



# *Sultanistic Regimes*

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## *The Batista Regime in Cuba*

Jorge I. Domínguez

The charge has been made that Batista is a usurper of authority. It is true that he seized power on two occasions. But it is also true that in each case he took the power from a weak, ineffective government which had shown no capacity for leadership.

EDMUND A. CHESTER,  
*A Sergeant Named Batista*

Fulgencio Batista was Cuba's premier political leader from 1933 to 1958, exercising de facto or de jure presidential power except between 1944 and 1952. But as reflected in the peculiar defense of Batista's rise to power made by his quasi-official biographer, Edmund Chester, Batista's claim to legitimate rule was remarkably feeble. He possessed no "traditional" authority. Nor was he a "charismatic" figure in the technical sense of that expression. Chester wrote that Batista had "a great sense of humor," and he also reported that Batista's "humor is noticed once in a while in some of his official acts."<sup>1</sup> In fact, though Batista was often quite charming in person, he was rather awkward and stiff in many of his speeches. Both on 4 September 1933 and on 10 March 1952, Batista rose to power as a usurper, not by winning elections or by following prescribed constitutional rules for access to power. Both times his claim to legitimacy was that his predecessors were even worse ("weak, ineffective" and lacking in "leadership")—a highly personalistic and subjective claim to the right to rule over his fellow citizens.

My task in this chapter is to characterize Batista's second regime (1952–58). In order to understand the regime from inside, whenever possible I will draw on his own writings (even if they owe much to his unacknowledged collaborators) and on the writings of authors who were associated with him in some way.

The overall argument is that the longer Batista remained in power the more he displayed sultanistic tendencies, though even in the end his regime did not quite fit the characterization sultanistic.<sup>2</sup> By "sultanism" I mean that this regime was personalistic, arbitrary, centralized, nonideological, distrustful, corrupt, and unprofessional. I will argue that when the regime fell it was not because Batista failed in the pursuit of his preferred policies but, on the contrary, because he had succeeded to a large measure in sultanizing the government. The regime's characteristics made for its swift disintegration in the face of a revolutionary challenge.

### *Biographical Note*

Fulgencio Batista, a light-skinned mulatto, was born in 1901 in the small town of Banes in Oriente province (eastern Cuba), the son of poor rural folk. His father was a sugar worker; his mother died when he was fourteen. As a teenager, he was a migrant worker (with jobs as cane cutter, carpenter, and railroad worker). In 1921 he joined the Cuban army as a private; in 1928 he was promoted to sergeant-stenographer. In 1926 he married Elisa Godínez, whom he divorced in October 1945. A month later he married Martha Fernández, whose personal traits fit in much more easily with the Havana elite. He had three children from his first marriage and four from the second, and in his will he recognized an illegitimate daughter, born in 1935 when he was chief of the armed forces. The first of his four children by Martha Fernández was born in 1942 while he was president of Cuba. In part because of his social background, Batista was at first shunned by Havana "high society" after seizing power in 1933.<sup>3</sup>

Cuba was hit hard by the world depression. After resisting years of insurgent attempts and urban terrorism, on 12 August 1933 President Gerardo Machado's dictatorship was overthrown; though the provisional government that replaced it had U.S. government support, it could not consolidate its power. The structures of the state and of the armed forces crumbled. Massive riots broke out in Havana and other cities; mobs assaulted the officials of the old regime. In the midst of such chaos, on 4 September 1933 a ramshackle coalition of noncommissioned officers (led by Batista), university students, and others overthrew the feeble government and the equally enfeebled military high command. On 9 September Ramón Grau San Martín was installed as president of Cuba with

Batista's support. By shrewd use of politics and military force, Batista soon forced out of office many of his initial collaborators, including President Grau in January 1934.

With the support of the U.S. government, Batista established himself as Cuba's "strongman." From 1934 through 1940 he served as chief of the armed forces while various civilians occupied the presidency for short terms. These puppet presidents did not always agree with Batista, so they were successively removed from office by various means. In 1940 he was elected president of Cuba. Cuba's constitution prohibited immediate reelection; Batista thought that his coalition could win free elections and that he could revert to the role of the power behind the presidency—one of many examples of rulers who miscalculate the support they enjoy. More recent examples of this stunning mistake are Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines, Augusto Pinochet in Chile, and a succession of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, especially in Poland. Thus in 1944 he presided over national elections, won by Ramón Grau at the head of an opposition coalition; Batista recognized the election results and peacefully turned the presidency over to his long-standing opponent.<sup>4</sup> In 1948 Batista was elected to the Senate from Las Villas province. He launched a campaign for the presidency in the 1952 elections—elections that were not held because Batista seized power on 10 March 1952.

### *The Conditions for Sultanistic Tendencies*

One set of factors that would contribute to the sultanization of Cuba's political regime in the 1950s is the nature of political society before Batista's March 1952 coup. Cuban politics in the twentieth century had a strong nonideological and clientelist component. As the decades passed, to be sure, certain ideological and programmatic trends appeared, but their significance remained secondary until 1959. Batista did not invent Cuba's nonideological and clientelist politics, but he came to embody them.

In the 1930s Batista built a powerful nonideological coalition by wooing his enemies. For the 1936 presidential elections, for example, former president Mario G. Menocal, leader of Cuba's most conservative political and economic forces, opposed the Batista-backed coalition. After the elections it was discovered that the opposition had not been recognized by any victory for the Senate; the cabinet thus retroactively amended the constitution to award some Senate seats to the opposition, all Menocalistas or "Democrats." By 1940 Menocal's Democrats had joined the Batista coalition.

Similarly, Batista's armed forces severely repressed the Communist Party in

the mid-1930s. By the end of the 1930s the Comintern had instructed communist parties throughout the world to seek "popular front" alliances; Cuba's communists approached Batista to make a deal. Batista was all too willing to reestablish social peace at low cost; he brought the communists into his coalition and, in 1939, permitted the founding of the communist-led Cuban Labor Confederation, Cuba's only labor confederation ever since. When Batista was inaugurated as president of Cuba in 1940, his coalition spanned Cuba's ideological spectrum; conservatives and communists served in his cabinet in the early 1940s.<sup>5</sup>

This nonideological trait was pervasive throughout Cuba's political society. Consider the behavior of two of Cuba's most prominent conservative politicians. Gustavo Cuervo Rubio, a Democrat, was Batista's vice-presidential candidate in 1940 against Ramón Grau and his Auténtico Party. As vice president, he defected to form the opposition Republican Party, aligned with Grau's Auténticos for the 1944 elections. For the 1948 elections he switched again to rejoin the Democrats as their vice-presidential candidate in coalition with the Liberal Party (also a conservative party) against the Auténticos. Ramón Zaydín had been Speaker of the House of Representatives as a Liberal Party member in the Machado dictatorship and, as a member of the Republican Party, an opponent of Batista in the mid-1930s. By the early 1940s Zaydín had rejoined the Liberals and become Batista's prime minister. In the late 1940s Zaydín led the Liberals into an alliance with the Auténticos—his presumed archenemies for the previous fifteen years—and entered President Carlos Prío's Auténtico-led cabinet.

These tactical shifts were evident as well on the political left. A grateful Communist Party supported the Batista coalition in the 1940 and 1944 presidential elections and in the 1942 congressional elections.<sup>6</sup> But communist loyalty was short-lived. In 1944 the Batista-coalition had seized control of both houses of Congress even as Grau and the Auténticos won the presidency. In December 1945 the communists crossed the aisle, joined in coalition with the Auténticos, and delivered the Senate majority to the new Auténtico president as part of a deal to retain communist control over the labor confederation. In the 1946 municipal elections the Communist Party supported 126 candidates, of whom 103 were in coalitions; the party's allies in these elections were distributed nearly randomly across the ideological spectrum.

Consider the nine congressional elections from 1936 through 1954. Never fewer than one-quarter, and as high as nine-tenths, of the members of Cuba's House of Representatives who had been reelected shifted political parties to gain reelection; they often affiliated with their former enemies who had become electorally more popular. The median proportion of reelected representatives

who shifted parties was 56 percent. In the Senate the median proportion of members reelected or promoted from the House who shifted parties was 45 percent.

In such a political system, the key incentive is access to political power and its rewards, including money and status. Such a political system lacks the racial, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, regional, religious, or social class cleavages that characterize democratic or other authoritarian regimes and that might serve as bases for political coalitions on other than clientelist grounds. There were few structural impediments in Cuba's civil society and political society to the making and remaking of political coalitions. Political loyalty, not just to programs or ideas but even to political leaders, was extremely weak. Even clientelist bargains were tactical and therefore unstable over the long run. Cuban society was already too modern for the old-fashioned stable loyalties of political machines in more traditional settings, and for this reason Cuba's political system differed from regimes that were more clearly sultanistic.

These nonideological, personalistic traits of Cuban politics, however, dated to the foundation of the republic in 1902. They made Cuban politics open to sultanization but did not require it. We need to search for factors closer to the 1950s to explain the shift toward sultanization.

A second important factor that contributed to the sultanization of Cuban politics was the structure of the state itself. Two characteristics of the Cuban state encouraged sultanistic tendencies. The first was the guarantee to the owners of property that the shifting pattern of tactical alliances would not hurt them or their property. These guarantees were made necessary by the social, economic, and political upheavals in Cuba in the early 1930s: social and economic elites demanded enough order to safeguard their interests. The innovation adopted under Batista's leadership in the 1930s was the informal segregation between the making of key economic policies and the filling of public offices.

The United States' Jones-Costigan Sugar Act cartelized the U.S. sugar industry and U.S. imports from Cuba. Cuba's Sugar Coordination Act of 1937 codified the domestic side of the cartel. Decision making over sugar policies—Cuba's premier economic enterprise—was highly and closely regulated. Policy and administration were in the hands of an autonomous and powerful entity, the Sugar Stabilization Institute, run by a board of twelve sugar mill owners, six sugar growers, and three government appointees. This system institutionalized access to political power for those who owned and operated the sugar industry and agriculture; the institute conducted the international relations of the sugar industry on behalf of the public sector and the private sector. This highly stable

arrangement endured until 1959. Protected property owners could let politicians personalize other aspects of Cuban politics because the relations between the state and the economy's key sector were secure.

Another feature of the structure of the state that promoted sultanization was the nature of civil-military relations. In 1944 the new *Auténtico* administration under President Grau purged Cuba's armed forces of those who had risen through the officer ranks during the preceding eleven years thanks mainly to their personal connections to Batista. By the end of 1944 the new government had retired some two hundred officers, including many generals. More would leave during 1945. The *Auténticos* also discharged the entire command of the national police. In their place, the *Auténticos* promoted academy-trained junior career officers. This promising policy, however, suffered from the serious malady of the Grau and Prío administrations—widespread corruption.

For many officers, the overwhelming evidence of corruption among government civilians was sufficient cause to support a coup. Moreover, a number of senior military officers themselves became corrupt, impairing the loyalty of their junior officers. As a result some junior officers began to plot the overthrow of the democratic regime and provided initial, decisive support to the Batista coup. On 10 March 1952, no regiment of the Armed Forces of the Republic took up arms to defend the constitutional order against Batista's coup.<sup>7</sup>

Though state and society seemed well suited for sultanistic tendencies, Batista himself bears responsibility for the regime change. Public opinion polls ranked him last of three candidates for the 1952 presidential elections. Batista's public rationale for the March 1952 coup was that President Prío was seeking to perpetuate himself in power and was possibly collaborating with the communists.<sup>8</sup> Batista's charges have been analyzed closely by historian Hugh Thomas, who finds them suspect and highly improbable.<sup>9</sup> Prío condoned gangsterism, enriched himself, and allowed others to profit from graft. But he had expelled the communists from control of the labor confederation in order to become president of Cuba and was probably one of the few political leaders in mid-twentieth-century Cuba with a genuine commitment to democratic politics. I will consider Batista's ideas in the next section.

There can be no sultanization without a would-be sultan. One difference between the highly clientelist, personalistic, and at most loosely ideological nature of politics in Brazil and in Cuba, both of which have loosely organized political parties, is that Cuba had Batista whereas Brazil had a more bureaucratized, professional state, and especially more professional armed forces. Sultanistic tendencies increased in Cuba, therefore, because this non-ideological politician took advantage of the weakly structured nature of Cuba's political

society, the peculiar property guarantees embedded in the Cuban state, and the divided and decomposed features of the Cuban armed forces. There were neither structural nor ideological and moral nor leadership constraints to stand in Batista's way. That was why his 1952 coup proceeded so smoothly.

In contrast to the significance of the factors cited above, other considerations seem less important. It is difficult to specify a relation between the structure of the economy or its growth patterns and the likelihood of sultanistic tendencies. By the beginning of the twentieth century most Cuban adults were literate. The very nature of the sugar industry meant that many Cubans were directly involved in manufacturing. Cuba was a rather urbanized country; even agricultural workers often lived in towns and went out to work in the fields. Rural folk were poor, to be sure, but not isolated from national or international affairs. Since the 1860s, the very openness of economy and society had made insurrections easy and frequent. The armed forces of Spain were on the verge of defeat by Cuban rebels when the United States intervened in 1898. In 1906 the armed forces were defeated by insurrectionists, provoking another U.S. intervention. As noted, in 1933 noncommissioned officers overthrew the president and the officer corps. Cuba lacked petroleum or mineral resources that would have aided the construction of a highly centralized rentier state. The country did not receive much foreign aid, nor was it heavily indebted to foreigners (the benefits of sugar price subsidies from sales in the U.S. market were highly dispersed throughout the economy). Cuba's economy was developed enough that corrupt rulers could use the funds for sultanistic purposes, but otherwise Cuba shares no evident economic prerequisite with other apparent sultanistic situations.

There is also no clear relation between Cuba's crisis of sovereignty and sultanistic tendencies. There is no doubt that U.S. intervention in Cuba during the first third of the twentieth century contributed powerfully to creating clientelist relations and to weakening the links between state, political society, and civil society. One source of power had been access to U.S. support in clientelist fashion. The United States' presence, moreover, had weakened Cuban rulers' claim to legitimacy. Indeed, there were strong sultanistic tendencies in Cuba during those decades. Yet sultanism peaked not then but later, as U.S. power over Cuba receded. In 1934 Cuba stopped being a formal U.S. protectorate upon repeal of the so-called Platt Amendment. The U.S. military presence in Cuba was modest thereafter, and the real value and centrality of U.S. investments in Cuba's economy declined in the 1930s and 1940s. Thus the connection between Cuba's early twentieth-century crisis of sovereignty and the increased sultanization of its politics in the 1950s is somewhat remote: U.S. intervention had

contributed to the foundation of a pattern of politics that leaders decades later exploited to sultanize their rule.

Anti-United States nationalist politics and anti-imperialist politics surfaced in Cuba in the 1920s and 1930s as they did in many other Latin American countries. But Cuba's nationalist effervescence was aborted by the evolution of party politics described above. By the late 1930s and early 1940s, the main anti-imperialist parties, the communists and the Auténticos, chose to ally with their presumed ideological adversaries in the contest for power. Cuba's strong anti-imperialist nationalism would resurface only after the 1959 revolution.

### *Batista's Rule*

Consistent with the preceding analysis, an important feature of Batista's rule was its nonideological character, drawing supporters freely across the ideological and partisan spectrum. After the March 1952 coup, Batista formed a four-party coalition that included his old conservative partners, the Liberals and the Democrats, but also Rolando Masferrer's Radical Union Party. Masferrer had fought alongside the communists in Spain during the civil war. In the mid-1940s he founded the Socialist Revolutionary Movement, an "action group" or violent political gang that contributed to a marked escalation of political violence in Cuba. By the early 1950s Masferrer was a senator in the Batista coalition.

Batista's most significant new partner after the March 1952 coup, however, was Eusebio Mujal, secretary-general of the Cuban Confederation of Labor. Mujal was the Auténtico Party labor politician who, with Prío's backing, had seized control of the labor confederation from the communists five years earlier. Mujal refused to back President Prío when Batista staged his coup and, instead, became a pillar of the new order. After the 1952 coup, as before, the labor confederation secretary-general was the president's ally; no revolutionary general strike succeeded in Havana until after Batista fled the country on 31 December 1958. These political parties, and the labor confederation, provided the bases of support for the Batista regime.

Another feature of Batista's rule was that he did not alter the institutionalized protections for economic elites. The elites retained access to and control over important chunks of the state. After his 1952 coup, Batista further reassured the economic elites by creating a Consultative Council of eighty members to replace the Congress. The council's members included the presidents of the sugar mill owners' association and of the sugar growers' association; the secretaries-general of the labor confederation and of its most important federations; and members from the key professional associations (bar association, medical association, etc.).<sup>10</sup>

To reassure the economic elites, Batista even kept many of the same top officials in such institutions as the central bank. The bank's board of directors had three representatives of the Cuban government and one each for the Cuban and the U.S. banks. In 1952 the three government representatives on the board resigned. The representative of the Cuban bankers became bank president; the alternate representative of the Cuban bankers became a regular member; the representative of the U.S. bankers did not change. More important, the nine department heads before the coup remained in their posts; when the Batista government fell in 1958, six of the nine still served in the central bank.

This reassurance of economic elites also indicates that Batista was prepared to respect merit and civil service procedures in certain sectors of his administration. He noted this respect (especially in the strategic banking and sugar sectors) with pride in the opening sentences of his published self-defense.<sup>11</sup> This sets the Batista regime apart from the sort of sultanistic regimes that recruit almost exclusively through patronage appointments.

In marked contrast to these guarantees to the economic elites was Batista's relationship to the armed forces. He discharged hundreds of officers, many of them career professionals who had withheld support from the coup even if they had not rallied to the constitutional regime. As Louis Pérez has aptly written, "The lumpenproletariat in uniform returned to active duty." Batista recalled the officers personally loyal to him who had been purged in 1944-45 and entrusted to them the top commands of the armed forces.

Noteworthy was the case of the Tabernilla clan. General Francisco Tabernilla Dolz became chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. His son Francisco Tabernilla Palmero, retired in 1944, was recalled to active duty in March 1952 as a lieutenant and within a month was promoted to lieutenant colonel. A second son, Carlos Tabernilla, who had retired as a lieutenant, in 1952 reached the rank of colonel within two months of his recall to active duty; in 1955 he became chief of the air force. The third son, Marcelo Tabernilla, was promoted to captain on the very day in 1952 that he was recalled to active duty and to commander two months later. Tabernilla Dolz's brother-in-law, Alberto del Río Chaviano, became military chief of Oriente province (the most important command outside Havana) as a brigadier general. Similarly, Batista's brother-in-law rose from lieutenant to brigadier general in five years. Brigadier General Rafael Salas Cañizares brought three of his brothers into the command hierarchy of the national police. It was these unprofessional, politicized officers who faced Fidel Castro's insurgency and lost.<sup>12</sup>

After the regime's collapse, in May 1959 General Tabernilla Dolz held Batista responsible. Tabernilla noted Batista's "centralizing urge to control everything" and charged that Batista had "sown disorder, lack of discipline, and unhappi-

ness with his favoritism in promotions." In August 1960 an even angrier Tabernilla accused Batista of having "destroyed the morale of the armed forces by using them for electoral purposes." Batista's "lust for wealth," Tabernilla charged, also "demoralized" the military. Military promotions were awarded to those personally loyal to Batista "who lacked professional capabilities and merits." Batista "violated the promotions code and indefinitely suspended the competitive examinations for military appointments." As an example, Tabernilla recorded Batista's appointment of his personal cook as a police lieutenant. Batista permitted the growth of "illegal gambling," with the proceeds going to the presidential palace. Tabernilla did acknowledge, however, receiving from Batista an appreciable though unspecified sum of money.<sup>13</sup>

The highly unprofessional nature of Batista's armed forces and his arbitrary decisions are typical of sultanistic regimes. Batista's policies deprived the armed forces of autonomy, subjecting them to his whims, and weakened and impeded their professionalism. This helps to distinguish his regime from the military regimes of various kinds that came to power in South America in the 1960s and 1970s. As Alfred Stepan has argued, different in many respects as were the Brazilian and the Peruvian authoritarian regimes of those years, their armed forces were quite professional as well as generally autonomous from presidential control.<sup>14</sup>

Batista's ideas about ruling were especially important. As Batista's former press secretary José Suárez Núñez has shown, the Batista who came to power in 1952 was a changed man since his earlier, more active years (1933-44). He watched films until late at night and thus got up late in the mornings, neglecting presidential duties until after lunch. He read little, ate a great deal, and played canasta several hours a week, requiring such games even in military barracks.<sup>15</sup> Batista wanted to be president in search of private pleasure, not to use the presidency for public benefit.

Neither Batista nor any of his closest associates has subsequently denied allegations of corruption. Batista's typical response to those accusations has been to quote the remarks of others to the effect that corruption exists everywhere. He quotes the former U.S. ambassador to Cuba (and former U.S. assistant secretary of state) Spruille Braden: "Of course there was always corruption . . . but also on Manhattan island, not to say the rest of New York City, there are similar situations of . . . criminality." Batista has also cited a public letter from most of his former ministers: "We do not deny that dishonest acts committed during our administration may be identified, as could also be done with regard to previous administrations in Cuba, and as occurs everywhere. It suffices to read the world press to understand that such acts occur everywhere." As if to reinforce the justification that "everybody does it so it must be all right,"

Batista appended a note of his own to his ministers' letter to call attention to the hundreds of millions of dollars invested in Cuba in the 1950s by U.S. firms.<sup>16</sup> This mentality justifies corruption not by denying its existence but by asserting its normality. Moreover, continued routine behavior by others, as exemplified by foreign investments, renders everyone a tolerant accomplice.

Rulers, Batista thought, ought to get rich. But even venal rulers need political support. Batista's rule rested on three fundamental concepts: distribution, growth, and order. These are not unusual in themselves. What was peculiar to the gradual sultanization of Cuban politics is the way Batista implemented them.

### *Distribution and Growth*

The quintessential policy of Batista's regime was managing the national lottery for distributive purposes. Established under Spanish colonial times, the lottery was at the center of a great many corrupt episodes during Cuba's independent political life in the twentieth century. Batista refined the use of the lottery to serve his purposes, however. As he has written, he removed the lottery from the national budget so none of its funds would enter the national treasury.<sup>17</sup> Decree Law 2185 (1954) authorized the director-general of the lottery "by means of decisions approved by the president of the republic" to make use of the lottery's profits to fund educational, social welfare, and cultural organizations.<sup>18</sup> In effect this institutional arrangement enabled Batista to *lawfully* distribute large sums of money to reward his friends and supporters, entirely at his own discretion, unencumbered by rules. This innovation contributed to the regime's sultanization in comparison with previous epochs by increasing the ruler's personal control over growing economic resources.

Batista has given a remarkably detailed account of his use of lottery funds from 1952 to 1958. He dwells on his gifts to journalists and to the Roman Catholic Church. Because he wanted favorable reporting, journalists and other authors received over \$1.3 million (the peso was equal to the U.S. dollar). Batista's lottery funds for the Catholic Church (over \$1.6 million) are broken down by diocese and parish, perhaps intending to show that the bishops who had criticized him most had also gotten his money. He gave over \$1.3 million to labor unions directly and another \$3.6 million to their social security funds. He reports giving away over \$63 million all together to specific organizations. These funds enabled him to purchase support or at least acquiescence and thus to contribute to the stability of his regime. He appends a footnote, however, indicating that "contributions in cash or in kind to specific individuals, or confidentially to individuals acting on behalf of their organizations, made by the president or by Mrs. Martha F. de Batista, directly or through the Office of the



Presidency, are omitted from this accounting." Thus even larger sums of money were used to buttress this highly personalized and clientelist regime.<sup>19</sup> By previous Cuban standards, Batista weakened political institutionalization and the rule of law, thus personalizing and centralizing Cuban politics even further.

Other aspects of Cuban politics promoted corruption. There are innumerable anecdotes about corruption in Cuba, but consistent with my self-imposed limitation of not citing Batista's enemies wherever I could avoid it, noted at the outset of this chapter, let us focus on the 1956 report of the Bureau of Foreign Commerce of the U.S. Department of Commerce. This report looked favorably on U.S. investments in Cuba and in general gave good marks to the Batista administration's economic policies.

First, the report noted that corruption existed before Batista's return to the presidency. An audit of Cuba's budget accounts for 1946-50, conducted by Price, Waterhouse at the Cuban government's request, found that the Cuban government's formal receipts exceeded expenditures by \$59 million; nevertheless, a deficit of \$104.6 million accumulated in fact. There was an unaccounted "loss" of over \$160 million. The report, then, cited Cuba's own Tribunal de Cuentas's audit for 1952-53, which found that only about 61 percent of the government's revenues and only 68 percent of its expenditures were formally a part of the national budget. On the revenue side, the tribunal, and the report, expressed concern that the state funded 243 extrabudgetary accounts that had little supervision and less accountability.<sup>20</sup>

The regime's distributive objectives were not limited to the personal enrichment of those it favored; its development policies fostered the use of funds earmarked for development for distributive purposes as well. For example, the U.S. Bureau of Foreign Commerce noted the allocation of funds by the Bank for Social and Economic Development (BANDES), which the regime founded in 1954: "Primary emphasis was placed on public works projects providing temporary employment but contributing little to increased national production. Less than 10 percent of the allocations could be classified in a production and development category."<sup>21</sup>

A similar distributive orientation was evident in the social security system. Cuba lacked a unified system, relying instead on forty-seven different social security entities, each of which administered its own funds. The existence and capacities of such funds depended on the political clout of the would-be beneficiaries; twenty-four of the agencies served the more powerful labor unions. Appointments to their boards were also linked to friendship and personal influence rather than to competence or merit.<sup>22</sup>

In order for funds to be distributed, the economy had to grow, and it did,

especially between 1953 and 1957. In constant 1937 pesos, real per capita income rose from 123 in 1953 to 154 in 1957. A less flattering comparison matches per capita income on the eve of the 1952-53 economic recession, which was 135, to per capita income during the civil war year of 1958, which was 142.<sup>23</sup>

Some of this growth was financed by the state's development banks. This in turn posed another issue: the regime's use of the state's development banks, and especially of BANDES financing, to require private business firms to take on regime leaders as business partners. Many BANDES loans were contingent on accepting Batista and his family as shareholders. Consider the account of a developmentally minded business executive:

He and his son Rubén in the latter years of my business ventures, specifically the . . . factory company, he became my "business associate." They were minority shareholders; exactly, if my memory does not fail me, their investment was \$400,000 which, I will never forget, his son Rubén had in cash in a briefcase and gave them to me to buy shares of stock on a morning at his house in Primera Avenida in Miramar way back I believe around 1953 or 1954. . . . They never interfered at all with the management of our business and they always received a good return on that investment . . . I was never Batistiano by heart but due to my perhaps excessive business ambitions I must confess I was Batistiano by convenience.<sup>24</sup>

More generally, Batista's former press secretary, Suárez Núñez, claims that Batista was subtle in his exercise of corruption. He avoided stealing directly from the Treasury and instead relied on payments of commissions (typically 30 percent of the cost) for government contracts—contracts that were indeed honored. This helps explain Batista's devotion to public works, noted above: they created jobs and generated kickbacks. Suárez Núñez also confirms that the BANDES was Batista's preferred institution to build up his private fortune.<sup>25</sup>

Thus the pattern of economic growth, as much as the pattern of distribution, featured the appropriation of wealth by regime incumbents in highly personalized fashion that circumvented or broke the rule of law. Batista's innovation was not the practice of corruption but its orchestration by one man; corruption in previous administrations had been more democratic too. This shift was consistent with the regime's sultanization.

### *Political Order*

Successor to a weakly institutionalized constitutional regime and mindful that his earlier rule had been strengthened by his sponsorship of a new constitution in 1940, Batista's regime in the 1950s rested in part on constitutional hypocrisy.

The regime formally sponsored presidential elections in 1954 and in 1958. In preparation for his presidential campaign for the 1954 elections, Batista even formally "resigned" as president (installing his long-standing associate, Andrés Domingo y Morales del Castillo as president for a few weeks). Former president Ramón Grau agreed to run as the opposition's candidate in the 1954 elections. Nonetheless, expecting massive fraud, shortly before the election Grau withdrew from the race and called for an electoral boycott. Batista was "elected" without formal opposition.

The Batista regime differed from more clearly sultanistic regimes, however, because there was an opposition operating within the permissible constitutional norms. In the 1958 presidential elections, former president Grau and Carlos Márquez Sterling ran for president as opposition candidates; their supporters ran for lesser offices. Batista's prime minister, Andrés Rivero Agüero, was the official candidate; he was proclaimed the winner by a share of the votes far greater than that allotted to the combined opposition presidential candidates. That parts of this tolerated opposition were manufactured by the regime reduced their credibility then and qualifies them conceptually for the label "pseudo-opposition."

The regime was not truly bound by its own constitutional and electoral law procedures. In the 1954 elections, the regime in fact chose eighteen members of the opposition whom it declared elected as members of the Senate (seventeen took their seats) to avoid the embarrassment of controlling every Senate seat. In 1958 the regime's electoral fraud was so massive that even U.S. ambassador Earl Smith, who had befriended Batista by this point, would write that Batista had failed to live up to "his solemn promise to me [that] he would hold free and open elections acceptable to the people."<sup>26</sup> Similarly, the regime canceled the constitutionally required 1956 nationwide congressional elections.

Batista believed that his tolerance of some opposition would gain him support, above all in the U.S. government. For this reason he authorized various "dialogues" with civic groups to find a solution to the problem of political legitimacy, whose only plausible outcome was his own resignation. Batista met personally with some of the leaders of these civic groups, and he deputized others to do so, in private and in public, effectively keeping the illegitimacy of his rule in the public eye. The most prominent of these "dialogues" occurred in 1955-56, led by Cosme de la Torriente and the Society of Friends of the Republic; other mediations were attempted by the Roman Catholic bishops and by the Havana Bar and the National Medical Association. Because he had no intention of resigning, the eventual failure of these negotiations further eroded

his base of power. Some of the civic group leaders (especially among the lawyers and medical doctors) felt so deceived that they openly joined the opposition to the regime, thereby weakening Batista's initial coalition from 1952.

Batista's constitutionalist ambivalence is equally evident in the regime's handling of press censorship. Though the frequency and intensity of censorship increased as the regime was challenged by the insurrection, censorship remained remarkably porous. For example, from 1952 to 1958 the Cuban press published twenty-five attacks against the regime by Fidel Castro. Nine of these appeared either before Castro's 1953 attack on the Moncada military barracks or in 1955 immediately after Batista had granted him amnesty. More noteworthy is the publication of thirteen of Castro's statements while he was already a political exile dedicated to the violent overthrow of the Batista regime, as well as of two major revolutionary manifestos, in 1957 and 1958, while Castro was in the mountains fighting Batista. Castro's interview with Herbert Matthews of the *New York Times* was also published in *Bohemia*, the leading Cuban news magazine.<sup>27</sup>

Ted Gurr has hypothesized that a regime's coercive control varies curvilinearly with the size and resources of its repressive capacity and with the severity of its sanctions, control being least when size, resources, and severity are at intermediate levels.<sup>28</sup> That was an accurate characterization of the Batista regime. Or to put it more simply, Batista was an inefficient dictator. His press censorship and his constitutional manipulation were distinctly inconsistent. That inconsistency contributed directly to the regime's unraveling: there was enough constitutionalism and press freedom to expose the regime's illegitimacy but not enough repression to crush the opposition.

Much of the revulsion against the Batista regime stemmed from its acts of repression. Some of the repression was lawful: some who committed acts of violence were arrested, brought before a court of law, and sentenced to prison. Much of it, however, was unlawful because the regime's security forces, as we shall see below, were grossly unprofessional; they indulged all too readily in police brutality. This very unprofessionalism is also an important explanation of the ultimate failure of this behavior.

Batista's response to these accusations has been twofold: that the acts of his opponents were worse, and that the acts of any regime's forces are difficult to control in the midst of civil war. He claims that some of his supporters have accused him of not having been harsh enough.<sup>29</sup> It is untrue, however, that the regime's acts of repression occurred only during civil war. An exemplary witness is former U.S. ambassador Arthur Gardner. Gardner became Batista's personal friend. In his writings, Batista praises and quotes Gardner, calling him

a credible witness to his presidency.<sup>30</sup> Therefore it is appropriate to quote from Ambassador Gardner's secret telegram describing killings in Havana in February 1957, far from what was still a weak insurgency in eastern Cuba:

We here now convinced recurrent killings of persons government maintains are oppositionists and terrorists are actually work of police and army. At least three such killings have occurred Habana alone during past few days. Official explanation is that men were apparently killed by other oppositionists. However . . . Legal Attaché . . . received indirect admissions culpability within police circles . . . from other evidence police responsibility at least one case. This all part attempt (1) answer force with counterforce (2) give justification continuing suspension constitutional guarantees (3) throw fear into active insurrectionaries (4) stop terroristic activities including bombings.<sup>31</sup>

The reliance on repression does not mean, however, that the law and the courts did not work at all. They did, but mainly in regulating the economy and society apart from the maintenance of public order. The regime's agreements with economic elites depended in part on its general willingness to honor the independence and efficacy of the civil courts to settle social and economic disputes. The courts lacked independence in political or military spheres, however. Their capacities and constraints thus summarized the rewards the regime accorded to economic elites and the unrestrained punishment it reserved for its opponents.

### *The Breakdown of the Batista Regime*

Studying the breakdown of the Batista regime requires more extensive treatment than can be given here; such a study also overlaps with a different topic—the outbreak of the revolution. Nonetheless, it is worth emphasizing that much about the Batista regime's collapse is best understood as derived from its essential characteristics, which made it incapable of resisting the revolutionary forces.

The regime lacked an ideology; indeed, it even lacked guiding ideas of a general sort other than the goal of generating prosperity. As economic growth faltered during the second half of 1958 and as Batista's continuation in office seemed more a liability than an asset in maintaining political order, its erstwhile supporters deserted: it lost the economic elites, the U.S. government, rank-and-file labor union leaders, and so forth. The regime's political parties failed to rally the population and neglected the tasks of political mobilization. The lack of loyalty in Cuban politics made such desertions seem not abnormal. No political, societal, or economic cleavages impeded them. Many politicians had

switched allegiances again and again during the preceding twenty years. Why not do so again in order to remain, as ever, on the winning side?

The revolutionaries had put forth a program that emphasized Batista's removal from power. The ruler himself was the fundamental target of the revolution. He had to go, making impossible the sort of compromise between the armed forces and the civilian opposition evident in the 1980s in much of South and Central America. The social and economic content of the revolutionary program seemed only a variant of the ideas of Cuba's moderate left. The programs of revolutionaries denounced corruption and unconstitutionality and promised the rule of constitutional law. The puritanical streak that would appear in the 1960s was at best a flicker in the late 1950s. The Roman Catholic Church as an institution played no role in Batista's overthrow, though many individual Catholics, of course, did so on their own. Religion was a minor factor in this process.

Only landlords had to worry about a revolutionary land reform, whose terms nonetheless seemed moderate enough. The economic planks of revolutionaries seemed to emphasize economic growth from which many could profit. The demands for the expropriation of foreign property had never exceeded the realm of public utilities, and even with regard to the utilities there seemed to be some backtracking. It seemed, therefore, that the guarantees for economic elites would continue into the 1960s just as they had survived regime changes since the 1930s. In December 1958 as in March 1952, in the end organized interest groups stood aside, or even welcomed the regime's fall.<sup>32</sup>

The most stunning feature of the Batista regime's breakdown, however, is that it happened so suddenly and so thoroughly. In mid-1958 Fidel Castro's guerrillas numbered only about three hundred, and his brother Raúl Castro commanded another one hundred. Both groups of rebels operated mainly in the mountains of eastern Cuba in Oriente province. Six months later they marched into Havana. Why? Within the context of this chapter, one answer lies in the structure of the state, in particular the structure of the armed forces.

Batista had succeeded in deprofessionalizing the officer corps of Cuba's armed forces. When in 1956 many of the remaining professional officers, led by Colonel Ramón Barquín, sought to stage a coup, they were defeated and jailed, and the armed forces were thereby deprived of their services.

The army's military campaigns against the guerrillas were inept. Many officers simply did not know how to do their jobs. When Fidel Castro's forces landed in eastern Cuba on 2 December 1956, they were not pursued for three days, giving them a chance to learn their way around the region. After six days

of active pursuit, the army declared victory and withdrew from the mountainous region of eastern Cuba, leaving the rebels with valuable time to organize, lick their wounds, plan strategy, and recruit peasants. This pattern of occasional army offensives followed by declarations of victory and military withdrawal was repeated several times throughout 1957.<sup>33</sup>

By early 1958 other aspects of the crisis within the army became clear: government military offensives collapsed through defections and desertions and through the simple unwillingness of many field officers and troops to fight on behalf of the Batista regime. (The army's soldiers were volunteers, not conscripts.) Afraid of conspiracies within the military, specifically in the Havana garrisons, Batista had to keep his most trusted officers, those politically loyal to him, in command in Havana. He also needed loyal troops in Havana, so that the officers dispatched to fight the rebellion in eastern Cuba were those least willing to fight on his behalf. They did not.

To protect the sugar harvest so that exports would continue and thereby to keep his pledge to the economic elites, Batista prevented the army from undertaking offensives against the guerrillas during the harvest season. The troops were committed to fixed defensive positions to protect sugar plantations and mills. This meant, for example, that the army launched its last major offensive in June 1958 as the rainy season began. Its motorized equipment soon got stuck in the mud, and the offensive failed.

By mid-1958 the army began to retreat in eastern Cuba whenever the rebels attacked. The main constraint on rebel victory became the lack of personnel to occupy the territory that the army seemed willing to yield. The rebel bands did not really beat the army; the army beat itself. Or more precisely, the capacity of the state to defend itself declined drastically as the military collapsed from within. The rebels took advantage of the structural implosion of the armed forces that occurred during the last six months of 1958.

By late 1958 the collapse of the army from within accelerated. In November Batista uncovered a coup attempt led by the general who was chief of army operations. A bit later another coup attempt was foiled, this one led by the chief of the navy air corps. In December the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Francisco Tabernilla Dolz, with one of his sons and his brother-in-law, visited the U.S. embassy to propose to organize a joint coup against Batista. General Eulogio Cantillo, chief of army operations in Oriente province, the man directly responsible for the conduct of the war against the guerrillas, opened direct talks with Fidel Castro.<sup>34</sup>

On New Year's Eve, Batista, the Tabernilla clan, and their closest civilian and military associates simply gave up and fled the country. In their absence the

armed forces disintegrated. At that time no guerrilla forces threatened the capital city of Havana. The military had not been defeated in the battle of Havana—there never was any such battle, because Batista surrendered state power.

In short, it is the crisis within the state, and especially within the military, that explains why Batista fell. Batista's sultanistic tendencies were his undoing: his purge of professional officers, his distrust of his own appointees, his insistence on being his own field commander (despite his total absence of field command experience), the lack of loyalties within the structures he had created, the absence of commitment to fundamental ideas, and the low morale among the troops induced by overwhelming evidence of corruption. The state entered this crisis because it had become more sultanized than ever in the past. Batista's manner of rule, and the nature of the regime he designed, explains why and how he fell.