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Cuba: Overview of corruption and anti-corruption

Author(s): Mathias Bak, tihelpdesk@transparency.org

Reviewer(s): Sofie Arjon Schuette, U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre and Jorum Duri, Transparency International

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Cuba's measures to counter corruption have increased under President Raúl Castro. Institutional and legal frameworks that have anti-corruption mandates implement some activities effectively. Corruption indicators show that Cuba now performs slightly better than the average Latin American country. However, Cuba's political atmosphere – which lacks media freedom, civil society space, and free speech – makes it difficult to expose corruption. There are many unanswered questions. For instance, it is uncertain whether the anti-corruption drive targets those at the top of political and military institutions. In general, therefore, the closed nature of Cuban institutions and lack of political, economic, and social rights remain corruption risks.

Query

Please provide an overview of corruption and anti-corruption in Cuba.

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Caveat

Due to the closed nature of the country, it is difficult to find systematically gathered data on the extent and nature of corruption in Cuba. To overcome this challenge, this overview attempts to synthesise available case evidence.

Background: Political transformation in Cuba in the last decade

Raul Castro was the President of Cuba between 2006 and 2018, after succeeding his brother Fidel (Acevedo & Sesin 2018). He made a series of changes to the composition of key institutions in the state apparatus, including in the state council, the council of ministers and the Communist Party's politburo, embracing a style that was less personalist than his brother (Bertelsmann Foundation 2018). The most significant policy outcome in the decade of Raul's rule (and one that has since been reversed) was the possibility to form small enterprises outside state control (Bertelsmann Foundation 2018). This resulted in a significant expansion in the number of self-

Main points

- Despite an anti-corruption drive and the fact that Cuba performs better than the average country in Latin America and the Caribbean, evidence suggests that corruption is still a major issue.
- Though it is difficult to gain insights into the exact patterns of corruption in Cuba, available evidence suggests that bribery and theft are common issues.
- Since the death of Fidel Castro, the army has increased its hold on Cuban society and has emerged as a central actor in both politics and the economy. These developments are associated with some serious corruption risks.
- Severe repression of independent civil society organisations and media outlets creates a culture where it is difficult to expose corruption and hold the government of Cuba accountable.
- In general, Cuba's ability to expose and get to grips with corruption is hindered by limited political and civil liberties and one of the world's most restrictive media environments.

employed Cubans and a growth in the private economy: 40% of employed Cubans are currently working in the private sector (Feinberg 2018).

The reform process during Raul Castro's leadership produced a change in economic structures (most significantly the increased opportunities for legal self-employment) but limited changes in the political sphere (Bertelsmann 2018).

The economic reform process has been driven by the logic that Cuba needs to overcome a number of key economic weaknesses to maintain regime legitimacy (Centeno 2017). Since the revolution, the social contract between ruling elites and the Cuban population has revolved around the exchange of the population's political loyalty for free access to social services, such as education, healthcare and employment.

Indeed, Cuba's social security system explains in large part the country's high human development index scores, which are among the highest in Latin America (UNDP 2018). Since the revolution in 1959, however, Cuba's social contract has been underpinned not just by this exchange but by charismatic leadership under Fidel Castro and by severe repression for anyone daring to question the government (Centeno 2017). In practice, therefore, Cuban state authority has been underpinned not only by universal access to welfare but punishment for non-compliance.

This logic of rule does not wield equal political support in every layer of society (Pertierra 2019). Younger generations, in particular, seem to be less loyal to the ideals of the revolution (see Enoa 2019). In addition, many traditional public sector jobs do not adequately cover basic household expenses (Feinberg 2018). Cuba has suffered from sluggish or negative rates of growth for decades and experiences a severe brain drain (Feinberg 2018). A third of Cuban households now live on less than US\$1 a day, while 78% in a recent national survey said that they receive little or no social assistance from the state (Gaviña

2019). Assuming that regime survival is a central objective for the Cuban regime, it has to undertake a careful balancing act. Reforms cannot upset the revolutionary social pact (Dilla 2007). For instance, the regime wants to avoid the emergence of a strong, independent private sector elite that is not politically expedient or a middle class that seeks large political changes. At the same time, it does not want to undertake measures that stifle economic growth too much. For this reason, Cuba's reforms have largely had a limited economic focus, seeking to salvage rather than change the nature of the revolutionary social contract (Bertelsmann Foundation 2018).

The political transformation that has occurred has not brought Cuba on a path towards a multi-party democracy. Rather, it has gone from a system of charismatic socialism – where power gravitated around a single charismatic individual (Fidel Castro) – to one of a more bureaucratic regime where the party and the army becomes the new centre of gravity (Hoffmann 2016). The role of the army, Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (FAR), in particular, has been strengthened significantly in recent years (Frank 2017).

Political openings in Cuba in the last decade have been “negligible”, according to the Bertelsmann Foundation (2018). The most important political opening is the ability to cast non-conforming votes (Bertelsmann Foundation 2018). Freedom House (2019) gives Cuba a low freedom score of 14 out of 100 (where 100 is the most free country). In 2019, Cuba continues to repress media and civil society organisations and restricts basic civil liberties, such as free speech and freedom of assembly (Freedom House 2019). Elections continue to be non-competitive and not free (Freedom House 2019).

Corruption

Over the last few years, the government has led a significant anti-corruption drive, leading to the erection of the comptroller's office. In the absence of substantive political reforms, however, there are few options to hold top-level cadres to account for suspicious activities. For instance, Cuba has no access to information law (Freedom House 2019), and the lack of transparency in state institutions provides no guarantee that legal, auditing and anti-corruption institutions always operate at an arms-length from the government (Freedom House 2019). The lack of space for civil society and repression of journalists makes it very difficult to hold political elites accountable for corruption or even expose it in the first place.

Since taking office in 2018, President Miguel Diaz-Canel has promised to step up the anti-corruption drive that began during Raul Castro's tenure in a "superior" way (DDC 2019). Diaz-Canel has framed corruption as one of the most serious threats to the island and the revolution (GAN 2018). Whether this anti-corruption campaign will lead to substantially lower levels of corruption is uncertain.

Extent of corruption

With a score of 47 out of 100 on the Corruption Perceptions Index, Cuba ranks 61 out of the 180 assessed countries in terms of perceived corruption. While this score is better than the average 44/100 for the Americas region, it still shows perceptions of high levels of corruption in the country.

On the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators (2018), Cuba scores 0.2 (on a -2.5 to 2.5 scale) on control of corruption, -0.2 on government effectiveness, and -0.4 on rule of law. In percentile rank terms, Cuba generally performs around the

global average on these indicators. When it comes regulatory quality, Cuba does not perform well on the index, with a meagre -1.5.

On the Bertelsmann Transformation Index, which measures a country's democratic maturity, Cuba scores 3.9 on the governance index (making it number 94 out of 129 countries globally). Cuba has a governance performance on the same index of 4.5 (#88). This makes Cuba the third-lowest performer in the Latin America and Caribbean region, after Venezuela and Haiti.

Overall, the available data shows that Cuba is currently facing a significant governance and corruption challenge, even if its levels of corruption are not high compared to other Latin American and Caribbean countries.

In 2018, corruption and irregular transactions caused a net loss to a number of Cuban public enterprises of about 2 billion pesos (CUC), according to the comptroller general (Cuba News 2019). A figure provided in 2016 by the Cuban comptroller general shows that 58% of special audits resulted in negative evaluations (Bello 2018).

Nature of corruption challenges

Petty corruption

There is a limited amount of data on the extent or impact of bureaucratic and petty corruption in Cuba. Hence, it is not possible to obtain a clear and data-driven overview of petty corruption in the country. Available evidence (mostly case-based) suggests that petty corruption in Cuba is a significant issue. Though it takes several forms, petty corruption mostly manifests itself as bribery.

Bribery, typically in the form of gift giving, is an increasingly common form of getting access to

social services. The Trace Bribery Risk Matrix (2018), which maps bribery risks in 200 countries places Cuba among the 40 countries in the world with the highest risks of bribery. According to the index, Cuba is particularly vulnerable to bribery in the domain of “interactions with government”.

A recent survey showed that the majority of Cubans believed low wages and a struggle to survive was the primary cause of a growing bribery issue (Isla 2018). Public salaries are now well below what is reasonably expected to maintain a standard living. The average Cuban salary corresponds to €21, while a standard basket of basic goods costs around three times that amount (Isla 2018). As a consequence, Cubans expect the other two-thirds of living expenses to be covered through bribes, because corruption, for many, is a question of survival (Isla 2018).

Examples of bribery in Cuba can be seen in the healthcare institutions that Cuba is famous for. Particularly in a context where medical workers struggle with low salaries and a lack of medical equipment, actual quality care often comes with a bribe (Diario las Americas 2018; CiberCuba 2018; Cubanet 2019).

Bribery has also been associated with the increasing engagement with international investors. There have been several cases recently of foreign business actors and investors bribing Cuban officials in exchange for contracts (Reuters 2014).

Petty corruption in the police forces is also a cause for concern. Case evidence indicates that police forces regularly engage in abuse of power, for instance, to extort bribes in the form of money or goods (Felipe 2018; Garcia 2015). Furthermore, the 2018 US Human Rights Report tells of police officers conducting searches of homes to steal possessions or to extort bribes from individuals

and families. In Cuba, the police does not need a warrant to carry out searches (US Human Rights Report 2018).

Misappropriation and embezzlement

Misappropriation and outright theft of state resources is another significant corruption challenge in Cuba. Inefficient economic policies and regular scarcities in basic necessities have engendered a large underground economy in Cuba (Ritter 2005). The underground economy is hugely diverse and contains everything from the exchange of everyday appliances and goods and services. Official employees of state-owned enterprises have been known to participate in the underground economy in a manner that could be considered corrupt. Regime insiders often participate in informal exchanges with other state-owned enterprises, high-ranking party members or other individuals with access to goods that are in demand (Ritter 2005).

In 2012, a leaked report showed that there were 57,537 inmates in Cuba, making Cuba the country with the sixth-highest proportion of its population in prison (Isla 2018). There is evidence that some of the most common crimes involve diversion of state resources or the use of stolen goods as bribes (Isla 2018).

In 2017, a year where certain drugs were in short supply in Cuba, there were 30 accounts of stolen medicines belonging to the state. While these medicines were meant to be sold at state-owned drug stores, they were likely sold in the underground economy, benefiting unknown individuals (Bello 2018). In 2018, there has been a significant focus on avoiding the diversion of fuel towards underground economies (Frank 2018). The diversion of fuel was a central focus in a recent audit of over 300 state-owned enterprises in 2017 (DDC 2017 and 2017b). In just one site, around 2.5

million litres of diesel were stolen (Cubadebate 2019).

There have also been cases of police officers stealing cement (Fundacion Nacional Cubana Americana 2018). In 2017, in only one of many incidents, US\$5 million worth of cement was stolen from state-owned cement stores, creating a large-scale shortage, in the state-run market (Ravsberg 2017). Indeed, this form of economic exchange of stolen goods is enabled by constant shortages that create incentives to steal and sell on the black market. Thus the system of theft perpetuates itself, benefiting particularly those who have access to warehouses and distribution centres. In many cases, it not unreasonable to suspect people who are working for the government (Armengol 2017).

Grand corruption

While there is limited evidence to give a clear picture of the level of grand corruption in Cuba, a number of corruption scandals in recent years have shown the involvement of high-level members of the Cuban government in bribery cases.

Most significantly, Odebrecht, one of the key companies in the Lava Jato scandal, has been involved with high-ranking Cuban officials. Odebrecht was behind a series of irregular payments to Latin American countries, including Cuba. These transfers were made between 2010 and 2015 as Odebrecht tried to obtain contracts for a series of infrastructure projects in Cuba, including two airport expansions and a large-scale modernisation project of the port of Mariel (Hall & Torres 2019), projects which were partly financed by Brazil). Leaks from Odebrecht Structured Operation's (the bribery division) secretive bribery accounting platform show a pattern of bribery payments made to Cuba very similar to Odebrecht's strategies in Ecuador, Peru and other countries in Latin America (Hall & Torres 2019).

Odebrecht effectively targeted Cuba's leadership, including Raul Castro, his close family, his confidantes and central insiders of El Grupo de Administracion Empresaria (GAESA), Cuba's military's economic conglomerate and the most significant economic player in the country (Hall & Torres 2019). The true scale of Odebrecht's involvement with Cuban officials remains known only known to the military, and the military has been effective in keeping this secret (Piña 2017).

Cuban involvement with Odebrecht is not the first high-profile case in Cuba. After the handover of power from Fidel to Raul Castro, high-level corruption cases started becoming public. Cases included the leasing of state-owned airplanes for private gain and embezzlement at several state enterprises (The Economist 2011). In one of the more famous examples from the start of the decade, a Chilean businessman, Max Marambio, gained control of a large part of Cuba's food economy through bribery and cronyism (The Economist 2011).

Political corruption

As an authoritarian, one-party communist state, Cuba systematically represses citizens' political rights (Human Rights Watch 2019). Elections are not free, fair or transparent (Freedom House 2019). In Cuban elections for the national assembly, voters can only choose to vote in favour of candidates or reject them (Bertelsmann Foundation 2018). Every national assembly candidate is pre-selected by the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC), and it is extremely rare that they are rejected by the people. The national assembly in turn appoints the council of state in a process that typically holds as few choices (i.e. none) as the national assembly elections (Freedom House 2019).

Municipal elections, in theory, are freer as they allow more than one candidate to run for election.

The government of Cuba, however, applies a mix of voter suppression strategies, vote rigging and violent suppression to ensure that no opposition politician can compete (Freedom House 2019). Security agencies and institutions often carry out suppression activities while local-level committees conduct surveillance of regime-critical individuals and activities and report them to the intelligence agency (Freedom House 2019).

Finally, it is illegal to organise in a political party other than the PCC. Opposition members often experience arbitrary arrests, though the number of arbitrary arrests has been going down in recent years (just over 2,000 in 2018) (Freedom House 2019). This system has cemented the Castro family's claim to power ever since the revolution. Raul Castro, who stepped down as president in 2018, is still first secretary of the PCC and remains an important power broker.

On V-DEM's Deliberative Democracy Index, an index that focuses on the inclusiveness and reasoning behind public decision-making, Cuba scores 0.08 (on a 0-1 scale, where 0 is the lowest). Cuba's decision-making, according to this index, is based mainly on the consultation of a narrow group of elites, while the voices of civil society and the population more broadly is ignored.

Other forms of corruption

In addition to bribery at various levels of society, misappropriation of resources and goods as well as political corruption, there are reasonable suspicions that a number of high-ranking officials have significant conflicts of interests. Indeed, Raul Castro had a tendency to replace officials with his former colleagues in the army (The Economist 2011). Given the close ties between high-ranking politicians and economic conglomerates (see e.g. Alfonso 2011; Frank 2017), there may be risks of revolving doors, interest conflicts and collusion.

Sectors vulnerable to corruption

State-owned enterprises and the private sector

While it has encouraged the development of a small private sector, the Cuban government still controls the economy to a large extent (Kuritzkes 2019). It has done so by reducing (and sometimes freezing) the amount of permits to form private businesses, increasing the amount of bureaucratic red tape for private businesses and the shutting down of private enterprises and cooperatives that grow too successful (Kuritzkes 2019). Moreover, Diaz-Canel's government has created policies stating that new entrepreneurs should post a three-month tax deposit up front, and it has explicitly banned private companies in a number of sectors from hiring. This has been interpreted as a way to reduce competition against state-owned enterprises (Kuritzkes 2019).

In addition to endemic theft, there have been a number of cases of SOE executives engaging in corrupt activities. Cases from the beginning of the decade include one where executives took bribes and kickbacks in the premium cigar business (Miroff 2011). Another prominent case was revealed in May 2019 when an old aircraft crashed, resulting in over 100 deaths (Isla 2019). Subsequent revelations exposed a decade of neglect of safety standards and continual leasing of airplanes to third parties – all for the benefit of corrupt individuals in the Cuban aviation industry. Revelations also found practices such as selling of fraudulent tickets and cargo space (Isla 2018). Corruption decidedly contributes (among many other factors) to efficiency problems in Cuba's SOE sector.

Military

Actors within the military have been accused of engaging in fuel misappropriation and theft (Chirino 2019). Allegedly, some of the more high-ranking officials' roles have been ignored and covered up, while non-military individuals who may or may not have colluded in these endeavours have taken some of the blame (Chirino 2019).

Always one of Cuba's most prominent institutions, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (FAR) has become increasingly dominant in Cuba's political and economic life ever since Raul's shuffle of senior cabinet and bureaucratic positions in the military's favour (Frank 2009). Most of former president Castro's inner circle, including Alejandro Castro Espin (Raul's son), Luis Alberto Rodríguez López-Callejas (Raul's son-in-law) and Leopoldo Cintra Frías serve in one of Cuba's security services, and many key political and technocratic roles have been distributed to people with backgrounds in the military.

While it is impossible to say whether or not Cuba has civilian control over the army, the security sector has evolved into a societal juggernaut, operating its own parallel structures (including hospitals) and economic activities. GAESA, one of the economic branches of the military, was founded in the 1980s, but rose to prominence during Raul Castro's tenure, coinciding with the appointment of members of the army to prominent positions (Frank 2017). GAESA reports to the FAR ministry and is headed by Luis Alberto Rodríguez López-Callejas.

GAESA controls companies such as Almacenes Universales (a large shipping company), Habaguanex (stores and restaurant conglomerate), Gaviota (the largest enterprise in the tourist industry) (Frank 2017) as well as Tecnotex (tech imports), TRD Caribe (retail chains), Servi-Cupet

(gas stations), CIMEX (a holding company and commercial conglomerate) Almenest Real Estate and a number of construction conglomerates (Bermudèz 2017). Individuals within the military are beneficial owners of enterprises in banking, real estate, telecommunications, satellite TV services, energy, construction and more (US Department of State 2019).

Estimates of the importance of GAESA's role in the economy varies dramatically. Most sources argue that GAESA controls the businesses that make up about 40% to 60% of Cuba's foreign exchange earnings (Frank 2017). One of the reasons for the dramatic variation in estimates is the fact that GAESA's accounts are not publicly available (Frank 2017), and therefore GAESA's actual economic power depends on how you estimate the revenues of its businesses (see LeoGrande 2017).

The fact that the military is a significant economic player heightens risks that it has the capacity (as has happened in a number of other countries, including ones where the military has taken on the role of safeguarding a revolution's ideals) to develop into a parallel (or deep) state. This arguably comes with serious risks with regards to cronyism and potential state capture.

Tourism

Cuba has a long history as a tourist destination, but the numbers of tourists dropped significantly after nationalisation in the 1960s. Recent attempts at normalisation of diplomatic relations have opened up a vast range of opportunities for Cuba's tourist industry. In 2018, tourism was the second largest industry in Cuba (the largest is the export of doctors) (Clausen and Garcia 2018). As the tourist industry has begun to grow and as the government has opened the door for Cubans to be self-employed, the tourist industry has emerged as both a way for the government of Cuba to earn foreign currency and as a means for micro-businesses to develop (Clausen and Garcia 2018).

There are certain corruption risks associated with a rapid expansion of the tourism sector without first developing capacities for controlling corruption. These include risks of insider-deals or non-competitive bidding for larger projects (Feinberg, Newfarmer 2016).

Despite the growth of the private sector, Cuba's tourism industry is dominated by state-owned enterprises, allegedly making up 69% of the tourism sector (Feinberg & Newfarmer 2016). Until recently, most of these enterprises were controlled by conglomerates responding to either the ministry of tourism or the ministry of defence. GAESA's hotels and tourism company, Gaviota group, has come to be the largest actor in the hotel market, owning 40% of all hotel rooms and the vast majority of 5 star hotel rooms (Feinberg, Newfarmer 2016). Gaviota is now twice as large as the second and third largest SOE operating in the tourist industry.

As with many of GAESA's ventures it is difficult to prove corruption within Gaviota. Nevertheless, one may conclude that there is a certain risk that Gaviota does not operate at an arm's length from GAESA's other ventures (such as those operating in construction or finance). Indeed, Gaviota does not release annual reports or audits, so it is difficult to ensure that there are no suspect money flows. Gaviota's headquarters are also located in the same building as many other GAESA affiliates.

Anti-corruption framework

Ministry of Audit and Control

The Ministry of Audit and Control (MAC) is the central agency responsible for the national audit system and in charge of executing government policies with regards to controlling state resources and auditing policy and guidelines.

The Comptroller General

The Comptroller General of the Republic (CGR) (<http://www.contraloria.gob.cu/es/>) was created to bolster MAC by enhancing accurate and transparent administration of public funds. It has emerged as possibly Cuba's most potent body for countering and preventing corruption. It was brought into public life in 2009 with the signing and ascension of law 107. Law 107 was partly a result of necessary legislative changes arising from Cuba's ratification of the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) in 2007. The CGR is autonomous from the national assembly and the state council.

The CGR has the right to make policy proposals in areas that ensure control over public finances as well as the mandate to carry out actions to ensure compliance with these laws. This includes the right to carry out investigations and audits of government entities, state-owned enterprises and of senior and junior officials.

Falling under the CGR are provincial comptrollers, tasked with auditing and carrying out other comptroller functions in their respective provinces, including municipalities.

In addition to its external control activities the CGR assists with the implementation internal control systems: systems of self-control that conform to the CGR's self-control guidelines. According to the CGR (2017), this is part of a preventive anti-corruption approach.

In practice, the actions of the CGR have led to arrests of Cuban and foreign nationals on grounds of corruption (Freedom House 2019). These include the cases of the Riozaza CEO and corruption in the tourist industry. The CGR has also been moderately effective in finding and reporting on corruption, mismanagement and economic fraud. In 2017, it reportedly applied over

5,000 disciplinary measures (Asociación Nacional de Economistas y Contadores de Cuba 2018). That does not mean that the CGR is working completely optimally, however. Wage levels for auditors are low, and CGR is understaffed (Asociación Nacional de Economistas y Contadores de Cuba 2018).

Financial intelligence unit

Dirección General de Investigación de Operaciones Financieras (DGIOF) is Cuba's financial intelligence unit. As such DGIOF is mandated to investigate financial crime, illicit financial flows and hold Cuba up to global anti-money laundering and terrorist financing standards.

The latest Financial Action Task Force mutual evaluation report (2014) points out that, in general, Cuba is not a high-risk jurisdiction and that Cuba complies to international standards against money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism. It does, however, note some shortcomings in the investigation regime of DGIOF, noting that prosecutions on money laundering charges are rare. DGIOF is a member of the Egmont Group

Judiciary

The general attorney, or Fiscalía General de La Republica (FGR) carries the responsibilities typically associated with an attorney general, including prosecuting cases.

Judiciary institutions are not completely free of interference from bribes, though it is rare (V-DEM 2018). Political interference is much more frequent, and according to Freedom House (2019), the council of state which "has full control over the courts", uses its influence to determine legal outcomes in its favour. According to the US State Department, those at the top of the political food

chain can engage in acts of corruption with impunity (US State Department 2018).

Very little information is available on ongoing trials. A high rate of the most prominent and media-covered corruption cases in recent years have involved Western businesses engaged in corruption in Cuba (see e.g. Trotta 2014; Grogg 2013). This does not mean that the judiciary has been unwilling to press charges on Cuban citizens (it indeed has), but that the many visible cases (e.g. Trotta 2014; Grogg 2013) involve foreigners in some way. Cuban regime critics have argued that the Cuban regime attempts to portray corruption as a phenomena that stems from sources external to the island (Armengol 2017).

Legal gaps

Cuba is a signatory to UNCAC and appears to be implementing it for the most part. Indeed, as mentioned, the comptroller's office was founded after Cuba ratified UNCAC. The latest review group report (see UNODC 2013) identified some gaps in the legislation that should be addressed with amendments to the criminal code.

The Cuban criminal code contains provisions to penalise active and passive bribery for all individuals who exercise a public function. For private sector cases, however, the criminal code only contains provisions for active bribery cases (UNODC 2013). The criminal code also criminalises most forms of embezzlement in the private and public sectors, though there is a lack of clarity around the terms. Likewise, illicit enrichment while in public office is covered (UNODC 2013).

Cuba does not have an asset disclosure law, nor does it have a freedom of information law (Freedom House 2019).

Moreover, Cuba has not signed or ratified the Inter-American Convention against Corruption

(IACAC). Being a signatory to the IACAC comes with a range of opportunities for technical cooperation, assistance and subjects the states in question to the IACAC monitoring, evaluation and compliance mechanism (MESICIC).

Other stakeholders

Civil society

The space for civil society organisations (CSOs) in Cuba is severely restricted by law and political practice, strongly limiting the capacity for CSOs to advocate for further anti-corruption initiatives. The Cuban state has been known to crack down hard on the most critical CSOs. A famous example is the Proyecto Varela, a protest movement related to the Cuban Christian Democratic Party. Proyecto Varela was largely disbanded after a brutal crackdown in 2003 known as the “Black Spring”.

The use of arbitrary detentions and forced evictions are common means of cracking down on independent CSOs. The Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation claims to have documented an average of 862 arbitrary detentions per month in 2016 (Lopez & Chaguaceda 2018). On a number of occasions, independent thinkers have been sentenced on the legal basis of “disrespecting” state officials (Lopez & Chaguaceda 2018).

State media has also been eager to delegitimise claims made by CSOs. State media has often referred to independent activists as “ex-Cubanos”, effectively framing them as non-citizens. State media also occasionally take steps to criticise the existence of critical, autonomous CSOs by claiming that they act on behalf on foreign conspirators (Chaguaceda and Gonzales 2019), e.g. as “mercenaries” (Alvarez 2018)). There are currently 120 documented political prisoners, mostly from

opposition parties or critical human rights groups (Human Rights Watch 2019).

Those CSOs that are tolerated are subject to monitoring and control by the government (Lopez & Chaguaceda 2018).

According to Cuban government discourse, the civil society landscape is lively (Chaguaceda & Gonzales 2019). Indeed, mass organisations such as the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution and the Workers Central Union of Cuba, count as CSOs and are Cuba’s “real and only civil society” (Alvarez 2018). They are, however, aligned to the official state ideology and remain connected to political elites. As a consequence, they often function as instruments to infiltrate various layers of society (such as women and workers) and ensure the monopoly of state-affiliated organisations in society (Lopez & Chaguaceda 2018). In general, the Cuban government tends to control the claims and representation of minority groups (Chaguaceda & Gonzales 2019).

Despite the monopoly of state-sanctioned mass organisations and severe measures against the right to free assembly, more critical and independent CSOs have emerged in Cuba in recent years. Among these, the most famous is the Ladies in White, a group of wives of prisoners of conscience. There are also a range of reformist CSOs operating within Cuba’s present political framework. These include Cuba Posible and Red Observatorio Critico, who both advocate for incremental changes in Cuban society (Lopez & Chaguaceda 2018).

A significant amount of Cuban activism has been related to the church, and pressure from the Catholic Church has in the past been instrumental in freeing political prisoners. The Catholic Church enjoys some freedom to act as a venue for critical discussion and should therefore also be seen as a

significant stakeholder in means to counter corruption (Lopez & Chaguaceda 2018).

Media

The Cuban state controls the vast majority of media outlets on the island and continues to systematically repress independent or critical journalism (Freedom House 2018). Journalists are subject to extensive monitoring and censorship (Reporters Without Borders 2019). Independent journalists are often accused of acting as foreign mercenaries and are routinely detained (Freedom House 2018).

In 2018, Reporters Without Borders ranked Cuba as 169 out of 180 in terms of freedom of the press, making Cuba one of the least free countries in the world on that front. Likewise, Cuba scores 91 out of 100 (where 100 is least free) on Freedom House's Freedom of the Press Index (the only countries to fare worse are North Korea, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Eritrea). According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (2019a), Cuba is among the 10 most censored countries in the world.

This issue has been demonstrated recently with a number of high-profile cases. In 2018, a journalist from La Hora de Cuba was arrested for conducting opinion polls (HRW 2019). In another case, the house of a journalist who founded the platform Cubanet was raided and electronic devices confiscated (HRW 2019). Cuban authorities detained journalists who covered natural disasters (Committee to Protect Journalists 2019a). Rather than opening up space for independent media, the Cuban state has doubled down on attempts to criminalise publicly voiced criticism in recent years. For instance, a recent presidential decree drastically regulates artistic freedom, and artists now need permission from the ministry of culture before producing art (Human Rights Watch 2019).

While internet penetration rates in Cuba are still low (World Bank 2018b), mobile internet has become increasingly available. As this has happened, critical internet-based media outlets have emerged. This advent of digital media puts pressure on the state's monopoly over the right to communication. Social media has been known to provide a platform on which to criticise government policy, not just by opposition supporters but also by seeming regime supporters (Hoffmann 2016). The proliferation (albeit slow) of online forums, blogs and other means for private citizens to voice their concerns have given new venues for discussion. The underground economy also features critical news media that are typically distributed via USB-sticks (Hoffmann 2016).

The battle for (or against) free speech in Cuba have increasingly moved into the digital domain. As people move towards the internet, Cuba's state-owned internet providers are working hard to restrict access to critical blogs. The government of Cuba has also taken more unconventional steps towards controlling net traffic. At the same time as the government has begun to host public Wi-Fi hotspots it has announced new decrees that makes it illegal to disseminate information that is not considered "moral". Independent journalists have seen this as a trap targeting independent bloggers and journalists (Committee to Protect Journalists 2019b).

An independent and strong media is one of the key means to inform the public about corruption issues (Schauseil 2019). Without fundamental freedoms and political liberties it is difficult to expose corruption issues in Cuba.

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www.U4.no

U4@cmi.no

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