 1959.

Batista sought to enhance his popularity by projecting an image as an international statesman. In November 1938 he took Mexican president Cárdenas up on an invitation to visit him in Mexico City. The trip came at a tense time in Mexican-United States relations as a result of Mexico's nationalization of its petroleum industry. Whilst in Mexico City, Batista talked openly about nationalizing the sugar industry and proclaimed his support for Republican Spain in front of a crowd of 100,000. The warming relations between Batista and Cárdenas were “watched with interest and some uneasiness by American businessmen” (R. Hart Phillips, *The New York Times*, May 8 1938). But it was clear that Cuba depended “completely on her largest customer, the United States, and that the prosperity or depression of the island depends directly on the reciprocity treaty and sugar quota” (Ibid).

Batista had visited the US President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the White House on the same trip. Batista declared that he would help Roosevelt “make the world safe for democracy” (*The Washington Post*, November 11 1938). Despite his fiery rhetoric in Mexico, it was clear that Batista had firmly placed

Cuba behind the United States and against the fascist countries. Batista “stated that he and Cuban officials would heartily cooperate with President Roosevelt in his plan to relieve the terrible situation abroad” (*The New York Times*, November 19 1938). Roosevelt and Batista announced that Cuba’s reciprocal treaty with the United States would be revised to allow \$50,000,000 to become immediately available for public works projects. Despite his talk of nationalizations, it is clear that the United States firmly backed the *Batistato*. But his mixed messages in Mexico and the United States led the British Embassy to write that “it is impossible to foretell whether as a Presidential candidate he (Batista) will seek to lead the forces of the centre or those of the left” (Whitney, 2001:172). The foreign trips in 1938 succeeded in enhancing Batista’s reputation and prestige at home.

The Constituent Assembly which had been elected to prepare the new constitution were meanwhile hard at work. The Cuban Constitution of 1940 was one of the most significant achievements of the Cuban Republic. It was the result of the admirable cooperation of disparate and opposing political groups. Signatories included communists Blas Roca and Juan Marinello, and Auténticos such as Ramon Grau San Martín and Carlos Prío Socarrás (*The Political Database of the Americas*, 2006). Whilst it was heavily influenced by Batista’s progressive reforms, the colonel was strangely not a signatory of the constitution. However, the final document did include many aspects which Batista had championed in his three year plan of 1937: social insurance, a minimum wage, pensions, accident compensation, an eight hour working day, a forty-four hour week and paid vacations (Thomas, 2001:449).

The constitution for the first time designated voting as a fundamental right. It protected private property and substantiated the independence of the judiciary. Constitutional protection was enacted protecting social and labour rights, culture and family. The Constituent Assembly sought the assistance and guidance of those who had helped to draft the Weimar Republics constitution in 1919 and the Spanish Republic’s Constitution of 1931 (*The Political Database of the Americas*, 2006).

The realisation of a progressive constitution was the first remarkable achievement of 1940. The second was the presidential election held in July of that year. Batista sought office in 1940 on “un programa de gobierno progresista pero moderado, que ofrece protección al capital y al trabajo estímulo al inversionista y libertad de enseñanza” (*Carteles*, April 7 1940:33).

Argote-Freyre points out that, whilst the Communists were more ideologically suited to an alliance with Grau. Mario Menocal (the conservative former President who had allied with the radical Grau in 1939) was actually more suited to an alliance with Batista (Argote-Freyre, 2006:269). Menocal’s Demócrata Republicano party had assured Auténtico success in the Constituent Assembly elections in 1939 and Menocal would be kingmaker in 1940 (Ibid). Both Grau and Batista sought the support of the former President, but it was Batista that finally secured Menocal’s support in March 1940, by offering more concessions (namely cabinet positions and congressional seats) than his rival (Argote-Freyre, 2006:270). Menocal must have also felt more



ideologically and personally close to the practical military man Batista, than to the radical Profesor Grau. By March Batista had put together a remarkable coalition of the PCC on the radical left, and the Demócrata Republicano party on the conservative right; this alliance became known as the Coalición Socialista Democrática.

The coalition won Batista the Presidency in July 1940; Batista polled 805,125 votes to Grau's 573,576 (Nohlen, 2005:204) in the most honest Presidential election since Menocal had won the Presidency in 1912 (Thomas, 2001:451).

“A few elections booths were burned, some telephone wires were cut, a bridge or two blown up, and a few trees felled across highways” (*Daily Boston Globe*, July 16 1940:16), but, by Cuban standards the election had been fairly peaceful. Reports of army intimidation were rife (Argote-Freyre, 2006:273), but it could be argued that, whilst Batista was unable or unwilling to control his loyal soldiers, he would have won the vote anyway, considering the overwhelming electoral support he received. Batista and his remarkable coalition of Communists on the left and Menocal's conservatives on the right, had beaten Grau's moderate alliance by a more than 230,000 votes (Nohlen, 2005:203) . *The Washington Post* insightfully observed that: “The Man who for seven years has been the power behind the throne in Cuba has now openly and with the full weight of constitutional sanction come forward to wield the sceptre” (*The Washington Post*, July 16 1940:10).

### **Batista the President**

Batista was sworn in as president on October 10 1940, a symbolic day chosen to coincide with the national holiday of the *grito de yara*<sup>10</sup> (*The New York Times*, October 11 1940:6). The character of Batista's Presidency between 1940 and 1944 was largely dictated by the Second World War. The decimation of the war-torn sugar producing countries in the far-east gave Cuba an unprecedented economic boost not seen since the *danza de los millones* (dance of the millions)<sup>11</sup>. Cuba achieved the highest standard of living per capita in Latin America during the first Batista Presidency (Farber, 1976:102).

As in 1952, Batista ensured that his government was filled with obedient and tame men, such as the Vice-President Gustavo Cuervo Rubio, and Prime Minister Carlos Saladrigas Zayas. Since 1933, Batista had politicized the army and under his stewardship had placed them at the centre of national politics. He had ensured that the military enjoyed the fruits of power, and by 1940 the leadership was accustomed to these privileges and expected power, influence and riches. In the first months of his presidency, Batista confined himself to civilian matters (Thomas, 2001:453). When, in January 1941 he replaced the police chief with Colonel Manuel Benítez, this set the former army chief on a collision course with his replacement and former right-hand-man Pedraza, as

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<sup>10</sup> The Declaration of Yara signifies the start of the first war of Cuban independence on October 10 1868

<sup>11</sup> This refers to the economic prosperity of the early 1920s in Cuba, which was a result of the decimation of Europe's beet-sugar industry following the first world war.

well as the chief of the Navy and fellow *septembrista* Angel Anselmo González<sup>12</sup> (Ibid).

Pedraza and González led a large group of disgruntled officers against Batista and had even confronted their former friend in the presidential palace whilst accompanied by dozens of heavily armed bodyguards (Thomas, 2001:454). When Pedraza demanded full control of the armed forces, Batista asked for 24 hours to think about it. The President immediately fortified the palace and personally seized control of Campamento Columbia, by appealing directly to the loyalty of the soldiers literally on the parade ground. Within hours, Pedraza and González had been arrested and subsequently sent into exile in Miami (Ibid). These events were the first test of the new constitution and indicate the continued volatility of Cuba by the 1940s. Events equally indicate the undiminished strength, resolve and to some extent popularity of Batista as an elected leader.

By December 11 1941, Cuba had declared war on Japan, Germany and Italy (*The Hartford Courant*, December 12 1941:1). This declaration assured the rapid agreement of a second trade agreement with the United States (Thomas, 2001:456), which authorised the sale of almost the entire 1942 *zafra* to the US (*The New York Times*, January 29 1942:8). Batista also agreed to the massive deployment of United States personnel and equipment on Cuban soil in support of 'hemispheric defence'. By late 1942 there were nine military agreements between the United States and Cuba, which involved the use of Cuban territory (Thomas, 2001:457). Several hundred Cubans volunteered to fight in the United States military, just as many had done on the side of Republican Spain in the 1930s.

As former *Jefe del Ejército*, Batista remained technically an army reservist, and in February 1942 he took advantage of his new wartime law which reorganized the Cuban armed forces to promote himself to the rank of Major General (*Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 6 1942). This rank had ceased to exist since the fall of Machado, and it is possible that Batista decided to promote himself to this rank (which would be the most senior military rank) in anticipation of a potential return as chief of the army under a future President of his choosing. The colonel was now a General.

The Communists remained firm allies of the President, and the US-Soviet alliance against the Axis powers only increased their support of the government. Soon Cuba and the USSR entered into alliance (Ibid), and in February 1942 Juan Marinello became the first ever Communist to enter a government in Latin America<sup>13</sup> (Thomas, 2001:458).

When Batista left office in 1944 he left behind a buoyant economy. In his final year in office, Cuba had produced an unprecedented *Zafra* which had yielded profits not seen since 1924 (Thomas, 2001:459). Subsequently, sugar mill workers received a 10 per cent salary increase (*The New York Times*, February

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<sup>12</sup> The name given to those in the military who participated in the events of September 4 1933.

<sup>13</sup> Marinello entered Batista's cabinet as minister without portfolio. A few months later Carlos Rafael Rodríguez became the second Communist government minister.

23 1944:6). A 10 per cent salary increase for low-bracket salaried public employees as well as for soldiers followed in June of that year. Batista could not have hoped for a more positive outlook economically as he prepared to leave office.

Batista and his handpicked presidential candidate Carlos Saladrigas must have understandably approached the 1944 Presidential election with enormous confidence. Batista and his Coalición Socialista Democrática<sup>14</sup> backed their candidate against Grau's Auténtico-Republicana alliance (López Civeira, 1990:45). Batista must have felt confident enough to decide to prevent the armed forces from interfering in the election. Saladrigas' campaign was well funded and well organized, but Grau waged an equally relentless and determined campaign which gripped the nation. The charismatic former university professor promised that: "The workers would have a fair deal. Corruption would end. Cuba would be for the Cubans. The Auténticos would make Cuba economically independent" (Thomas, 2001:460).

In what the magazine *Bohemia* referred to as "la sorpresa electoral" (*Bohemia*, June 18:24) Grau secured more than 200,000 votes than Saladrigas (*Nohlen*, 2005:203). Despite this, Grau was not the only hero of the hour in June 1944:

"En las calles de la Habana el milagro se reveló sobre el pueblo. Por la tarde se arremolinaban en los parques y plazas, sonando fotutos, agitando banderas, golpeando bongoes, bailando la conga a lo largo del magnifico paseo El Prado. Ovacionaron estruendosamente a Grau San Martin. Todavía más estruendosamente ovacionaron a Fulgencio Batiststa, el hombre fuerte que habra impuesto la democracia en Cuba". (*Bohemia*, June 18:27)

Whilst Grau was the man of the moment, Cubans also applauded General Batista for finally bringing a free and fair democracy to Cuba. *The New York Times* reported that Batista had "received the greatest ovation from the people in his decade in power" (*The New York Times*, June 4 1944:11). It reported thousands upon thousands of people congregating at the Presidential Palace shouting cries of "*Viva Batista*" (Ibid).

Batista left the Presidential Palace for the last time on October 10 1944 to the cheers of 35,000 Cubans (*The Hartford Courant*, October 11 1944:4). Batista was the hero of 1933, he was a strongman who had championed democracy and had left office presiding over a strong, stable and prosperous Cuban nation.

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<sup>14</sup> In 1944 this alliance consisted of the Communists who had since renamed themselves the Partido Socialista Popular, the ABC as well as the Partido Demócrata and Partido Liberal

## CHAPTER 3

### THE AUTÉNTICO ERA (1944-52)

#### *A POT OF GOLD AND AN EASY CHAIR*

The literature frequently treats the years 1933-58 as a sustained period of Batista rule, but this is to neglect the eight years of Auténtico government between 1944 and 1952. The Auténtico era culminated in a discredited political system, which was unable to withstand Batista's *golpe de estado* in March 1952.

The Auténticos had won one of Cuba's fairest and most honest presidential elections ever in 1944. *Autenticismo* came to power on a wave of optimism and great expectations<sup>15</sup>. The era was one of economic prosperity, unprecedented civil liberties, and the most democratic political process in Cuban history. The era is also remembered as one of the most corrupt, violent and chaotic periods in Cuban history. The Cuban people's feelings of hope and optimism in 1944 became feelings of betrayal and disillusionment by March 1952.

#### **The Glorious Journey**

The nucleus of the group which would become the Auténtico party, originated from the fraternization of imprisoned DEU (Directorio Estudiantil Universitario) student leaders and university professors in Machado's Presidio Modelo (model prison), on the Isle de Pines. The prison became more of a revolutionary training school than a prison. Disparate elements of the anti-Machado struggle (which included imprisoned soldiers) conspired together for the first time (Ameringer, 2000:4).

The collapse of the *Machadato* and subsequent *revolución de los sargentos* (revolution of the sergeants) in 1933 resulted in a five day provisional executive of five leaders (which included Carbó and Grau), and subsequently the '100 day government'<sup>16</sup>. This government engineered radical social change, and issued a number of progressive decrees in its short existence (Farber, 1976:43). Batista pushed aside Grau and the civilian leaders of the revolution in January 1934; within weeks the deposed leaders had regrouped under Grau to establish the Auténtico party (officially called the Partido Revolucionario Cubano-Auténtico) (Ameringer, 2000:12).

The party was heavily influenced by *Aprista* doctrine. This ideology was pioneered by the Peruvian political party APRA (Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana) led by Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre in the early

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<sup>15</sup> The political doctrine of the Auténtico party

<sup>16</sup> The government, led by Ramón Grau San Martín, actually lasted 127 days, between September 10 1933 and January 15 1934

1920s (Kantor, 1952:578). It called for continent-wide political unity in Latin America, anti-imperialism, economic nationalism, democracy and the use of the state power to improve “education, agriculture, industry, transportation, and communication” (Kantor, 1952:578-584). Political movements in Peru, Mexico, Costa Rica, Bolivia and Venezuela (as well as in Cuba) were influenced by *Aprista* doctrine (Alexander, 1949:236).

The Auténtico party adopted the slogan “Cuba para los Cubanos” (*Bohemia*, May 24 1944:24), and from its inception had “monopolized the symbol of “revolution” in Cuban politics” (Stokes, 1951:39).

Batista’s violent oppression of opposition between 1934 and 1936 forced the Auténtico leadership into exile. Whilst Grau campaigned against the *Batistato* from Mexico, many Auténticos fought the regime (literally) from within Cuba. Other non-Auténtico groups such as Antonio Guiteras’ Joven Cuba similarly fought against Batista. These armed-groups won Grau’s respect and some of these fighters subsequently established the *grupos de acción* (action groups) of the 1940s (Farber, 1976:62).

A more accommodating Batista permitted the party leaders to return to Cuba, to participate in the constituent assembly elections of November 1939 (Ameringer, 2000:13). The Auténticos stood as part of an ‘opposition front’ alliance which defeated Batista’s ‘government front’, by winning forty one of the seventy six seats in the assembly (Nohlen, 2005:197). Grau had ridden a “wave of popular emotion and messianic fervour” in *autenticismo* (Ehrlich, 2012:296). Auténtico assembly members subsequently played a pivotal role in the drafting the Cuban Constitution of 1940, which ultimately contained much of the Auténtico social-democratic philosophy (Ameringer, 2000:14). Grau however lost to Batista in the 1940 presidential election heavily tainted by reports of army meddling (Argote-Freyre, 2006:273). The 1944 election was, by comparison, free and fair and without military interference (Thomas, 2001:460). The victory represented a culmination of what Eduardo ‘Eddy’ Chibás described as “la jornada gloriosa” (the glorious journey) (Ameringer, 2000:16).

### **Great Expectations and Wasted Opportunities**

By 1944 *autenticismo* “had replaced Liberalism as the collective state of mind of Cubans” (Ameringer, 2000:143). The magazine *Bohemia* wrote that Cuba had waited a long time for democracy, and declared that Cubans vested great hopes for change in Grau (*Bohemia*, June 18 1944:27). The Auténticos promised tax reform, the elimination of corruption in public office, the creation of a national bank and currency system, as well as improvements to public sanitation, healthcare and education. They had promised to expand public works projects, do more to assist *campesinos*, and secure the economic independence of the island (*The New York Times*, October 11 1944:13). It seemed that a new day had come for Cuba, as Grau promised everybody “a pot of gold and an easy chair” (Staten, 2005:66).

Grau started decisively, he “used his popular mandate like a machete” (*Time*, November 20 1944), retiring “many of Cuba's swaggering Army officers” (Ibid), and announced that he would “eliminate Cuba's cherished *botellas* (literally, bottles—soft government jobs” (Ibid). The British embassy anticipated a positive improvement in Cuba; they commented that Grau was an “honest man and an idealist who had been constitutionally elected President after years of political struggle” (*British Embassy*, Dispatch No. 192, December 30 1948).

The promotion of *Graulist* officers, such as the unpopular Major Pérez Dámara (who was promoted to General and *Jefe del Ejército*) resulted in seething discontent amongst the pro-*batistiano* military (Thomas, 2001:469). Grau retired more than two hundred *septembrista* officers<sup>17</sup>, replacing them with *Graulist* officers (Staten, 2005:79). The president was shaken when a group of *septembrista* officers (led by the ex-colonel Pedraza) were detained for apparently plotting a *golpe de estado* in February 1945 (Embassy of the United States, March 22 1945); it must have seemed like déjà vu. Grau remembered the sacrifices of his ‘boys’ in the *grupos de acción*, and would come to rely on them more than the army.

Cuba was enjoying enormous prosperity as a result of post-war demand for sugar; prices had not been as high since the *danza de los millones*<sup>18</sup>. Record-breaking flows of capital entered the Cuban economy; the national income was double that of 1939 and by 1947 real incomes had increased some 40% on average:

“This phenomenal rise stemmed from the combination of the lifting of wartime price controls and the fact that European sugar beet production had not yet recovered from the war’s devastation” (Ameringer, 2000:122).

Grau increased taxes on sugar to finance public works programmes. The first Auténtico government spent some \$80,000,000 each year on constructing roads, schools, parks, houses and hospitals. These projects provided jobs for many sugar workers during the off-season. The government also encouraged union participation, and by 1948 as many as 50 per cent of the work-force were part of one union or another (Staten, 2005:79).

Nevertheless, endemic corruption overshadowed the positive work of the Grau administration. Charles Ameringer (2000) described the presidency as “one of the most corrupt periods in the history of the Republic” (Ameringer, 2000:60). Whilst the Auténticos did not invent political corruption in Cuba, they did master it. The culture of corruption in Cuba can be traced back to Spanish colonial rule when civil servants were paid so little by the Spanish crown, that

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<sup>17</sup> Those officers who had taken part in the ‘revolt of the sergeants’ of September 1933, and who, owed their positions to Batista

<sup>18</sup> The ‘dance of the millions’ refers to the skyrocketing sugar prices of the early 1920s, this was as a result of increased post-war demand

theft was the only method of attaining reasonable remuneration. Corruption most often involved the allocation of public works contracts, pardons, non-existent government or military positions, the sale of government property and the misappropriation of national lottery funds (Thomas, 2001:463). Just a year into Grau's presidency, the British embassy found "little justification for optimism" (*British Embassy*, Dispatch No. 192, December 30 1948), and accused the Cuban government of graft on a grand scale.

The British later explored the issue of corruption further by highlighting the case of Grau's Minister for Education, José Manuel Alemán (*British Embassy*, Dispatch No. 50, 12 April 1950). Alemán had been a bureaucrat who had "risen to power as a result of his "skill in the malversation of public funds" (Ibid). The report describes how the 'Inciso K' tax, which levied nine cents on a bag of sugar to supposedly support the maintenance and development of rural schools, actually allowed the minister to plunder millions of dollars from the treasury without having to account for it. From the time that Alemán took up his post at the Ministry of Education, funding for rural schools almost ceased to exist. Whilst "Alemán did not invent thievery in the Ministry of Education . . . he would raise it to unprecedented levels" (Ameringer, 2000:34). When asked how he managed to extract so much money from the treasury in the last days of the Grau regime, his reply was "in suitcases" (*British Embassy*, Dispatch No. 50, 12 April 1950).

Grau spent his final days in office "busily engaged in filching what was left in the treasury" (*British Embassy*, Dispatch No. 192, December 30 1948). Grau's presidency drew to a close "four years of deception and disappointment . . . trampling on the expectations of the many people who had faith in his promises" (Thomas, 2001:477-478). Grau had done nothing to strengthen the democratic process in Cuba, he had actually achieved quite the opposite.

### **The 'Cordial' President**

Whilst many Cubans had been hopeful in 1944, many had become pessimistic by 1948. The Grau government had "proved themselves one more phalanx of greedy office holders" (Schwartz, 1997:112). Nevertheless, the Auténticos remained the largest and best organised political party in Cuba, the party was still the flag-bearer of the 'generation of '30'<sup>19</sup>, and was by far the best funded party (as a result of their pilfering of the Cuban treasury).

The former DEU leader, Carlos Prío Socarrás, was selected as the Auténtico presidential candidate in 1948. Prío had the support of Alemán and his political slush fund, BAGA (Bloque Alemán-Grau Alsina). BAGA was a limitless political fund (plundered from the treasury) controlled by Alemán and Grau's nephew, Francisco Grau Alsina. BAGA was "the most powerful political machine in Cuba's history" (Ehrlich, 2012:295). According to the British, it

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<sup>19</sup> The generation of revolutionary leaders of groups such as the DEU and ABC who fought against the *Machadato*

was Alemán's financial support that "weighed the scales in favour of Prío as candidate of the Auténtico party in 1948" (*British Embassy*, Dispatch No. 50, 12 April 1950). BAGA supplied Prío with as much as thirty million pesos in 1948 (Ehrlich, 2012:295).

The Auténtico candidate had outstanding revolutionary credentials: he had been a founding party member, and had served as a competent Minister for Labour and Prime Minister under Grau. His outgoing demeanour and friendly smile would result in him becoming known as the *presidente cordial* (cordial president). But behind the persona of *cordialidad*, it was known that power had corrupted Prío, by 1948 he was "already known to be extraordinarily attracted by the idea of money" (Thomas, 2001:479).

The Auténticos allied with Alonso Pujol's Partido Republicano in 1948 (which established the Alianza Auténtico-Republicana) (López Civeira, 1990:54). The largest opposition was the Liberal-Democrata coalition of traditional parties led by Ricardo Núñez Portuondo. The Communists participated, but struggled to garner support without allies. More importantly, the popular Auténtico leader 'Eddy' Chibás' had broken away from the party in May 1947 and had formed a new anti-corruption party called the Ortodoxos (officially called the Partido del Pueblo Cubano-Ortodoxo). For the first time in a generation, no *batistiano* candidate campaigned for the presidency. The Alianza Auténtico-Republicana conducted a well-organised, well-funded and meticulous campaign. Organisations such as the Comité Femenino endorsed Prío with slogans such as "me voy con Carlos Prío porque es cordial y amistoso".. and "Cubanas .. demostraremos una vez mas que sabemos escoger" (*Diario de la Marina*, June 16, 1948).

The election was relatively peaceful, with only 'some' reported violence which was an achievement by Cuban electoral standards. On the day, 78.7 per cent of the electorate turned out to convincingly elect Prío to the presidency (with 46 per cent) of the vote. The government coalition returned thirty six senators and forty congressmen (Nohlen 2005:203). Whilst the victory was not a landslide, the fragmented (or inexperienced, in the case of the Ortodoxos) opposition ensured that the Auténticos secured a convincing second mandate.

Despite the victory, enthusiasm for the Auténticos had greatly diminished since 1944 (Stokes, 1951:77). The influential political analyst Raoul Alfonso Gonse (sic) wrote in *Alerta*, that the morally "bankrupt leadership compelled the masses to seek elsewhere for relief for their disillusionment" (Stokes, 1951:77). The British embassy concurred, predicting that Prío and Pujol would be confronted "with one crisis or another, financial or revolutionary or both, and neither, in my view, is of the stuff to masters revolutions" (*British Embassy*, Dispatch No. 192, December 30 1948)



The 'cordial' president started decisively by establishing a Banco Nacional, Tribunal de Cuentas and Banco de Fomento Agrícola e Industrial de Cuba (BANFAIC). The Banco Nacional is considered the greatest achievement of the Prío presidency. It was designed to independently administer credit, centralise national finances and reduce government corruption. The Tribunal de Cuentas was (ironic considering the Auténticos record in office) designed to administer the use, and reduce the misuse of public funds. BANFAIC was intended to be an independent organisation which would provide credit to struggling farmers to whom private banks would not lend to. BANFAIC was designed with economic diversification in mind (Ameringer, 2000:107-108). These were apparently well-intentioned achievements which finally went to some way to fulfilling the original 1944 Auténtico programme, at least in theory.

Changes in personnel occurred in most government departments, but the most complete overhaul was at the Ministry of Education (Alemán's former ministry). Aureliano Sánchez Arango replaced Alemán, and was probably one of the most honest ministers of the entire Auténtico era. Sánchez Arango dismissed over a thousand personnel (real or imagined) (*British Embassy*, Dispatch No. 20, February 16 1949). The new education minister declared that the "appointments had been sold and issued wholesale in an illegal manner and therefore now had to be revoked" (Stokes, 1951:77-78).

Just three months after taking office, the president claimed to have succeeded in lowering the cost of living and basic foodstuffs. According to the British embassy, Cubans were not convinced. Many Cubans actually felt that the cost of living had increased since Prío's inauguration (*British Embassy*, Dispatch No. 14, January 27 1949). As a result of poor planning and the reduced demand for sugar internationally, Prío ultimately presided over a declining economy.

In 1951, the IBRD (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development) published an extensive report on the Cuban economy. The report presented an all-encompassing analysis of the economy, its public administration and policy. The report's findings were not unexpected; the economy was over-reliant on sugar and the United States; 83 per cent of all Cuban imports originated from the United States (IBRD, 1951:739) and sugar was responsible for 90 per cent of its exports (IBRD, 1951:194). Everybody knew that Cuba was "infatuated with the output and price of sugar" (Gutiérrez Sánchez, 1950), but the report offered "substance to the notion, providing statistics, tables and charts" (Ameringer, 2000:121). The British concurred with the IBRD assessment that the Auténticos "would have paralyzed Cuba if it were not for the strong demand for sugar in the world market (*British Embassy*, Dispatch No. 58, April 25 1950). The report concluded that the Auténtico policy of 'economic nationalism' had encouraged a sugar industry which was over-regulated and lacked productivity, dynamism and innovation. The report also concluded that US sugar interests (which produced 55 per cent of raw sugar) believed that "Cuban sugar was in its declining stage (Ameringer, 2000:127).

The Auténticos' management of the education system was criticised in the study. It concluded that educational standards, literacy rates and attendance had deteriorated as a result of over-centralisation, corruption and incompetence (Ameringer, 2000:130-131). The Bank further criticised the Auténticos' public administration, arguing that political appointments in public administration encouraged corruption which had diminished the authority of the government. By the time that Prío received the report in July 1951, he could not act upon its recommendations, as he was struggling for political survival by this time (Ameringer, 2000:142).

The Cuban economy was increasingly stagnant by the late 1940s. The economy relied on the export of a product for which "market conditions were uncertain and competition was intense" (Pérez 2003:207). The development of the sugar industry had peaked by 1925 and had developed little since. The Auténticos did little to diversify a boom and bust economy, which was hostage to the uncertainty of international demand.

The one sector of the economy that defied the sugar industry stagnation, and contradicted the Auténtico concept of 'economic nationalism', was the increase in (non-sugar related) commercial ties between Cuba and the United States (Ibid). Air travel expanded immeasurably, there were as many as twenty eight scheduled flights a day to and from the United States by 1949 (Ibid). The permanent Cuban communities in the United States grew exponentially (primarily in New York City and Miami) (Ibid). A Cuban Chamber of Commerce was established in New York City which resulted in greater bi-lateral commercial ties and familial remittances (Pérez 2003:207). The number of travelers between two countries increased massively in the late 1940s: "In one four-month period between May and August 1948, an estimated forty thousand travelers from Cuba arrived in Miami. By the early 1950's, this number had increased to fifty thousand. During these years Cubans visiting Florida were spending more than \$70 million annually" (Pérez 2003:207). The realisation that the one aspect of the economy that 'bucked the trend' of stagnation under Prío, was an aspect of the economy not under government direction, must have undermined the prestige of the Auténtico concept of 'economic nationalism'.

Arguably the most surprisingly development of the Prío presidency was the fragmentation of the party in 1950; between the president and his supporters and Grau and his allies. Prío permitted the criminal prosecution of his former friend, charging "that he found Government departments without funds and heavily in debt", he announced that "millions of dollars had disappeared in the last days of the Grau government" (*The New York Times*, July 5 1950). It is difficult to believe that Prío had been ignorant of the thievery of the Grau government; Prío indeed had very much been a member of the government and must have been aware of the outrageous plundering of the treasury. The likely motivation of the charges therefore was the desire to reduce the influence of Grau and Grauist elements within the party. The charges could also have been an attempt to divert public attention away from economic stagnation, corruption and *pistolerismo* (political violence) (Staten 2005:81).

The indictments were handed down by Judge Federico Justiniani on charges of the misappropriation of \$174,000,000. Even though Alemán had passed away in April 1950, the bulk of the evidence in the case originated from his outrageous activities at the Ministry of Education. Before the trial began, six masked gunmen broke into the courtroom and “stole every scrap of paper related to the case. This consisted of thirty five folders, each containing 200 pages” (*The New York Times*, July 5 1950). The Prío government was in fact engaged in exactly the same practices as its predecessors. It has been claimed that Prío may have himself stolen as much as \$90,000,000. What is sure, is that, despite his relatively modest presidential salary, Prío and his brothers had become millionaires and had invested heavily in everything from agriculture to Havana nightspots (such as the Sans Souci Casino) to Miami real estate. In 1949, Chibás asked, “Tell me, Carlos Prío, how you can buy so many farms and build them in so many and various things while at the same time you say there is no money” (Hirschfeld, 2007:194).

As a result of the Prío-Grau hostilities, the party underwent a second split in 1950. The party split between the *libres* who supported Grau, and the *gubernamentales* who supported Prío (*British Embassy*, Dispatch No. 86, June 12 1950). Factionalism threatened to irrevocably divide the party. Perhaps the most notable example of the hostilities was the disagreement over the Auténtico candidature for the Mayor of Havana race (Ibid). Prío supported his brother Antonio’s nomination, whilst Grau preferred Nicolas Castellanos. Despite the backing of his brother and BAGA funds, a superior war chest could not neutralize Antonio Prío’s “meager likability” (Ihrlich, 2012:297) and Castellanos won by a mile. By 1950 *autenticismo* had suffered two damaging splits and found itself severely fragmented and diminished.

Prío therefore entered the final period of his presidency in a climate of contradictions, poor administration and a decline in the prestige of the Auténticos. The Auténtico party had squandered opportunities, abused public trust and succeeded in fracturing the legitimacy of the system; by 1951 “democracy was progressing” but “in peril” (Ameringer, 2000:166).

### **Organised Labour and *Los Rojos***

Farber argues that by the Auténtico era, the PSP was perceived by a majority of Cubans as opportunistic, undemocratic, and (most damningly) un-patriotic. This was in large part a result of their perceived ties to the Soviet Union, and alliance with Batista between 1938 and 1944. Ironically, the PSP was one of the most ‘independent’ communist parties in the world during this time. In 1946, the Soviets even criticized the PSP for their ‘right-wing’ support of the United States communist leader Earl Browder (Farber, 1976:89).

‘Browderism’ had become a popular idea amongst Communists in the western hemisphere; it promoted collaboration over confrontation in capitalist countries. Roosevelt’s progressive politics and support for organised labour in the United States, coupled with the US-Soviet wartime alliance, had created conditions in which it seemed that Communist participation within mainstream politics could flourish (Johanningsmeier, 1994:293). Browder envisaged a

'popular front' not as a "temporary exigency or a manoeuvre, but as a more or less permanent state" (Ibid). In a pamphlet entitled *Victory and After*, Browder predicted a lasting peace between the Soviets and the United States. In December 1943, Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt affirmed their intention to work together as allies during and after the war. Browder then sought acceptance and mainstream legitimacy for the United States Communists by seeking to distance Communism from the conspiratorial nature of its past (Ibid). When Stalin dissolved the COMINTERN (Communist International) in 1943 to obtain increased allied assistance in the war, Browder (naïvely) took this as a sign that national Communist Parties would be free to act more or less autonomously. Browder went as far as to dissolve the United States Communist Party as a political party, and redefined the group as a communist political association. He sought alliances with mainstream politicians, just as the PSP had done in Cuba (with Batista between 1938 and 1944, and with Grau between 1944 and 1946) (Ibid).

The death of Roosevelt in 1945 and the subsequent beginning of the Cold War resulted in the decline of 'Browderism'. The leader of the French Communist Party, Jacques Duclos, attacked the idea in the French Communist journal *Cahiers du Communisme*:

"despite declarations regarding recognition of the principles of Marxism, one is witnessing a notorious revision of Marxism on the part of Browder and his supporters, a revision which is expressed in the concept of a long-term class peace in the United States, of the possibility of the suppression of the class struggle in the post-war period and of the establishment of harmony between capital and labor" (Johanningsmeier, 1994:305)

Browderism had been discredited and its decline resulted in a strategic shift in Communist strategy throughout the western hemisphere from 1946 (Alexander, 1957:39). As a dual result of the decline of the legitimacy of Browderism, and the Auténticos no longer requiring their support in the legislature after the 1946 elections, the PSP found themselves politically isolated and perceived by many as Moscow's puppets. The PSP performed dismally during the Auténtico era:

"They reached ten per cent of the vote in the congressional elections of 1946. In the Presidential elections of 1948 their candidate received seven and a half per cent of the poll. In 1950 they elected 8 out of 136 members of congress" (Goldenberg, 1965:119).

The Batista-PSP pact of 1938 had resulted in the establishment of the (communist controlled and government-backed) CTC in 1939 (Alexander, 2002:82). The Auténticos' tenuous position in the legislature in 1944 (Thomas, 2001:468) had resulted in Grau continuing the tradition of government support for the confederation, at least for the first two years of his presidency. The agreement permitted the Communist leader Lázaro Peña to remain as CTC General Secretary in return for greater Auténtico representation on the executive committee; the collaboration was a marriage of convenience. The 1946 mid-term parliamentary elections resulted in the Auténticos emerging as

the largest parliamentary party, which no longer required PSP support (Nohlen, 2005:203). The Communists had lost their political leverage and were vulnerable from this point on.

With Aléman's financial backing, action group 'muscle', and the political support of (Auténtico) labour leader Eusebio Mujal and Minister for Labour Carlos Prío, the government was able to seize control of the CTC. Batista claimed that Prío needed to control the CTC to consolidate his political power and provide jobs for his supporters (Batista, 1964:29). The government withdrew its 'official recognition' of the Communist delegates, and subsequently held a new congress to elect their own (Auténtico) representatives. The new Auténtico delegates were not as experienced as trade unionists as the Communists had been, and were perceived to be political rather than labour leaders (Farber, 1976:130). Lázaro Peña presided over his own 'illegal' version of the CTC, but struggled without government monetary and political support (Alexander, 2002:118-119). Farber argues that workers did not have the "desire, training or endurance" (Farber, 1976:141) to follow their former union leaders to Peña's CTC. Many workers equally viewed the new (Auténtico) leaders with cynicism (Ibid). The upheaval resulted in militancy and labour conflicts, which alongside decreasing sugar demand, resulted in encouraging a stagnant economy by the late 1940s (Farber, 1976:131).

The CTC takeover had been a throwback to the most brutal days of Machado or Batista in the early and mid-1930s. Communists found themselves imprisoned; their newspaper *Hoy* and radio station *Mil Diez* (1010) were ransacked and closed (Ameringer, 2000:49). Much of the legitimacy of the Auténticos' had resided in their commitment to democratic freedoms, but the takeover demonstrated to some Cubans an abandonment of these values.

The outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 initiated a second wave of repression against the PSP. Prío even contemplated establishing mass detention camps in the event of a crisis. The government issued Decree 2273, which demanded "free, equal radio time for any government official to answer 'slanders' by commentators (Ameringer, 2000:114). The decree provoked outrage and even the government minister, Ramón Vasconcelos (Minister without Portfolio and editor of *Alerta*) denounced the decree as outrageous. Opposition was so great that the decree was rescinded after only being used once (against Chibás) (Ameringer, 2000:165). Nevertheless, the damage had been done to the government's perceived commitment to democratic process. There had been one hundred and twenty strikes and one hundred and fifty one demands for wage increases during the final year of the Prío presidency, a record in Cuban history; discontent amongst organised labour had never been greater (Farber, 1976:130).

Increasing working class disillusionment with *autenticismo*, and the failure of the government to manage industrial relations, resulted in a weakening of legitimacy in the political system. Auténtico failings in labour relations had resulted in an organisational vacuum by 1952. Many workers found themselves unwilling to defend a government which had provided them with

turmoil and political appointees rather than genuinely effective labour leaders. Mujal and the CTC executive lacked loyalty to the morally bankrupt concept of *autenticismo* by 1952, and were prepared to work with anybody, as long as they continued to receive funds from the presidential palace.

### **Pistolero Politics**

In March 1952, Batista had justified the coup by citing his desire to restore public order and peace (Batista, 1964:36), following years of *pistolero* under the Auténticos. The term *pistolero* refers to the political violence of the Auténtico era which brought murderous brutality to Cuban streets. This violence was committed by groups claiming to be revolutionary student organisations (but almost all were simply opportunistic gangsters). The chaos of *pistolero* politics played perhaps the greatest role in the breakdown in the legitimacy of the political system, and was perhaps most directly responsible for Batista's intervention. Many of these groups were supported financially by the Auténticos, and were essentially the governments 'muscle'. Many in the country (and pertinently in the armed forces) were disgusted by the Auténtico complicity in the *pistolero* carnage.

Whilst the Auténtico participation in the revolution of 1933 had not resulted in an army loyal to *autenticismo*, it had resulted in the formation of a number of so-called *grupos de acción*. These groups had originated as university-orientated organizations that violently opposed the *Machadato*, and later *Batistato*. Upon coming to power in 1944, Grau gifted his loyal 'boys' salaried positions in the government and police force as a "counterweight to the perceived threat of Batista's army", believing that "they could be rehabilitated by being given responsibility" (Ameringer, 2000:22). There were a number of such groups, each claiming to be revolutionary, but in reality most lacked any ideology whatsoever and were basically comprised of opportunistic thugs (Ibid). Rolando 'El Tigre' Masferrer's MSR<sup>20</sup> (Movimiento Socialista Revolucionario), was amongst the most lethal of the groups. This group was rivalled in its infamy by the UIR (Unión Insurreccional Revolucionaria) led by Emilio Tro<sup>21</sup> (Skierka, 2004:21). These groups brought assassinations and disorder to Cuba on an unprecedented level (Farber, 1976:121). In an attempt to counter hostility in the pro-Batista military and in the Communist-controlled

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<sup>20</sup> Masferrer (1918-1975) was a Communist who had participated in the Spanish Civil War as an enforcer for the International Brigades. Upon returning to Cuba, he renounced Communism and founded the MSR (an anti-Communist group) which supported the Auténtico governments. Masferrer was subsequently elected to Cuba's House of Representatives in 1949 as an Auténtico congressman from Holguín. Following the 1952 coup he switched sides again and founded a pro-Batista paramilitary group called 'Los Tigres'. The group was amongst the most murderous of the Cuban conflict of the 1950's and are accused by the current Cuban government of more than 2,000 murders.

<sup>21</sup> Tro (1917-1947) had fought in the Spanish Civil War on the loyalist side. He had opposed Batista until being forced into exile in 1941, when he served in the US Army, before returning to establish the UIR which supported the Auténtico administration.

unions, both Auténtico presidents appointed action group members to government positions in return for their support: “Grau even appointed as head of the criminal investigation department an MSR leader, Mario Salabarría a notorious killer ... Tró the UIR boss, made it as far as head of the national police school” (Skierka, 2004:21).

The Auténtico era is full of examples of politically motivated violence, but perhaps the single most sensational event of the *pistolero* era took place in September 1947. Opposing factions of uniformed police (one loyal to the MSR and the other to the UIR) fought in the streets of Marianao (a Havana suburb) for three hours (Ameringer, 2000:53). The clash erupted when Salabarría set out to arrest the UIR-affiliated police chief, Antonio Morín Dopico and Tró. The resulting chaos left six dead and eleven injured, including Tró, who was shot and killed alongside a pregnant woman after surrendering. The shoot-out took place in full view of the national press which documented the entire event for a shocked nation (*The New York Times*, September 17 1947:15). The Auténtico president did not intervene in the situation and only acted days later when public outrage left him no choice but to mobilize the army to settle the dispute (Ameringer, 2000:53).

Francisco José Moreno (2007) argues that, whilst a “few restraining mechanisms” (Moreno, 2007:44-45) had existed under Grau, these ceased to exist altogether under Prío. The violence became more frequent and more unpredictable during the second Auténtico government (Ibid). Discontent towards the Auténticos became more volatile. Within months of Prío’s inauguration, a group calling itself Acción Auténtica Independiente began planting bombs at the homes of former Grau government members who had used their positions to amass fortunes (*British Embassy*, Dispatch No. 14, January 27 1949). The Auténtico era may have seen unprecedented civil liberties, honest elections and freedom of the press, but it was also amongst the most chaotically violent periods in Cuban history. The government had set a dangerous precedent in its complicity with the action groups, and had by 1948 lost much of their ability to manage the action groups.

Whilst Grau had not supported any anti-*pistolero* action, in July 1949 Prío declared that he would “wipe out the violence” and created the GRAS (Group for the Repression of Subversive Activities) (Stokes, 1951:78). But this was little more than a ploy. In reality, GRAS just imprisoned a few low-level *pistoleros*, whilst the government resumed “excellent relations” with action group leaders (Thomas, 2001:480). Hardly a week passed in the late 1940s without some public atrocity or gangland execution, carried out by one action group or another (Ameringer, 2000:81-84). Concerned at the levels of violence on the streets, Prío orchestrated a *pacto de los grupos*. The pact ramped up the distribution of *botellas*, in return for a cease to the violence. The president distributed as many as 2,000 salaried government positions to a variety of action group members (Thomas, 2001:483). The pact did little to stem the violence and was a complete failure. In 1951, Masferrer commented that “we’re all gangsters . . . this isn’t Europe. Only Chibás is not a gangster and he’s

mad” (Thomas, 1971:488). As the sun set on the Auténtico era, Cuba had descended into a gangster state, where machine-gun diplomacy prevailed.

*Pistoleros* like ‘*El Tigre*’ Masferrer and Orlando ‘*El Colorado*’ León Lemus rode around Cuba like “pirate kings” (Ibid). The notorious *El Colorado* admitted to journalist Néstor Piñango that his friendship with Prío went back as far as the first *Batistato*. He claimed that he ‘took care’ of voter registrations for the PRC-A in Pinar del Rio, and that he provided ‘muscle’ for Prío’s rivalry with ‘Miguelito’ Suárez Fernández for the Auténtico nomination in 1948 (Ameringer, 2000:84). Piñango claimed to have been taken to the interview in a National Police patrol car, to a location guarded by uniformed soldiers. The Auténticos were complicit in sponsoring political violence which had weakened the legitimacy of the political system. By the dawn of the 1950s, “it seemed as if the country was in a state of near-insurrection, with incendiary rhetoric the norm among the young and angry cynicism among the elders” (Moreno, 2007:34). The November 1951 escape of the notorious *pistolero* Policarpo Soler from the supposedly impregnable Castillo del Príncipe prison, and the February 1952 assassination of the ex-Minister of the Interior and Radio Cadena Habana proprietor, Alejo Cossío del Pino, were the final, high profile blows to the prestige of the Prío government (*Embassy of the United States*, February 15 1952),.

### **The Ortodoxos: *Vergüenza contra dinero***

The outrageous corruption, violence and incompetence of the Grau administration compelled some Auténticos to follow ‘Eddy’ Chibás, when he broke from the ruling party to form the Ortodoxo Party. Chibás had been a leader in the 1927 DEU student directorate, a leading figure in the anti-Machado struggle, and a hero of the ‘generation of ’30’. He was a left-wing ‘democratic populist’, who fought for *los humildes*, which had been a political strategy in Cuba since the days of José Martí (Farber, 1976:123).

Whilst ‘Eddy’ Chibás was not photogenic like Batista or Prío, he was honest, politically astute, and was one of the most charismatic and popular politicians of the Auténtico era. Stokes described him, as a man of “fanatical courage” who shouted “passionately in constant denunciation (Stokes, 1951:60). Chibás was committed to the original values of *autenticismo*, and was “more Auténtico than the thieves and fifth columnists who had taken over the party” (Ibid). Two years of Grau government had resulted in nothing but disappointment for Chibás, and he realised that he had to leave the party in order to rescue its original programme (Ibid). A significant group of leading Auténticos (Emilio ‘*Millo*’ Ochoa, José Pardo Llada, Luis Conte Agüero, Rafael García Bárcena) (Pérez Llody, 2007:57), as well as elder statesmen (Fernando Ortiz, Herminio Portell Vilá and Jorge Mañach) (Stokes, 1952:71) joined Chibás in 1947. In a 1948 interview, ‘Eddy’ gave three primary reasons for breaking from the Auténticos:

“(1) the realization that the Grau administration was corrupt; (2) the rehabilitation program-rural schools, cement floors in each bohío, sanitary



latrines, good wells was stopped in its tracks and Grau did not seem to do anything but make promises; (3) belief that Grau intended to perpetuate himself in office or effect *continuismo* by hand-picking a successor” (*Carteles*, 1948: 28-29).

William Stokes argues that there is compelling evidence to suggest that there had been personal animosity between Chibás and Grau, a common belief in Cuba at the time was that:

“Chibás’ deviation from time-tested support of the chief of the party came when Grau listened with mock seriousness and evident sympathy to Chibas’ divulcation of presidential aspirations, then promptly ridiculed the idea into oblivion with the Auténtico organization” (Stokes, 1952:43).

The Ortodoxos adopted the slogan *vergüenza contra dinero* (shame against money) (Ehrlich, 2007:3). Chibás promised that he would not dilute his revolutionary agenda by entering into political alliances with other groups. He denounced those that did as *pactistas*, who were only interested in pursuing politics as usual (Ameringer, 2000:62). The Ortodoxo platform was a product of *autenticismo*. They declared their commitment to “independencia económica, libertad política y justicia social” (Pérez Llody, 2007:57). What differed from the Auténticos was their obsession with eliminating corruption in public office, and eradicating the *pistolero* violence on the streets. Chibás adopted the symbol of a broom with which he said he would sweep away the mistakes of the Auténtico era (Ameringer, 2000:45).

One of the party’s most prominent young supporters was a 21 year-old Fidel Castro. Castro had been a founding party member. He admired Chibás’ fearless style, but did not agree with his non-violent approach (Ameringer, 2000:44). Castro began to develop his own power base by founding the ARO (Acción Radical Ortodoxa), an Ortodoxo youth organization. It is known that he had links to the *pistoleros*, and had once been a member of the UIR (Skierka, 2004:24). Castro had been accused of at least three assassinations by 1948, he had participated in a failed invasion of Trujillo’s Dominican Republic, and had been present at the *Bogotazo* incident<sup>22</sup> (Skierka, 2004:26-27). Castro later stated that he had been “always under guns and bullets . . . what I suffered at the university had more merit than the Sierra Maestra” (Skierka, 2004:25). Stories like Castro’s were not uncommon in a period characterised for its chaotic violence.

The Ortodoxo Party had “produced a powerful revival of the Cuban populist political tradition” (Farber, 1976:128), despite having only been in existence for barely a year, they fought a strong campaign in the 1948 presidential election. Ultimately, their lack of financial support and organisation and their

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<sup>22</sup> Refers to the April 1948 riots in Bogotá, Columbia. At least 3,500 people were killed by the Columbian military whilst protesting (following the assassination of the populist presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán Ayala). Rumours of Castro’s involvement abound, but it is known that Castro was in the city as part of a student delegation at the time, and he may have been present (or involved in) in the rioting.

refusal to enter into political alliances prevented the party from coming near to victory. Despite this, they secured an impressive 16.4 per cent of the presidential vote, and won four seats in the House of Representatives (Nohlen, 2005:203).

The Ortodoxo Party sustained their almost fanatical attacks on government corruption. Chibás accused Prío (whose father-in-law had been conveniently appointed Director of the National Lottery) of “buying off government and opposition senators with free lottery tickets which they sold at a good profit”, and it was claimed that the Vice-President, Alonso Pujol, alone was earning \$30,000 a month from the free lottery ticket fraud (*British Embassy*, Dispatch No. 20, February 16 1949). The party’s obsession with the issue of corruption began to gain traction not only amongst its own supporters but also amongst the electorate more generally (Ihlich, 2012:195). The Ortodoxo leaders’ popularity only increased when Prío imprisoned him for a short time in 1949, on a charge of ‘contempt’ (Thomas, 2001:482).

A diaphragmatic hernia had struck Chibás down with illness for much of 1950, but he contested the mid-term senatorial elections nonetheless (Ameringer, 2000:144). He accused the senate of being a den of iniquity and promised to act as a safeguard against the exploiters of the people (*Bohemia*, April 30 1950:25). An election poster portrayed a battle scene in which ‘Eddy’ would be the people’s ‘trench’ against corruption (*Bohemia*, May 19:81). Despite his poor health, the Ortodoxo leader won the Havana senatorial seat in 1950. The party won nine parliamentary seats, which was more than any other party outside of the winning government coalition<sup>23</sup> (Nohlen, 2005:203). Ehrlich argues that the Auténticos won a majority in 1950, by throwing stolen public funds at senatorial races and resorting to “shady methods” (Ehrlich, 2012:299). In a poll taken just after the mid-term elections, Chibás was voted the leading presidential candidate in Cuba, with 26.25 per cent of the vote (Batista came in second, the Auténtico ‘Miguelito’ Suárez was third) (*Bohemia*, June 25 1950:84).

Chibás maintained his momentum. A second poll taken almost year later showed that he was still the most preferred presidential candidate in the country; he had increased his popularity to 29.7 per cent (Batista was still second, whilst Prío’s Auténtico candidates trailed in fourth place behind Pepe San Martín a Grauist candidate) (Ameringer, 2000:153). Chibás led in all six provinces, and, barring an Auténtico alliance with another party, looked like a possible future president.

In his enthusiasm to incriminate the Prío government, ‘Eddy’ had accused the Education Minister Aureliano Sánchez Arango of having plundered the treasury to fund real estate purchases in Guatemala, but he had a difficult time substantiating his allegations. After two months of failing to provide evidence, public opinion had begun to question the validity of the allegations, and ‘Eddy’ faced the greatest crisis of his political career (Ameringer, 2000:154). Pressure

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<sup>23</sup> The government coalition consisted of the Auténtico, Democrat and Republican party’s. The coalition secured 42 of the 66 parliamentary seats in 1950.

mounted as violent clashes claimed the lives of two of his supporters (Batista, 1964:28). On August 5 1951 Chibás decided to settle the dispute once and for all. He declared that he was hoping to sacrifice his own life to “arouse the Cuban nation and stir its conscience” (Ibid). With that, he shot himself in the abdomen ‘live’ on air during his radio broadcast. The shot did not ring out ‘live’ on air as intended. Chibás had overrun his allotted time slot and his listeners heard an advert for Café Pilón rather than the fatal shot (Skierka,2004:29). The Ortodoxo leader had risen to national prominence by shooting himself in the abdomen in 1939. It seems that his ‘suicide’, had actually been an attempt to garner sympathy or shock by recreating his earlier stunt. He even shot himself in exactly the same place as before, the bullet took the same trajectory, but this time, the enigmatic ‘Eddy’ Chibás died (Moreno, 2007:72).

The death of Eddy Chibás initiated an explosion of grief which threatened to topple the Prío government (Ameringer, 2000:155). *Bohemia* (which was edited by his Chibas’ friend and Ortodoxo supporters Miguel Ángel Quevedo) dedicated an entire issue to his passing. Its editorial commented that “con Chibás muere la figura política más limpia de toda la historia republicana” (*Bohemia*, August 19 1951:95). As many as 300,000 mourners escorted Chibás’ body to the Colón cemetery, in what was the “greatest demonstration in Cuban history” (Ameringer, 2000:155). According to Cabrera Infante, Fidel Castro wanted to march on the presidential palace to depose Prío that day. If Pardo Llada had not vetoed the plan, the Ortodoxos could have easily succeeded (Ibid).

The death of the most honest and popular politician of the Auténtico era resulted in a power vacuum which threatened to destabilise the government and the entire political system. The perceived legitimacy of the democratic process never recovered. The death plunged the country into strikes, protests and general discontent. The Ortodoxo Party declared that Cuba was living “under a pirate flag” (Ameringer, 2000:156).

The death of Chibás obviously shook Prío, whose actions in the following weeks were remarkable. He threatened to resign and turn the government over to the military authorities. The president commanded the police to stop students demonstrating against a bus fare increase by any means necessary. If this were not bizarre enough, on September 19, he delivered a speech which criticised everybody from business leaders to unions, the media to political parties. The president finally blamed all of Cuba’s problems on the PSP (Ameringer, 200:157). Prío seemed to be doing everything possible to destroy the credibility of the presidency, and was reminiscent of Machado when he promised to bring the ‘weight of the law’ down upon those insulting or showing a lack of respect for Cuban government institutions (Ibid). Within days, Prío’s action group friends were beating cinema-goers for not showing enough respect for images of government officials (Ameringer, 2000:158). “Cubans wondered if the *porra* had been resurrected to deprive Cubans of “the sacred right to whistle” (Ibid). Gangs of masked men carrying machine guns raided the Communist newspaper *Hoy*. The Ortodoxos claimed that Prío was attempting to install a dictatorship (Ameringer, 2000:159). Whilst the

president did quickly rescind the heavy-handed approach, the damage had been done. The legitimacy of the presidency and the political system had been damaged still further.

The Ortodoxo Party had been the “obra de Chibás” (*Bohemia*, August 26:35) and his replacement, Roberto Agramonte, did not possess the charisma of his predecessor (and cousin). Whilst Chibás was irreplaceable, the party could still count on the political astuteness of established leaders such as like *Millo Ochoa* as well as Agramonte, as well as charismatic rising stars like José Pardo Llada and Fidel Castro. A national poll in December 1951 showed that the Ortodoxos stood an excellent chance of winning the presidency in 1952 (*Bohemia*, December 16 1951:127). A majority of 50.54 per cent said they would vote for an opposition presidential candidate, whilst 33.79 per cent said they would vote for a government candidate (the remainder declined to answer, or did not know) (*Bohemia*, December 16 1951:126). Of the opposition voters, 29.29 per cent said they would vote for Agramonte (compared to 14.21 per cent who would vote for Batista).

‘Eddy’ Chibás had almost done too perfect a job in discrediting the Auténticos. His death left an immeasurable vacuum in Cuban politics which no other democratic leader could fill. To many Cubans he was the only leader charismatic, politically astute and popular enough to remedy the sickness of the Auténtico era. Not many Cubans felt that they could disagree with Batista in March 1952 when he claimed that Cuba was in the danger of descending into disorder and lawlessness. If Batista had got past the sentries of democracy, it was because ‘Eddy’ Chibás had inadvertently left the door open.

Corruption, *pistoleros*, the crisis of organised labour and the rise of the Ortodoxo Party were all symptoms of the failings of the Auténticos. The weak Auténtico governments had “proved to be an inadequate substitute for Batista’s authoritarian Bonapartist rule” (Farber, 1976:109). Whilst the Auténticos had been strong enough to drive the *batistiano* candidate from the ballot box in 1944, they were not strong or capable enough to imitate the liberal democracies (the model of which the political system had adopted) of North America or Europe (Farber, 1976:111).

## CHAPTER 4

March 10

### *Order from Chaos?*

Batista's unexpected seizure of power on March 10 1952 was met with remarkable apathy and calm by the vast majority of Cuban people: "what is the most extraordinary feature of the whole affair is the calm with which the people has received the change of regime" (Havana Post, March 12 1952:6). Batista claimed that he had seized power to impose order and end the lawlessness and corruption of the Auténtico years (Batista, 1964:36). Whilst this may have been true, equally, it was extremely unlikely that Batista could have returned to power by democratic vote. He must have realized that a military coup was his only opportunity of returning to power in Cuba (*British Embassy*, Dispatch No. 35, March 19 1952). As already seen, by virtue of his unconstitutional seizure of power, alongside his regime's brutality and abuses of power in the mid-to-late 1950s (which resulted in the one-dimensional caricature), the literature assumes that Batista was deeply unpopular in Cuba at the time he took power. However, this was not necessarily the case. For a start, by 1952, Cuba's discredited political system was akin to a terminally ill patient, and many Cubans were actually relieved to see the demise of the Auténtico government. Some sectors of Cuban society even vested great hopes in a return to the order and prosperity of Batista's first tenure in power. Whatever Batista's level of support amongst the electorate, what is certain is that his rebellion initially faced almost no resistance, no mass protests, and no serious organised opposition whatsoever. On the contrary, in the moment of March 1952, most Cubans demonstrated tolerance or support for Cuba's *caudillo*.

#### **'This is the Man'**

Batista had cut short his 'discreet exile' by returning to Cuban politics in 1948. He won a Las Villas senatorial race without even having to leave Daytona Beach, Florida. Voters in Las Villas had evidently "forgotten his brutal police methods, (remembering) only that meat and butter were cheaper in his time" (English, 2008: 86). The *ex-caudillo* was met by "an enthusiastic welcome from thousands of his supporters who literally mauled him with affection upon his arrival at Rancho Boyeros airport" (Embassy of the United States, November 22 1948). He then founded the PAU (Partido Acción Unitaria) as his election vehicle in March 1949: "El emblema también debía servir de "gancho" político por lo que incluía a Martí y Maceo y debajo un yanque con el lema "Pensamiento y Acción: Trabajo y Progreso" (López Civeira, 1990, 62).

The party's ideology was vague, and the *paupistas* (PAU supporters) were joined by some of the Partido Liberal and Demócrata leaders (López Civeira,

1990, 62-63). PAU primarily existed as a personal election vehicle for Batista. He was so well-known that it was not even necessary to include his name on campaign literature, which simply declared 'Este es el hombre' (this is the man) (English, 208:209). However, the 1950 mid-term elections resulted in electoral disaster, "el desastre se produjo con las elecciones pues sólo lograron 3 alcaldes y 5 representantes" (López Civeira, 1990, 63). This abysmal performance resulted in Batista frantically searching for allies in order to avoid a similar fate in 1952.

Prío's Vice-President Alonso Pujol (whose Partido Republicano had formed part of the winning coalition in 1948), had opted to support Grau in his opposition to Prío during the Auténtico hostilities of 1950 (*Embassy of the United States*, Dispatch 195, November 14 1951). This alliance soon disintegrated, Pujol dissolved the Partido Republicano, and established the PNC (Partido Nacional Cubano). Pujol's new group subsequently nominated the Mayor of Havana, Nicolás Castellano, as its party president. Batista seized this opportunity and allied with the PNC in February 1951, declaring that, "Los partidos de Acción Unitaria y Nacional Cubano, apreciando de igual manera los problemas que el país confronta, desde un plano de serena, reflexiva y enérgica oposición al Gobierno" (*Diario de la Marina*, February 1 1951:6).

Considering the fragmented state of *autenticismo*, the alliance seemed to have somewhat of a credible chance of competitively contesting the scheduled 1952 election (Thomas, 2001:490). However, Castellanos reneged on the agreement in December 1951, when the Auténticos offered his group seven senatorships and the provincial governorship of Havana (Ibid). The breakdown of this alliance all but destroyed Batista's chance of returning to the presidential palace by the democratic route. In December, *Bohemia* wrote that "el general del 'Cuatro de Septiembre' confronta hoy la posición más difícil del cuadro de aspirantes" (Bohemia, December 9 1951:65). Carlos Márquez Sterling predicted that "el caudillo comienza a declinar" (Ibid).

Despite his anti-communist rhetoric following the coup, the General had actually explored the idea of resuming his alliance with the PSP in the months prior to March 10. Talks failed only because the PSP had made it clear that they would actively support the Soviets in the event of direct conflict with the United States, whereas Batista had promised to side with the United States (the war in Korea made such a conflict a real possibility). A PAU-PSP alliance was therefore rendered impractical. The PSP, for their part, had attempted to forge an alliance with the Ortodoxos, but, having failed in this endeavour, they realised that they stood no chance of success and ultimately directed their supporters to vote for the Ortodoxo candidate Roberto Agramonte (Thomas, 2001:490).

Agramonte (who had been a sociology professor and ambassador to Mexico) was known to be politically astute but lacked any of his predecessor's charisma. However, his academic demeanour and steadfast commitment to the Chibás political programme endeared him to the urban middle classes (Thomas, 2001: 490). Hart Phillips argued that the Ortodoxos revolved around the cult of personality of their former leader, and that the "the ghost of Chibás

ran for President with Agramonte as a stand-in” (Hart Phillips, 1959:256). Perhaps the Ortodoxos’ greatest challenge was their commitment to Chibás’s vow not to enter into political pacts or deals, so Agramonte announced that “ganaremos el poder en 1952, como quería Chibás, sin más aliado que el pueblo” (*Bohemia*, December 2 1951:32).

In a national poll published in *Bohemia* in December 1951, Agramonte was the most favoured presidential candidate, with 29.29 per cent support (compared with 17.53 per cent supporting Hevia, and 14.21 per cent Batista) (*Bohemia*, December 16 1951:127). Of those respondents who said that they would support the Ortodoxos, the largest percentage (42.31 per cent) agreed that the Ortodoxos should not enter into any pacts or deals, compared to 29.93 per cent who believed they should enter into ‘some’ deals (but not pacts), and 13.49 per cent who believed that they should enter into both pacts and deals. Of those who believed that the Ortodoxos should enter into pacts or deals, 61.44 per cent believed they should do so with Castellanos, compared with just 3.79 per cent believing that they should do so with Batista (*Bohemia*, December 16 1951:146).

The Ortodoxos gained momentum in early 1952 and their attacks on the Auténticos were ceaseless. The young Ortodoxo congressional candidate, Fidel Castro, had seemingly replaced Chibás as the government’s ‘chief accuser’: “Las pistolas con que se mata, las paga Prío, las máquinas en que se mata, las paga Prío y los hombres que matan, los sostiene Prío” (Castro, *Alerta*, March 2 1952:13). In an article entitled ‘*Yo Acuso*’, Castro accused Prío of acquiring four farms illegally between 1946 and 1949, and of acquiring one of these farms in return for squashing a case against a man for molesting a small child (*Alerta*, January 28 1952:13). In a subsequent exposé, he went undercover to pose as a gardener on Prío’s luxurious La Chata estate, to prove the extent of the president’s embezzlement, he even took photographs (*Alerta*, February 11 1952:1). He claimed that “\$18,000 mensuales dan a las pandillas en palacio” (*Alerta*, March 4 1952:1) and implored the Tribunal de Cuentas to “el vástago de chorro de oro que alimenta al chorro de sangre fratricida que corre por las calles de la capital” (Ibid).

The Auténticos had nominated Carlos Hevia as their 1952 presidential candidate. He had played an important role in the anti-Machado struggle, had served in the ‘100-day government’, and had avoided scandal whilst holding high-profile posts, such as Secretary of State and Minister for Agriculture in the Auténtico governments. However, he primarily owed his nomination to his reputation for honesty, a rare attribute that the Auténticos desperately needed following eight years of scandal (Thomas, 2001:490). The Prío government, however, had left Hevia in a precarious position: the *Bohemia* poll of 1951 concluded that the majority of Cubans thought that Prío had done a ‘bad’ job as president (*Bohemia*, December 16 1951:124), respondents said that the economy, bad administration and gangsterism were the three worst aspects of the Prío government (Ibid:127). Hevia would struggle to win back the electorate’s confidence in the Auténticos in 1952.

## The Bloodless Coup

Batista subsequently claimed that several officers had approached him in the months preceding the *golpe*, and had attempted to convince him to take command of the armed forces, to prevent “the country from plunging into complete chaos” (Batista, 1964:31). He also (somewhat absurdly) claimed that Prío was a secret communist, who had left Cuba clandestinely (without the required constitutional approval) to visit “the red president, (Jacobo) Árbenz” in Guatemala. Prío was apparently planning a *golpe* of his own, as a response to Ortodoxo threats to imprison him in La Cabaña if they were to win the election<sup>24</sup> (Batista, 1964:29-33). Several authors dismiss these claims: “Prío, despite his condonation of gangsterism and graft, retained certain democratic predilections which make it unlikely that he seriously wanted to interfere with the constitution” (Thomas, 2001:492).

The coup’s timing was impeccable and the date of March 10 was not arbitrary. Three days earlier the majority of the cabinet had formally resigned in preparation for the electoral campaign (as constitutionally required). On March 9, *Carteles* had joked “CRISIS MINISTERIAL ¡Cualquiera sale!” (*Carteles*, March 9 1952:26). The joke implied that there were no ministers left in office, as they had all left and were too busy campaigning. Prío was away on his La Chata estate in the suburbs of Havana, preparing a list of names to temporarily fill cabinet positions until after the election. With most of the ministries leaderless, the government was at its weakest (*British Embassy*, Dispatch No. 35, March 19 1952).

Nevertheless, the *madrugón* was entirely unexpected : “una atmósfera de sorpresa se apoderaba de todos” (*Carteles*, March 16 1952:52). In the early hours of March 10, Batista entered Campamento Columbia, accompanied by just one captain and his .38 revolver (*Havana Post*, March 11 1952:1). With the complicity of his co-conspirators, he assumed command of its four infantry battalions and ordered the arrest of the *Graust* military high command: Chief of Staff Ruperto Cabrera, Inspector-General of the Army Quirino Uría and Adjutant General Rogelio Soca Llanes (Thomas, 2001:495). The *golpistas* simultaneously seized key points across the capital (such as the La Cabaña fortress, the air force and navy headquarters, police and military commands, radio stations and CTC headquarters). This was a pattern repeated throughout the country (Ameringer, 2000:180). Just “an hour and seventeen minutes” after entering Columbia, *batistianos* “had control of every military post in Cuba” (Los Angeles Times, March 11 1952).

Prío and his ministers had assembled at the presidential palace at 5am; the president appeared to be paralyzed with indecision and his cabinet was acting hysterically. Army commands in Matanzas and Santiago de Cuba had initially resisted the *golpe* and remained loyal to the government (*Embassy of the United States*, Dispatch No. 599, March 10 1952). Ameringer argues that Prío

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<sup>24</sup> The La Cabaña fortress was Havana’s most notorious prison, it also served as a military base.



could have resisted the coup if he had left the capital to take command of the provincial commands sooner (Ameringer, 2000:179).

Soon after 6am, a small detachment of soldiers arrived at the palace, offering to 'reinforce' the presidential guard. Realising that Batista had sent them, Prío's guard disarmed the group and a Prío aide shot dead the detachment's officer, Lieutenant Negrete (Thomas, 2001:496). An FEU delegation arrived at 6.30am to offer to support the constitutional process by resisting the coup (Ameringer, 2000:180-181). The students requested access to the emergency arms caches which existed for just this type of occasion. Prío agreed to send arms to the university, but, as the students left optimistically to await the delivery of the arms, Prío left the palace "without having done anything" (Thomas, 2001:497). The government in fact abandoned the palace at 8.15am when informed that tanks, dispatched from Campamento Columbia, were heading towards them. By 8.30am, *batistianos* assumed control of the presidential palace (*Carteles*, March 16 1952:33). Prío, along with his brother Francisco and leading Auténtico 'Tony' Varona, headed to Matanzas, but, upon arriving three hours later, discovered that *batistianos* had seized the military command there (British Embassy, Dispatch No. 35, March 19 1952).

The president learned that "the popular masses "were in the streets and up in arms" (Ameringer, 2000:181) in Camagúey and Oriente provinces, and Ortodoxo leader 'Millo' Ochoa offered to send a plane to fly Prío to Santiago de Cuba to organise resistance. The PSP newspaper *Hoy* reported "profunda commoción y encendidas protestas" (*Hoy*, March 12 1952:1) in the interior of the country, and claimed that spontaneous protests had erupted in Camagúey and Oriente provinces, closing streets and causing chaos. Gladys Marel García-Perez (1999) argues that popular outrage was immediate and spontaneous: "people in Las Villas, Matanzas, Havana, and Oriente took to the streets and parks to protest the coup, and students and workers called for a general strike." García-Perez argues that "students, professionals, workers, and members of the Ortodoxo and the Auténtico Parties ... rallied to defend the beleaguered government" (García-Perez, 1999:2). However these claims remain uncorroborated and are contradicted by other studies and the media coverage at the time. It seems that whilst there were some protests outside of the capital, they could not be described as major incidents and had been quelled within hours. Whatever the case, the president gave little or no encouragement to those military officers in a position to oppose Batista (Alexander, 2002:134); rather, he accepted defeat and returned to the capital to seek asylum in the Mexican embassy (Ameringer, 2000:181). Prío and his ministers were then given safe passage to Mexico a few days later (*The Washington Post*, March 12, 1952). "Batista was now President – by the grace of his balls" (Moreno, 2007:97).

### **The Flight of the Politicos**

Radio stations had been seized and ordered at gun point to play music only, while rumours abounded that Prío was being held prisoner or was missing, or that shots were coming from inside the presidential palace; *Carteles* described the day of the golpe as one of "pasividad y silencio", as the "pueblo se debatía

entre versiones confusas y contradictorias” (Carteles, March 16 1952:52). The United States’ Ambassador, Willard Beulac, observed that, other than a small student protest at the university, there were no disturbances whatsoever in Havana. He also observed that there was great jubilation amongst soldiers and sailors (*Embassy of the United States*, Dispatch No. 0292, March 10 1952). Indeed, the coup had been met with overwhelming apathy, tolerance or impotence by the vast majority of the Cuban people: “Batista had taken over the military, claimed to be in control of the country, and no one was trying to stop him. No government reaction, no resistance, no fighting, nothing” (Moreno, 2007:96).

Opposition politicians (those that had not fled) immediately met the coup with public statements denouncing it, but, otherwise, there was no active resistance. Farber argues that the political leaders of the Auténtico era had become accustomed to peace, and by 1952 lacked the capacity to challenge Batista with anything other than words (Farber, 1976:150).

In subsequent days and weeks, politicians who attempted to meet in large groups were harassed and detained; for example, when a group of Auténtico congressmen met in the house of the ex-minister Arturo Hernández Tallaheche, the national police arrested eleven of the group for illegally congregating (*Diario de la Marina*, March 13 1952:1). When congressmen tried to enter the Capitolio<sup>25</sup>, they were prevented in doing so by soldiers firing over their heads (*Havana Post*, March 18 1952:1). Grau, who had been detained during the morning of March 10 and then released without charge (he was supposedly detained by over-zealous young officers), denounced the coup: “una situación defacto resultaría intolerable” (*Diario de la Marina*, March 16 1952:1). Hevia too released a statement denouncing the golpe:

“Torrentes de sangre y el sacrificio de varias generaciones culminaron en el régimen jurídico que el pueblo de Cuba se dió con la concurrencia de todos los Cubanos, en la constitución de 1940 . . . y ahora poniendo por encima de los supremos intereses de la patria la ambición de poder, se lanza un reto al pueblo de Cuba, para someterlo por la fuerza a una servidumbre inicua . . . Condeno indignado este crimen de esa patria, y fiel a la tradición de mis mayores y a los más altos ideales del pueblo de Cuba” (*Carteles*, March 16 1952:28).

Despite the denunciations, there was no attempt to actively resist the coup. Moreno argues that the Auténticos in government had the least to lose, since they were “on their way out, and they knew it, which could explain their reluctance to take an open and strong stance against Batista and his soldiers” (Moreno, 2007:96). Prío and his ministers had already made their fortunes in office, and the majority appreciated that their ministerial careers were at an end anyway (coup or no coup). They therefore had little to gain from risking their lives opposing Batista. Either way, the government’s feeble response ensured the end of *autenticismo*: “the loss of prestige of the Auténticos hit bottom with the quick stampede of its leaders towards Miami (Ibid). The United States’ ambassador believed that “the general attitude of disillusionment with the

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<sup>25</sup> The Capital building was the seat of government in Cuba and home to Congress.

Auténticos makes a return in strength of that party seem unlikely” (*Embassy of the United States*, Dispatch No. 1619, April 1 1952). Auténtico activists therefore now found themselves leaderless, fragmented and furious with their leaders’ abandonment; some attempted to persuade Ortodoxo supporters to join them in building a “civic front” (Thomas, 1971:510).

Ironically, the most noble Auténtico response came from Prío’s Education Minister, Aureliano Sánchez Arango (the minister whom Chibás had accused of stealing children’s lunch money to pay for real estate purchases in Guatemala). In the weeks following the coup, Sánchez Arango established the Triple A group (Asociación de Amigos de Aureliano), which became the first of the anti-Batista insurgency groups of the 1950s (Llerena, 1978:53); it was primarily comprised of Auténtico and Directorio Revolucionario supporters and eventually became responsible for planting bombs on a daily basis in Havana. Sánchez Arango became the symbol for what little resistance there was in the capital in the months following the coup (Llerena, 1978:54). Roberto Luque Escalona aptly sums up that he was “brave but without popularity” (Ameringer, 2000:183).

The Ortodoxos were probably the greatest political casualties of the coup. The pro-Ortodoxo newspaper *Alerta* led the media’s opposition to the coup. Arguing that Batista had destroyed a constitutional process built up over many years, its editor Ramón Vasconcelos blasted the Prío government and the Cuban people for their docility and lack of conviction (*Alerta*, March 11 1952:1). Moreno (who was an Ortodoxo youth leader at the time) argues that “it made sense for the Ortodoxos to lead the resistance, since we had the most to lose if Batista got away with a military putsch less than three months before an election we were sure to win” (Moreno, 2007:97). Agramonte publicly denounced the coup, arguing that “Este cuartelazo, que quebranta el ritmo constitucional de la nación, tiene la repulsa unánime del pueblo cubano” . ‘Millo’ Ochoa spoke of a “golpe militar incalificable” (*Carteles*, March 16 1952:33). Moreno recalls attending an emergency meeting (chaired by Ortodoxo youth leader Pepe Iglesias) on March 10:

“Pepe didn’t have much to say and, contrary to my expectation, was calm and collected, didn’t foresee any counteraction to the military takeover of the government, didn’t have a course of action to recommend, showed no inclination to lead in any direction, and went on to explain in unerring logic that we had nothing to fight with Batista with, even that even if we could get our hands on some weapons, we wouldn’t know how to operate them or what to do with them” (Moreno, 2007:97).

Fidel Castro later argued that the Ortodoxos could have resisted, arguing that Chibás’s memory had left an “immense influence” on the Cuban people, and that the party enjoyed great “moral authority” in Cuba at the time (Farber, 1976:152). Nevertheless, the party (already weakened by the death of their unifying leader) was fragmented and ultimately collapsed as a unified party in the weeks and months following the coup (Farber, 1976:151). Farber argues that the collapse reflected the feelings of the Cuban middle classes to which most of the Ortodoxo membership belonged. The middle classes lacked

ideology and “strong organizational autonomy” (Farber, 1976:152), and it was this which resulted in them avoiding direct confrontation with the *golpistas*.

The eradication of the *grupos de acción* was one undisputed benefit of the coup. These groups suddenly found themselves without political protection and melted away almost overnight. Leaders such as Policarpo Soler and Jesús ‘*El Extraño*’ González Cartas fled and eventually turned up in the Dominican Republic where they hired out their ‘expertise’ to the Trujillo regime (*Embassy of the United States*, Dispatch No. 1072, April 25 1952). In the months that followed, rank and file action group members “took up positions as defenders or opponents of Batista” (Thomas, 1971:560). Of all the apparently fearless action group leaders, only the MSR leader Masferrer supported the students at the university on March 10. Ameringer argues that his subsequent service to Batista could have meant he was there to infiltrate rather than to help the students (Ameringer, 2000:182).

### **The Students: Brave but Unprepared**

As the day of the coup progressed, the students declared a strike and essentially remained the only voices of dissent in the capital (albeit from the safety of the University<sup>26</sup>). Moreno remembers that “the only visible opposition came from the University students who marched and demonstrated and shouted against the government through loudspeakers at the bottom of the steps leading to University Hill on San Lázaro Street” (Moreno, 2007:133). *Carteles* wrote that “La escalinata universitaria durante la mañana del 10 de marzo. Grupos de estudiantes se reunieron en el recinto universitario para expresar su protesta contra el golpe militar” (*Carteles*, March 16 1952:51).

The protesting students became Batista’s greatest concern in the initial weeks and months following the coup; he tried to appease them by promising to build a \$10 million Ciudad Universitaria, complete with brand-new facilities and even boarding houses, but the students rebuffed these efforts and adopted the mantra *La Universidad ni se vende ni se rinde*. The FEU organised successive demonstrations in the months following the coup, frequently clashing with police (Llerena, 1978:53). They demanded “the restoration of the 1940 constitution, the reestablishment of civil government, and the holding of free elections” (Suchlicki, 1988:107). Days after the coup, Fidel Castro delivered an emotional speech at the tomb of Chibás in Havana’s Colón cemetery (*Diario de la Marina*, March 18 1952:7). The students soon adopted Chibás as their martyr, his principles energising students, as chants of “Chibás, Chibás, Chibás” rang out throughout the university (Thomas, 1971:508). In April, the FEU staged a mock funeral and symbolically buried the Cuban constitution:

“Los estudiantes de la FEU han mantenido su actitud de protesta contra el régimen del presidente Batista, primero colocando cartelones en la colina y ahora “velando” la constitución y llevando el féretro simbólico hasta el Rincón Martiano, en la tarde del domingo 6” (*Carteles*, April 13 1952:34)

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<sup>26</sup> Government or military authorities were prohibited from entering the grounds of the university by the constitution of 1940. Batista would have risked outrage (or bloodshed) if he had violated this revered clause of the constitution.

Some students began to follow the enigmatic Ortodoxo and university teacher Rafael García Bárcena. In the months following the coup, he had established the MNR (Movimiento Nacional Revolucionaria) as an anti-Batista militant group (Pérez Llody, 2007:71). García Bárcena was a “brilliant intellectual – philosopher, poet, journalist (and) professor” (Llerena, 1978:45); on March 10 he had been a teacher at the Escuela Superior de Guerra (a training school for army officers), but lost his position as a result of his opposition to Batista. He argued that the *golpe* had initiated “a new revolutionary cycle in Cuba” (Llerena, 1978:46). The MNR fashioned itself after the ABC and DEU groups of the anti-*Machadato* struggle (Pérez Llody, 2007:76). MNR activist Mario Llerena argued that the group was “more a fluid state of mind than a real revolutionary movement” (Llerena, 1978:49), and that it achieved little beyond theorising in its short existence. The MNR crescendo occurred in April 1953, when it marched on Campamento Columbia, armed with elderly guns and knives. García Bárcena apparently had ‘friends’ amongst the officers, and had conspired with them so that they would rise up with him to precipitate a revolution. The attempt failed, however, and García Bárcena was imprisoned for two years, being “tortured so vilely that his spirit and any political that he might have had were finished” (Thomas, 2001:514).

Fidel Castro of course launched a similar attack four months later. His now famous attack on the Moncada barracks in Oriente province had been intended to seize a military garrison (where some one thousand heavily armed soldiers were stationed) using the element of surprise. Like García Bárcena, he hoped that its success would ignite rebellion throughout the country (Thomas, 1971:543). The attack, however, was marred by mishaps and confusion and, after one hour of fighting, had failed miserably. Of Castro’s original one hundred and sixty fighters (some dropped out just prior to the assault): around eighty were captured on the day of (or the day after) the attack, a further sixty eight were killed either in the fighting or tortured and murdered while imprisoned (Thomas, 1971:545). Whilst the attack itself was a disaster, the event and Castro’s ‘History will absolve me’ speech at his subsequent trial, provided some of the impetus for the resulting anti-Batista struggle of the mid-to-late 1950s.

### **Communist and CTC Responses**

The PSP reaction to the coup was full of contradictions. Batista clearly distanced himself from his former allies upon seizing power: the new Minister of Work, Jesús Portocarrero, warned of the dangers of communism, days after taking power: “El gobierno se propone preservar al pueblo del peligro real y positivo que significa el comunismo” (*Diario de la Marina*, March 12:1). Equally, Hoy denounced the break of constitutional process in the strongest terms. However, it has been suggested that some members welcomed the breakdown of the democratic system, and there were even rumours that PSP and PAU members worked together in the aftermath of the coup. Party leader Juan Marinello vaguely assured a historian, in the weeks after the coup, that the PSP “would probably not resume its old alliance with Batista” (Thomas, 1971:506). Marinello and Blas Roca continued to live openly in Havana throughout the second *Batistato*, without experiencing the same level of

persecution which haunted other oppositionists from the mid-1950s (Goldenberg, 1965:165). Some communists who had held government civil service posts remained in their jobs after March 10, and some were even newly appointed (Thomas, 1971:506). Goldenberg claims that, following the coup "five of their senior officials (communists) had joined the Batista government" (Goldenberg, 1965:165.). The party was able to publish at least four journals (whilst other oppositionists were unable to do the same); some leaders were detained, whilst others were permitted to travel to and from the Soviet Union freely, and when Batista established an 'anti-communist' police unit in the summer of 1953, it only had a small staff and few resources (Thomas, 1971:506). The lack of determination to 'crack down' on communism could have stemmed from the fact that, whilst armed groups such as the 'Triple A' or MNR (or indeed Castro's 'July 26 movement') were committed to armed action against the *Batistato*, the PSP remained committed to peaceful opposition (and remained so until the very final months of the 1956-1958 insurrection). The PSP had become accustomed to the emergence of "ultra-revolutionary movements arising on their left and was understandingly suspicious of all of them" (Jackson, 1969:11); they believed that those who pursued armed struggle were 'putschist' and adventurers, and that strikes could defeat Batista. However, Batista's influence over Mujal and the CTC (and therefore his influence over most of the trade unions in Cuba) blunted the effectiveness of this strategy (Farber, 1976:163).

*Hoy* was permitted to continue to operate (even if it clearly opposed the *golpe*). The newspaper unequivocally declared its opposition: "el pueblo está contra el golpe militar" (*Hoy*, March 29 1952:1). The Communist organ argued that the coup's objective had been to "poner el poder en manos de Batista para que reagrupe las fuerzas gobiernistas, disperse a las masas electorales ortodoxas y prepare las condiciones para una victoria electoral" (*Hoy*, March 15 1952:1). Despite this opposition, the newspapers criticism of Batista was clearly muted, it more energetically attacked the record of the Prío government, the United States and Mujal, rather than Batista. *Hoy* accused Prío of having left the palace on March 10 with eleven million pesos in suitcases (*Hoy*, March 20 1952:1). The newspaper was equally critical towards the United States. On March 21, it published a cartoon which depicted the Cuban constitution being trampled on by 'Uncle Sam' and a (cryptic) military boot (*Hoy*, March 21 1952:2); in another edition, a cartoon depicted 'Uncle Sam' strangling a communist worker to death (*Hoy*, March 25 1952:2). Mujal was also criticised frequently, and portrayed as an opportunist and a gangster (*Hoy*, March 14 1952:1); a cartoon depicted a smiling guitar-strumming Mujal, alongside a gangster at a jovial party, the caption read: "Y tú ¿cómo estás encantado de la vida?" (*Hoy*, March 12 1952:2). According to the British ambassador, communist labour leaders were indeed "operating under the guise of *paupistas*" against Mujal (British Embassy, Dispatch No. 64, April 10 1952). Publicly, Batista opposed the (supposed) growing communist influence in Cuba: days after the coup he announced that "Cuba will line up with the free world in the impending conflict, between communist and democracy" (The Washington Post, March 18th 1952); however, privately it seems that he was not really sure what to do with the PSP all, he seems to have considered them a much lesser threat than other opposition group.

As for the CTC, the *golpistas* seized the Cuban telephone exchange and Palacio de los Trabajadores (CTC headquarters) on the morning of March 10, thus preventing any effective CTC resistance (*United States Embassy*, Despatch No. 1481, March 11 1952). The Auténtico-led CTC executive initially opposed the coup and attempted to organise a national strike, but were slow in doing so; some (but not all) finally met in front of the Batista-occupied Workers' Palace mid-morning on March 10, but the *golpistas* seizure of communications rendered it practically impossible to relay national strike orders. Some unions, such as the Electrical Workers Federation, did not receive the order to strike, while others, such as the Telephone Workers Federation, received the order but decided not to obey it (Alexander, 2002:135). The result was a confused and inconsistent CTC reaction:

“There was, it is true, a paralysation of urban transport in Havana. There were also strikes in two petroleum refineries, various railroad delegations and one or another labor center. There was partial abstention in the Ariguanabo Textile Firm and some other enterprises but the rest of the workers in other economic activities either did not hear about or ignored the calls of the CTC”  
(Alexander, 2002:135).

Alexander argues that, since the Auténticos had seized control of the CTC in 1947, they had succeeded in orientating it around “economic rather than political objectives” (Alexander, 2002:136). Workers perceived the confederation to be an organisation through which they could demand pay increases, but not an organisation from which they should follow political directives. Political events not directly affecting their particular union seemingly mattered little to the average workers, and most would not risk their jobs for some abstract political cause that they did not understand or about which they did not care. The strike of March 10 was a failure, and by 11pm Mujal and Batista had reached an agreement (Alexander, 2002:141): Batista promised to respect CTC gains won under the Auténticos, and agreed not to interfere with the running of the union and not to purge any of its leadership. In return, the Palacio de los Trabajadores was returned to the CTC by March 14, and Mujal (the hitherto ardent Auténtico) switched allegiances, declaring his support for Batista; Mujal remarkably announced that “the workers were solidly behind General Batista in his struggle for a better Cuba”. Alexander argues that (despite the fact they had been Auténtico political appointees) the CTC executive was primarily motivated by financial rather than political factors: they had received \$300,000 annually from the Auténtico governments and were primarily interested in a continuation of this agreement with Batista, no matter the political ramifications (Alexander, 2002:141).

### **‘Here I am, back again’**

In judging Batista's popularity at the time of the coup, the literature relies on *Bohemia's* national survey published in December 1951, which placed the ex-caudillo in third place in the election behind the Auténtico and Ortodoxo candidates (*Bohemia*, December 16 1951:127; Alexander, 2002; Dominguez, 1978; Farber, 1976; López Civeira, 1990; Ameringer 2000; Thomas 2001). However, it has surprisingly neglected two later studies published by Cuba's

other major weekly, *Carteles*. Just a month before the coup, the study placed Batista in second place, with 23.40 per cent support, compared to Agramonte with 29.76 per cent support, and Hevia with 15.78 per cent (*Carteles*, February 3 1952:30). The literature's reliance on the earlier *Bohemia* study is flawed. Firstly, it relies on one individual source and ignores the later (and therefore perhaps more relevant) surveys. Secondly, because the *Bohemia* survey was conducted at exactly the time that Batista's alliance with Castellanos disintegrated, this development could only have negatively impacted on the electorate's perception of Batista's chances of success at that exact moment.

The *Carteles* (February 1952) surveys concluded that Batista was the most recognisable candidate, with 75.90 per cent of respondents recognising him (compared to 70.31 per cent for Agramonte, and 65.91 per cent for Hevia). A majority of 46.75 per cent believed that Batista would do a better job of improving or developing health care, education, the economy and industrialisation (compared to just 10.97 per cent for Agramonte and 10.43 per cent for Hevia) (*Carteles*, February 10 1952:30). Whilst this seemed encouraging for the General, only 3.86 per cent of respondents thought that he was honest (compared to 48.32 per cent for Agramonte and 23.14 per cent for Hevia), suggesting that, whilst the Cuban people believed that Batista was the most 'competent' candidate, they also thought that he was (by far) the most dishonest (*Carteles*, February 10 1952:32).

A second *Carteles* survey looked specifically at the central and eastern provinces of Las Villas, Camagüey and Oriente. It suggested that, whilst 25.76 per cent of respondents preferred Agramonte, Batista was, within a margin of error, on 23.14 per cent, while Hevia was third, with 18.59 per cent (*Carteles*, February 3 1952:30). Whilst this study did not suggest that Batista was the most popular candidate nor that he stood any chance of winning the election, it did suggest that he did have some support: more support than all the other candidates amongst rural Cubans, females, as well as the overwhelming support of black and mixed race Cubans (38.71 per cent of black Cubans in the eastern provinces said they would vote for Batista, compared to just 23.64 for Agramonte) (*Carteles*, February 3 1952:32), and greater support amongst the electorate than *Bohemia's* earlier surveys had suggested, and even greater than the Auténtico candidate. Whilst these surveys suggested popularity amongst specific sectors, they also suggested that he was most unpopular amongst the (predominantly white) urban middle classes. Perhaps most pertinently, the surveys demonstrated his reputation for dishonesty, in an election in which the attribute of *honestidad* mattered most.

Indeed, some historians have seen such support, especially amongst richer or more elite sectors. In her memoirs, Hart Phillips argued that "many businessmen and merchants were pleased by the coup, feeling he would bring law and order to the country, stability that meant prosperity and a sounder economy" (Hart Phillips, 1959:260). Pérez-Stable (1999) concurs that the *clases económicas* (commercial and industrial classes) generally welcomed the coup and looked to Batista to restore public order. Morley argues that the coup was particularly welcomed by Cuban and United States entrepreneurs, who believed that the coup would bring stability and an end to on-going labour



disputes (Morley, 1982:147). Aguila argues that many Cubans supported the coup, including “prominent national figures, business organizations, corporate interests, working-class leaders, and the leadership of the Partido Socialista Popular either directly endorsed the coup and rejoiced at the prospect of returning order and stability”, or as with the PSP “tacitly approved the breakdown of the democratic regime” (Aguila, 1994:31).

Members of the executive board of the Association of Landowners of Cuba paid its respects to the new government to avoid disruption to the *zafra*. The prestigious Economic Society of the Republic equally urged the acceptance of the new regime. Representatives of the Asociación de Hacendados de Cuba, Banqueros de La Habana, Asociación de Colonos and Asociación de Veteranos visited Batista to offer their support (*Carteles*, March 23:73), while the Asociación Nacional de Industriales de Cuba and its President José R. Pérez made it clear that they did not want anything to affect production and offered the government their full cooperation (*Diario de la Marina*, March 19:1). Within five days of the coup, the “Havana Exchange, industrialists, colonos, banking firms forming the Association of Banks of Cuba, and the Havana Clearing House had pledged their support of the government” (Pérez, 1976:132). Hence, it is clear that Batista was not without influential support.

However, Batista consolidated his position elsewhere by visiting 119 of Cuba's 126 mayors within weeks of taking power (*Carteles*, March 23:49), and also issued a number of populist measures. At his first cabinet meeting on March 31, he announced the reinstatement of a number of school teachers who had been removed by the Auténticos, and also that all teachers would receive an enormous 150 per cent pay rise (*British Embassy*, Dispatch No. 43, April 2 1952); he also announced cash payments for married women with children, and a house-building programme to bring affordable housing to workers and peasants alike within one year (*British Embassy*, Dispatch No. 43, April 2 1952). The Partido Demócrata supported Batista within weeks, while the police rank and file welcomed Batista after new police chief, Rafael Salas Cañizares, promised them new equipment and patrol cars, the recruitment of 2,000 new police officers and a 30 per cent pay increase (*Havana Post*, April 1 1952:1).

Batista was also welcomed by powerful conservative interests. The Catholic Church wasted no time in welcoming and officially blessing the coup; Cardinal Manuel Arteaga and the vast majority of his Bishops immediately congratulated the General, although two or three bishops were privately opposed, and one Franciscan priest, Father Julián de Bastarrica, publicly denounced it. The majority of the Church embraced the golpistas, and the *Virgen de la Caridad*, “Cuba’s national religious symbol, was carried by military plane on a national pilgrimage . . . and through her presence the church officially conferred its blessing on the coup” (Kirk, 1989:44).

Alejandro de la Fuente’s (2000) study provides in-depth analysis of the response of the Afro-Cuban population. Fuente discusses the support that the Federación de Sociedades de la raza de color immediately bestowed upon the new regime. Fuente describes how the federation’s President (Prisciliano

Piedra) asked all Afro-Cuban social clubs to “display their frank and strong support for the new leadership of the nation” (Fuente, 2000:243). Fuente argues that expectations were high amongst afro-Cubans who overwhelmingly supported Batista. His study discusses the significance of the appointment of several Afro-Cuban leaders (such as: Generoso Campos Marquetti, Aquilino Lombard, Gustavo Urrutia, Gastón Baquero and Luis Oliva Pérez) to the consultative council which replaced congress; as well as the importance of the two Afro-Cuban appointees to Batista’s first cabinet: Miguel Angel Céspedes as minister for justice and Justo Salas as minister without portfolio. Fuente quotes a Cuban staff member at the United States embassy who confirmed that “Batista is generally assumed to have considerable sympathy for the negro and his problems (he is, of course, widely thought to have some small proportion of Negro blood himself).” (Ibid:249).

Cuba’s leading conservative newspaper, *Diario de la Marina*, was Batista’s most vocal supporter in the media, announcing that the coup had been met with absolute peace and normality, and leading daily tributes to Batista and the new *Jefe de Ejército* General Tabernilla. In an interview with the newspaper, Tabernilla said that “todo el mundo acude al trabajo. La vida nacional no se ha interrumpido” (*Diario de la Marina*, March 13:1), and, in the subsequent days and weeks, *Diario de la Marina* enthusiastically reported the speeches and announcements of the new government, publishing full colour photographs of the new leaders and excitingly reporting their latest declarations. They were particularly obsessed with Batista’s wife, Marta Fernández Miranda de Batista; articles appeared daily concerning her various charitable donations to places such as the Escuela Parroquial de Morón, Hospital Infantil de San Juan de Dios or Madres Oblatas de Camagüey (*Diario de la Marina*, March 30, 1952:1). One article detailed a day in the life of Marta ‘at home’ on the family estate as she received her high-society friends (*Diario de la Marina*, March 13 1952:1), but the British embassy also compared her to Evita Perón for her dedication to public works and charitable projects (*British Embassy*, Dispatch No. 64, April 30 1952). Marta would most famously be responsible for the construction of the iconic twenty metre high *Cristo de la Habana*.

The *Havana Post*, popular amongst industrialists, entrepreneurs and foreigners, enthusiastically supported the coup. Since the annual Havana Carnival had been scheduled two weeks after the coup and was permitted to go ahead as planned, the *Havana Post* claimed that the peaceful nature of the carnival was indicative of the lack of opposition to the coup in the capital:

“It could well be that to the success of the week-end carnival celebrations of attached a message of political significance. If there were people here in this capital ready to cause trouble, this would have been an ideal opportunity for them to go into action. What could be more helpful to them than to be able to wear disguises and voluminous garb under the latter of which could be concealed all kinds of weapons including machineguns and bombs? Nothing occurred. From the fact that nothing occurred with such excellent, made to order opportunities for potential trouble –makers can reasonably be deducted that trouble-makers at the present time are in short supply in Havana. The spirit of joviality was unrestrained” (Havana Post, March 18 1952:1)

The centre-right newspaper *El Mundo* argued that Prío had collaborated with criminals and that Batista should be given the benefit of the doubt. Its editorial argued that all of the facts were not yet clear, and that Cubans should avoid bloodshed and work for the restoration of constitutional process peacefully (*El Mundo*, March 12 1952:1). The newspaper *Mañana* defended Batista, arguing that the country had disintegrated into chaos, democracy had ceased to exist anyway, and that Batista was the only person capable of restoring stability (*Mañana*, March 12 1952:2).

The British ambassador Adrian Homan observed that the country had met the coup quietly, even if they were not contented. Holman praised the *golpistas* for behaving well, and for not unnecessarily abusing civil liberties or politically persecuting opponents to any great extent. The British generally supported the coup, arguing that “nothing could be worse than the degrading depths reached by the last (Prío) regime” (*British Embassy*, Dispatch No. 43, April 2 1952); they had been highly critical of Prío, arguing that his “weakness and unreliability of character, hardly fitted him for shouldering the heavy responsibilities of office in a land such as this, where economics, labour problems and communism play such an important role”, and agreed with Batista that “drastic action” had to be taken to avoid the country deteriorating still further, and concluding that the “people should be grateful to Batista for the present intervention” (*British Embassy*, Dispatch No. 35, March 19 1952). Holman argued that, whilst Batista himself was full of good intentions and had superb attributes, his inner circle were of a substandard quality and that his cabinet was “overloaded with dead wood”; he complained that the Consultative Council which had replaced Congress was full of his incompetent cronies and political allies, and was too big to actually achieve anything (*British Embassy*, Dispatch No. 64, April 10 1952).

However, the differences between the British and US reactions were intriguing. The British ambassador took a pragmatic approach, applauding Batista’s commitment to controlling organised labour and eradicating gangsterism, corruption and communism; whilst he recognised that Cubans had started to perceive themselves as beacons of progress and democracy in the region and that the coup had “struck a rude blow at their amour-propre” (*British Embassy*, Dispatch No. 35, March 19 1952), he was generally less concerned with the demise of democracy and much more concerned with the stability and pro-business policies Batista was expected to support.

However, the United States ambassador Willard Beaulac was much more concerned by the break in constitutional process. He argued that, whilst many in Washington disliked the *Auténticos* and would have been pleased to see Batista return via the ballot box, “many were unable to stomach his success as a result of unconstitutional procedure” (*British Embassy*, Dispatch No. 35, March 19 1952). The British claimed that, in the days following the coup, the United States had made “frantic efforts to make an honest woman of Miss Cuba after her unfortunate deviation from the democratic path of virtue” (*Ibid*). They speculated that the United States might pressure Batista to appoint a provisional president (in the fashion of his puppet presidents of the 1930s) until fresh elections could be held. Batista confided in his close friend, the

American lawyer Lawrence Berenson (who became the President of the Cuban Chamber of Commerce in the United States), his nervousness at the United States public's reaction to his coup; to this end, he sought to employ another American, his friend (and journalist) Edmund Chester, as his public relations representative (*Embassy of the United States*, Dispatch 1604, March 27 1952). Batista also called upon other high-profile friends in the United States to restore his reputation, including the US Army Colonel, Elliot Roosevelt (son of the former United States president Franklin D. Roosevelt); Roosevelt visited Batista in the days following the coup and publicly supported the caudillo, declaring that "I feel very friendly towards General Batista whom I have known for many years and who was a great friend of my father. I believe and hope that General Batista will carry out a constructive work of government which will positively benefit Cuba" (*Havana Post*, March 15 1952:1).

López Civeira frames the coup in the context of the cold war and suggests that agencies of the United States government implicitly engineered the coup:

"Before the coup Elliot Roosevelt came to Cuba, officially on business, he met privately with Batista and on the very day of the coup communicated telephonically with Washington that the plans had been fulfilled, immediately after Batista was installed in the presidential palace he visited with a group of North Americans. There was also a direct U.S. presence during events, a U.S. Officer was in Campamento Columbia during the entirety of the coup, as well as two US Navy Officers" (López-Civeira, 1990:67 - translated by Author)

Whilst it true that the Elliot Roosevelt had indeed visited Batista before and after the coup, and was known to have enjoyed excellent relations with the General stemming from Batista's first tenure in power, there is not any evidence to suggest that Roosevelt represented the United States in any official or unofficial capacity, rather, it is clear that Roosevelt was simply a businessman as he claimed to be. There is equally no evidence to suggest that United States military personnel based at Campamento Columbia in March 1952 participated or influenced the coup in any way. United States military personnel presence had been routinely present for many years and was related to the United States presence at Guantanamo Bay. Research behind this study suggests that the claims made by López-Civeira are unsubstantiated.

Batista had requested recognition from the United States on the day of the coup (*Embassy of the United States*, Dispatch 0287, March 10 1952), but was informed by the United States Secretary Of State, Dean Acheson, that relations were "técnicamente en suspenso" (*Diario de la Marina*, March 13 1952:1). Washington was furious with the unconstitutional manner in which Batista had come to power. British Embassy dispatches show that the United Kingdom was waiting for the United States to recognise the Batista regime first, and was surprised and nervous that this recognition was taking so long. The Dominican Republic dictator Trujillo had been the first to recognise the regime on March 11 (*Alerta*, March 12 1952:1), and Spain had done so on March 17 (*Diario de la Marina*, March 18 1952:1). After a long wait for the United States, the British ambassador had finally been instructed to meet the new minister of State, Miguel Angel de la Campa y Caraveda, on March 26, to recognise the

new government. Holman reported that it was a brief meeting “with this kindly and rather colourless and moth eaten old gentleman, who had been on the shelf since 1944”; the Canadian ambassador concurred that the “only missing was the moth ball” (*British Embassy, Dispatch* 43, April 2 1952). The British had ultimately feared that waiting any longer could endanger the Cuban-Anglo commercial agreement which had been signed in 1951, as well as other British interests (such as United Railways and the Leyland Bus contracts). The United States finally recognised the regime on March 27, by which time 21 other countries had already agreed recognition (*Diario de la Marina*, March 28 1952:1). This delay demonstrated the disapproval of the coup in Washington. The *Havana Post* later wrote that “a great part of the Cuban population awaited the recognition of the Batista regime by the government of the United States as though it implied a greater consolidation of the de facto situation we confront” (*Havana Post*, April 29 1952:1). A cartoon appeared in *Carteles* which depicted Batista in a sick bed (he had contracted chicken pox in the week following the coup), as a doctor, dressed as Uncle Sam, asked “¿Cómo se siente, General?”, and Batista replied “Estoy mejor, después del reconocimiento” (*Carteles*, April 6 1952:26). Recognition by the United States had bestowed on the coup the required stamp of international approval.

### **Batista and the Military**

Whilst the General had commanded support from various sectors of the country, it was his support in the military which was, and always had been, central to his success. Batista was a soldier, a military man who had risen through the ranks to become *Jefe del Ejército* and President. The *Havana Post* pertinently commented that “there is no question about it. Batista is to the Cuban Army as the heart is to the human body” (*Havana Post*, March 12 1952:1). *Diario de la Marina* published an insightful cartoon which depicted a voter proudly declaring that his candidate had the support of 43 *barrios*, and, in response, a soldier declared that his candidate only had the support of one barrio: Campamento Columbia (*Diario de la Marina*, March 23:7).

In order to appreciate the significance of Batista’s rise in 1933, it is useful to review the preceding historical context. The United States’ authorities had dissolved the *Ejército Libertador* (Cuban army of independence) during its first occupation of Cuba (1892 until 1902), and had left behind a poorly-armed and poorly-trained *Guardia Rural*. The Guard, as its name suggest, was primarily assigned to policing the countryside, but was unable to respond effectively to serious disorder. Subsequent rebellion in 1905 had left Cuba in a state of insurrection and saw the return of United States’ occupation (as a result of the Platt Amendment which permitted United States to intervene militarily in Cuban affairs). The inability of Cubans to control the rebellion themselves had been largely a result of having no permanent standing army (Thomas, 1971:282). The second occupation (1906 until 1909) therefore resulted in the establishment of an *Ejército Permanente* (Permanent Army). United States occupation Governor, Charles Magoon, announced the establishment of the Army in April 1908: “General Alejandro Rodriguez shall be in command, and artillery, including mountain rapid fire guns, constitutes the basis of the new army” (*The New York Times*: April 5, 1908). By orchestrating the

establishment of a permanent army, the United States authorities primarily aimed to ensure stability and therefore safeguard their own economic interests on the island. However, in its first years, the army became “more responsive to the needs of American policy objectives” than to protecting Cuban sovereignty. Pérez argues that this “diplomatic imperative” resulted in a pattern of *continuismo*, which came define the army’s role in the Republic for generations (Perez, 2009:8). He argues that the army’s lack of historical tradition and lack of Cuban input in its creation and development left it apart from national interests: “the armed institution, lacking historicity, grew increasingly estranged from national traditions” (Perez, 2009:xvi).

When Batista joined the 11,000-strong army in 1921 as a private, he had joined an extremely elitist institution. Enlisted men were treated appallingly by their officers, and countless rules existed to ingrain a sense of inferiority amongst the enlisted soldiers: they were required to leave a public place if an officer appeared, they would travel in third class whilst officers travelled in first class and they would live and dine in appalling conditions while officers enjoyed opulence. Some enlisted men were even required to work as domestic servants to, and perform household chores for, their officers (Argote Freye, 2006:25). The army was also outrageously corrupt: it was not unusual for the Cuban treasury to fund more army positions than actually existed, with the extra funds being pocketed by high ranking officers. Officers received financial rewards for assisting one politician or another. Consecutive presidents used the military as a political tool, serving party political interests rather than national necessity. The army routinely influenced election results: “the military frequently played a role in national elections, favouring one candidate over another by means of intimidation or outright fraud” (Argote Freyre, 2006:26). Even army discipline depended on political persuasion: “punishment for serious breach of discipline was often vitiated by political intervention” (Pérez, 2009:31). It was not until the *revolución de los sargentos* in September 1933, that the dominance of the military by the Cuban elites was broken; but, rather than resolving these problems, Batista’s working-class sergeants simply replaced the middle-class officers in becoming the military’s new benefactors. The revolt of 1933 created a powerful group of officers who became known as the *septembristas*; perhaps the most prominent of the group were Francisco Tabernilla and José Pedraza. These officers owed their positions to Batista and benefited most from his rule until 1944, but many survived throughout the Auténtico era until 1952.

Grau did purge some of the *septembristas* on coming to power in 1944, but he more generally worked to diminish the military’s role in politics, and relied more on the support of the *grupos de acción* than the Cuban army. The army lost power and influence during the Auténtico era, and by 1952 the old guard (many of them *septembristas*) felt pushed aside by the government, as the military’s role in the centre of Cuban political life diminished; many feared that a third *autenticismo* victory would permanently exclude them from the benefits of power. Meanwhile, a significant group of young officers (known as *puros*), who had been the first generation of the professional training academies felt “thoroughly disgusted with the corruption and gangsterism” of the government (Ameringer, 2000:179). Auténtico corruption and complicity

in *pistolerismo* inspired little confidence or respect in all ranks in the military. Pérez argues that the “assassinations and gansterismo<sup>1</sup> exposed the inability of civilian leadership to underwrite order and stability, discrediting the government and senior (Auténtico) army commanders in the eyes of the young professional soldiers” (Pérez, 1976:126). Furthermore, the Auténticos had appointed unpopular high commands; Grau’s despised *Jefe del Ejército*, Genovevo Pérez Damara, was the perfect example of the pro-Auténtico officers who were unpopular, incompetent and commanded little loyalty amongst the rank and file (*Embassy of the United States*, Dispatch A-437, March 2 1945).

García-Pérez identifies three distinct bases of Batista support within the armed forces: *puros*, *tanquistas* and serving or retired *septembristas*. The *puros* were young professional officers who were appalled by the politicking, deal-making and corruption of the Auténticos. *Tanquistas* were comprised primarily of “corrupt, hard-line” (García-Pérez, 1998:4) captains and lieutenants, who were frustrated by the lack of promotion opportunities under the civilian administrations. The third, *septembrista*, group consisted of officers purged by the Auténticos since 1944 (most notably Tabernilla, Carlos Cantillo and Ramón E. Cruz y Vidal), or still serving officers (such as Rafael Salas Cañizares and Dámaso Sogo) who feared being displaced permanently by a third autenticismo electoral victory. García-Pérez concludes that the primary difference between 1933 and 1952 “was that instead of organizing sergeants and enlisted men, on this occasion he (Batista) organized captains and lieutenants” (García-Pérez, 1998:5).

Much of Batista’s support was nepotistic and derived from a few powerful military families. The Tabernilla family was the most notable of these. Family patriarch Francisco Tabernilla (who became *Jefe del Ejército* after March 10) was a enormously respected and influential professional soldier, who had supported Batista since 1933; his three sons (Francisco, Carlos and Marcelo) had all been high-ranking officers who had retired with Batista in 1944 and who returned to support him in 1952 (two ultimately became brigadier generals and one a lieutenant colonel). Similar dynasties included the Cañizares, García and Cantillo families; allies or members of these (almost feudal) familial dynasties were responsible for seizing and consolidating many of the military commands throughout the country on March 10, and Batista could not have succeeded without the support of these networks of support (Pérez, 1976:146-147).

The golpe had the effect of renewing the preeminence of the military, returning it to the centre of Cuban political life (and to the prestige and financial benefits that came with this). Pérez-Stable argues that the young officers (who had been the original conspirators) had turned to Batista for leadership, as a result of his experience, influence and the general support that he commanded amongst the ranks (Pérez-Stable 1999:52). The United States Embassy concurs that the young *puro* officers had been the original conspirators and had even set the date of March 10, to which Batista agreed (*Embassy of the United States*, Dispatch 1604, march 27 1952); but the coup could not have succeeded without Batista’s leadership and popularity amongst the soldiers. No other

leader could have persuaded the soldiers at Campamento Columbia to revolt as Batista had could:

“It is simply a case where an eloquent speaker dominates the emotions of his listeners like a great master draws inspiring music from a Stradivarius. That same instrument, in unskilled hands, perhaps would produce nothing but a series of discordant notes . . . what Batista is best at doing is standing before a crowd of men as he did yesterday at Columbia while telling them that he is just a common, humble soldier, convincing them that he was sent to lead them in the fulfillment of their destiny.” (*Havana Post*, March 12 1952:1)

The *golpe* had surprised everybody on March 10, but no group had the means of resisting Batista's loyal soldiers. The average Cuban was not invested enough in the democratic system to consider fighting (and possibly dying) for it. Many people's experience of the 'constitutional process' had been overwhelmingly negative and they attached little loyalty to the system. To many, Batista was a known quantity and most settled for Batista with relief; Thomas argues that “the prostitutes of Virtue Street knew that the substitution of Batista for Prío in the National Palace would make little difference to them” (Thomas, 1971:503). The CTC leadership were apparently prepared to work with anybody as long as they received government money; Mujal was probably relieved that the Ortodoxos would not be given a chance to win the election (which likely would have resulted in an end to the government subsidy). Much of the electorate was sickened by the corruption and political violence of the Auténtico era, and the death of Chibás had left an unmistakable vacuum in public life. Many Cubans must have felt that nobody (other than perhaps Batista) could genuinely eradicate *pistolerismo* and restore stability to the country. The rest of the *autenticismo* generation had been discredited and did not have the capacity or desire to resist the *golpe*. Most lacked the stomach to participate in armed resistance; they had already grown rich and accustomed to the comfort of corruption. The students, despite their good intentions, were unarmed and unprepared to do battle against Batista's tanks and machine guns in 1952. There was really little opposition to the *golpistas* until the full emergence of hungry young leaders such as Frank País, José Echeverría and Fidel Castro in later years; but, in the moment of March 1952, most Cubans must have received the second Batistato with indifference, cautious optimism or a sigh of relief.



## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

In the Introduction it was established that we have inherited a one-dimensional caricature of Batista as the archetypal dictator of the *tiranía*. Popular culture and the narrative of the Cuban Revolution have successfully sold us a distorted and oversimplified perception of pre-revolutionary Cuba. The research behind this thesis gives a different picture; it suggests that the loss of legitimacy of the political system under the *Auténticos* directly resulted in the conditions which permitted the coup. Evidence suggests that there was much tolerance of Batista (who was not overwhelmingly popular or unpopular), primarily because he was not an *Auténtico*.

This thesis has stressed the clear distinction between Batista of the first *Batistato*, and the Batista of March 10 and during the second *Batistato*. This thesis suggests that Batista had many faces, and was not the same man in 1952 that he had been in the 1930s. In December 1951 the Ortodoxo congressman Luis Orlando Rodríguez almost prophesied when he warned that:

“Ahora Batista no es el sargento flaco, desgredado e insolente del 4 de septiembre 1933, a quien resultaba natural la camisilla deportiva con que se disfrazaba de civil: es el multimillonario a costa del Presupuesto, el poseedor de fincas, casas de apartamentos, sociedades anónimas y otros negocios”  
(*Bohemia*, December 23:25)

This study suggests that it was more than Batista's reputation as a revolutionary (derived from his participation in the *revolución de los sargentos*) that accounts for the support that the armed forces gave him in 1952. His support revolved around much more practical considerations; *septembrista* officers owed their careers to Batista (many had been lowly sergeants or corporals who had risen to become colonels and generals), and believed that Batista could re-establish the pre-eminence of the military, which would have been lost forever if the Ortodoxo Party had won the presidency in 1952. Younger *puro* officers (who had been the original conspirators in 1952) were drawn to Batista's prestige and realised that his support would greatly increase their chances of success. We can therefore assume that there were more practical implications than just nostalgia that were responsible for the military's support in 1952.

This thesis suggests that whilst Batista attempted to become a populist leader in the 1930s (and to some extent succeeded). He was limited as a populist to the extent that other Latin American leaders were not; Cuba's overwhelming reliance on the *zafra* and the Reciprocity Treaties with the United States made industrialisation (and therefore economic independence) impossible.

Furthermore, his rapid transition to social reformer in 1937, and verbatim adoption of much of Grau's '100 day government' agenda, coupled with his

opportunistic alliance with the Communist Party, suggests that, whilst he was a successful populist to some extent, he was surely not Cuba's answer to Lázaro Cárdenas or Juan Perón.

Batista did undoubtedly leave office in 1944 reasonably popular and with some prestige. He had undoubtedly orchestrated a transition to a truly representative and honest democracy for the first time in Cuban history, overseeing some of the most transparent elections ever. But we should remember that, despite the financial backing of Batista and his friends amongst the *clases económicas*, the *batistiano* candidate in 1944, Carlos Saladrigas Zayas, lost the election. It seems plausible therefore that Batista owed any support he may have had to individual achievements and his *hombre fuerte* persona, rather than any visionary political platform. The *ex-caudillo* did not leave office either as a wildly popular or a deeply unpopular figure, but Grau was the man of the moment in 1944.

This study has suggested that the *Auténticos* had wasted the hopes of many Cubans with inefficient and corrupt governance. Grau had offered 'a pot of gold and an easy chair' to his political allies and government ministers. His successor did not do much better; the newspaper editorial of *Alerta* aptly summed up the Prío presidency: "El nepotismo, el favoritismo y las camarillas influyentes gravitan decisivamente en la débil voluntad del Presidente" (*Alerta*, October 11 1950:1). Whilst the research for this thesis found no compelling evidence to suggest that the dawn of 1952 found a nation in the grip of "chaotic conditions which endangered lives and property" (Batista, 1964:34), it does suggest that there was some degree of disorder and that much of the basis of support or tolerance for the coup originated from the excesses of the *Auténtico* era.

From exile, Prío commented that the coup was: "Neither right, nor left, nor centrist. It is nothing more than a military coup in which one caudillo takes power for himself and divided up the commands among his supporters" (*Havana Post*, March 14:1). This thesis has demonstrated that, whilst this may have been true, it did not necessarily mean that most Cubans opposed the action. Research has demonstrated that support for the *golpistas* came from (admittedly) predictable sectors of Cuban society, but also attracted the surprising support of the CTC and some confused PSP members. This study has also dispelled the assumption that the United States government supported Batista's return in 1952, and in fact were furious at the break in constitutional process. Ameringer and Thomas argue that Cuban people would have fought tooth and nail against the coup if they had suspected that the constitutional process had been permanently discarded, there seems no evidence to suggest that any group had the capacity to resist, or the desire (with the possible exception of a very small number of FEU students).

This thesis has thrown up many questions in need of further investigation. The historiography does not account for the mechanism of *batistiano* support. Whilst Louis Pérez touches on his closest collaborators (such as José Pedraza and Francisco Tabernilla), no study really accounts for these pivotal historical figures (who were at one time or another the second most powerful figures in

Cuba). The organisation of Batista's political party (PAU) is equally shrouded in obscurity. There is, therefore, a definite need for further investigation of this topic.

Whereas we would have expected the military, capitalists, conservatives and so on to support Batista (for the reasons investigated throughout this thesis), what the research behind this study has demonstrated is the remarkable degree of apathy and tolerance of him in 1952. In the days following the coup, Tabernilla claimed that: "Not only is Cuba calm, but also contented. The man in the street is cheerful and does not hide his satisfaction over the security which is offered him by the provisional government, based on the prestige enjoyed by General Batista." (*Havana Post*, March 18 1952:1). This thesis can conclude that whilst the coup was indeed met with calm, Batista was not popular enough in 1952 to inspire 'cheerfulness' amongst the majority of the population.

Fulgencio Batista had begun his career as a revolutionary sergeant and subsequently underwent many incarnations before ending his career in disgrace, slipping away in the early hours of January 1 1959, with a plane full of cronies and suitcases full of gold. But in the moment of March 10 1952 (after almost eight years of Auténtico government), many Cubans must have remembered the old Cuban proverb: *con un cambio de actividad se renuevan las energías* ('a change is as good as a rest'). Inconvenient a truth it may be, when Batista declared that he was 'back again' on March 10 1952, much of Cuba breathed a sigh of relief and some even vested hopes for change in Cuba's *hombre fuerte*.

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