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## Conflicting Perspectives on Cuban Civil Society

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By Guy Burton

The news from Cuba that the Women in White – six women who are the wives and mothers of men currently in prison on the island for their political activities – were [harassed by pro-government supporters](#) prompts an evaluation of Cuban civil society. In particular the event highlights two contrasting visions of Cuba, which are exacerbated by external factors. This is especially apparent in the choice of language used in the BBC report and especially the term ‘political prisoner’, which reveals the highly polarised and uncertain nature of the internal social dynamics underpinning Cuba.

Part of the difficulty may be found in different conceptions of ‘civil society’. For [US policymakers and Cuban-American](#) groups mainly based in Florida, civil society is seen as an independent and voluntary public sphere, separate from the state. By contrast, since the 1990s the official Cuban position on civil society is that it has a complementary rather than competitive or confrontational role with the state. The result is that Cuba’s leadership is inclined to label any action that challenges the state as ‘subversive’ while Washington and its Cuban-American allies consider it to be ‘pro-democracy’.

But as the experience of the Women in White shows, along with the arrest and prison sentences imposed on various individuals between 2003 and 2005, the official Cuban position is not one that is shared across society. And even efforts to untangle these differences by scholars highlight continuing difficulties over both the notion of Cuban civil society and its future direction as well. Perhaps the most useful effort in recent years is a volume edited by Alexander Gray and Antoni Kapci, *The Changing Dynamic of Cuban Civil Society* (University Press of Florida, 2008), on which a number of reviews have been written and which illustrate the continuing confusion and disagreement about the topic.

Most apparent is the difference of opinion as to whether the Cuban leadership has been unified or not over its approach to civil society. [New York University’s Noelle Stout](#) notes that during the 1990s there was a debate by Cuban academics that took place in the state media about the concept while in [C. Maria Keet’s view](#) the issue was settled by Raul Castro’s 1996 statement to the Fifth Congress of the Cuban Communist Party.

That such differences exist underlies the course that Cuban civil society has taken since the 1990s. Indeed, in a [separate article](#), Alexander Gray notes two contradictory paths that it has gone down between the state-directed ‘Big Seven’ on one hand and independent NGOs on the other.

The Big Seven are the traditional mass organisations (revolutionary committees, workers, small cultivators, youth, school students, university students and women) that have been the main vehicles for public participation since the early period of the Revolution. As well as being close to the state, they are dominant actors in their sector, owing to official unwillingness to extend similar and legal legitimacy to other, independent mass-based movements and organisations. As a result in addition, they tend to be largely top-down in their orientation – although there have been occasions where they have campaigned against government policy, for example by the official workers’ union in 1994 over a national income tax.

From the early- to mid-1990s though, the role of the Big Seven has been challenged by a growing number of independent NGOs. The economic crisis of the Special Period in the early- to mid-1990s is seen as ‘Year Zero’ for the emergence of such actors, their grassroots orientation and foreign funding presenting a considerable challenge to the Cuban authorities. As a result the leadership introduced strict forms of control of NGOs: the state retained a central role by authorising the choice of projects undertaken by domestic NGOs and requiring that foreign NGOs (with funds and technical expertise) both partner with Cuban NGOs and not undertake independent activities. This approach was justified on both ideological and practical grounds. At the same time the economic crisis and resulting scarcity encouraged central planning of NGO activity.

The rise of grassroots organisations and foreign involvement have proved problematic in other ways as well. Locally, the formation of neighbourhood associations to tackle problems like rubbish collection came up against bureaucrats who feared that such decentralised activities would lead to growing inequalities. Internationally, tensions have emerged between the Cuban state and foreign NGOs who differ over the former’s ‘shared ideology’ and the latter’s ‘shared objectives’.

The obstruction that such groups have faced is being felt elsewhere. The past decade has seen an economic revival on the island and a growing political resurgence for the Cuban revolution, especially among left of centre social movements and governments elsewhere in the region. One result of this has been to strengthen the hand of the Cuban government in its dealings those groups that it regards with suspicion.

In sum then, what these different experiences and ideological and historical course reveal is the extent to which Cuban society is much more complicated than the image presented by the present stand-off between the Women in White and pro-government supporters reveal. Cuban society – and therefore its politics – is undergoing a significant process of development and change, for which the outcome seems far from certain.

Guy Burton is a research associate for the Latin America International Affairs Programme at the LSE Ideas Centre.

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