

## It takes flour to stay: Why people leave Cuba - or return



Street scene in the old town of Havana (Source: [Commons](#))

*A guest article by Andreas Hesse.*

Major German media rarely talk about Cuba. But in mid-March, images from Santiago made it into the headlines of Spiegel, Zeit, and Co. "We are hungry", chanted several hundred people on the streets, demanding electricity, fuel, and food. The constant war against the island and the fight against economic decline are wearing on people's nerves. It is clear that many are leaving the country. But some Cubans are also coming back. What drives them?

At first glance, they don't seem to have much in common. But the various events of the last few months show that there are fierce confrontations in and around Cuba.

November 2, 2023: The United Nations General Assembly voted for the 31st time to end the US blockade of Cuba, by 187 votes to two (USA, Israel). Consequences: none. The German media, which generally follows UN resolutions very closely, reacted with collective silence.

At the end of January, two foreign cyberattacks on institutions on the island paralyzed key areas. The financial services provider Fincimex, through which a large proportion of money transfers from the USA are processed, was hit. It was out of action for around two months. It then hit the fuel supply system, meaning that the drastic price increases for petrol could only come into effect a month later than planned. This delay in turn was not unwelcome to the long-suffering population...

At the beginning of February, 133 tons of rationed chicken meat were stolen from a state factory in Havana, the most spectacular food theft in the country's history. The perpetrators of the heist were caught. They were shift supervisors, IT staff, and security guards from the

factory. The country's media did not conceal the incident as they had done in the past, to the contrary. The message was supposed to be: "We'll get you."

20 February: The "Prisoners Defenders", based in Spain but supported by the US state budget, and their boss J. Larrondo, took José Manzaneda from the solidarity medium "Cubainformación" and representatives of the organization "Euskadi - Cuba" to court. Cubainformación, which describes Washington's blockade of the island in violation of international law as a war against Cuba, had described the passionate blockade advocates from Prisoners Defenders as "war criminals like Donald Trump" in an article. The plaintiff organization has now demanded six years in prison for Manzaneda and his colleagues for alleged defamation, with the ultimate aim of forcing the closure of the unpopular opposition medium. The 31st Criminal Court in Madrid has now handed the "anti-Castro" plaintiffs a resounding defeat and ordered them to pay the legal costs due to the "foolhardiness and dishonesty" of the lawsuit. Manzaneda and his colleagues were exonerated of all charges. According to the court, the incriminating term was at most a hyperbole, an exaggerated comparison, in the context of the article. On the lurid homepage of Prisoners Defenders, there is still not a word about the embarrassing failure in court. It is piquant that a human rights organization - according to its self-portrayal - is judicially certified as not respecting the freedom of expression of political opponents.

In March, there was another drastic increase in power cuts. This was partly due to a lack of import capacity for crude oil and partly because the Antonio Guiteras power plant, the island's largest electricity generator, was taken off the grid for necessary maintenance work. The province was without electricity for up to 18 hours a day in some cases, another stress test for the beleaguered population.

March 5: French biathlon world champion Sophie Chauveau declared that she had been denied entry to the USA to take part in the World Cup in Utah because she had spent a vacation in Cuba.

On March 7, Havana announced that Alejandro Gil Fernández, who had just been dismissed as economy minister a month earlier, was under investigation for serious offenses against his official duties. The news was a bombshell, but official details have not yet been released. According to the rumor mill, the former minister and several family members are allegedly involved in a serious corruption case in the provincial capital of Ciego de Ávila.

### **"Just don't come here"**

What the examples show: All the main and secondary theaters of war are in full swing. In this permanent state of emergency, the island's suffering population seeks its salvation sometimes in opening small businesses, sometimes in black market transactions, delinquency, corruption, or taking from their own business. And in migration.

It is well known that the island is drying up demographically and that more than half a million Cubans have migrated since 2021, mostly to the USA. Only a small minority still try to make it by sea as "balseros". The overland route is more popular, for example visa-free travel to Nicaragua and then north. So far, 75,000 people have a sponsor in the US as part of the "humanitarian parole" program, which enables privileged resettlement and integration through material support. Among the emigrants are people who find the status quo so

traumatizing that they have lost faith in improvement or in the revolution. But there are also people who see their migration status as temporary and want to return as soon as they have saved up enough. Not everyone is happy with their fate where they have landed. For Adrian, 29 years old and employed in a private corner store in Santiago de Cuba, there is no question that he will stay in Cuba. He talks about his best friend who left for the USA two years ago: "She writes: 'Just don't come here. All the money goes on rent and food. I haven't gone out once in two years. What kind of life is it here?'" Another emigrant used to be the uncrowned king in his village as a profiteer with both legal - for the sake of the facade - and black market businesses, but wanted more and emigrated. Today he is somehow getting by in Florida, but as a cleaner he has lost his former position in the social fabric and has become a nobody.

Such stories exist in endless variations. Immigrants deal with the political hatred and extreme intolerance of exile in Florida in different ways. Some adapt easily; others develop disturbing feelings that make them feel alienated from their new home, because there is no freedom of expression there either and you have to be careful what you say. Even well-known artists can fail: when the feature film "Sergio and Sergei" (2017) by Ernesto Daranas was presented in the USA, the protagonist, Tomás Cao, a very popular TV and cinema actor in Cuba, left the country. His Hollywood dreams did not come true. In 2018, Cao still appeared in a US television series, but then it was over. He was last seen as a supermarket employee in Florida. The Cuban musician "El Médico de la Salsa" lived in Miami for a time and once described the city as a cemetery for Cuban artists. The eternal interplay between fascination with the West and disillusionment: the place of longing as a haven of facades and beautiful appearances.

### **Flour for everyone?**

If people who want to return (they exist even now!) flirt with self-employment, they want legal and planning security. This is not easy in Cuba, with its independent monster bureaucracy.

One example: the state is in such dire straits in the current crisis that it cannot import enough flour for the subsidized bread for the population for the month of March, even though the price of wheat has fallen on the world market. As a result, people are scraping together the last of their money to buy more expensive flour from MIPYMES (Micro-, Pequeñas y Medianas Empresas; micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises) so that they at least have bread. In the province of Santiago, it has been decreed that where subsidized bread is no longer available, the private sector will no longer be allowed to bake bread either. Instead, the state wants to "capture" the MIPYMES and produce there on its own terms using their flour stocks, either to prevent inflation or to save face. Even if the state only takes over the enterprises temporarily, the owners of the MIPYMES would lose their high investment in buying and transporting the flour. Because they see this as a breach of contract by the provincial government, they are opposing the plan and going on strike, so to speak, against their own companies. The victims are the fuming population, who are now unable to find their bread here or there.

The incident shows how a Kafkaesque bureaucracy does not give in of its own accord; rather, there is a back and forth between containing and reigniting bureaucratic excesses.

Can a return to an old culture of overregulation get the country back on track, regain trust and persuade people to stay or return? A rhetorical question.

Since the start of the pandemic, the standard of living has only gone in one direction: downwards. The harsh reaction to the protests of July 11, 2021, by the state, which is fighting a defensive battle, was a shock, especially for members of the younger generation. Alongside the economic collapse, political resignation is one of the main reasons for migration among the younger generation.

Is there any prospect that things could change for the better over the course of the year? At least there were slightly more tourists in January than in the previous year. There is hope for new agreements on the export of medicines and medical services. A large delegation from the Egyptian Ministry of Health has just visited the island. Agricultural production is also not lying idle across the board. In some communities, the call for people to take responsibility for their own production is taken more seriously than elsewhere. The aim is to generalize examples of best practice. Two large new photovoltaic parks will be connected to the grid in March, with more to follow by May 2025. The world market price of nickel, the main export product, which has been languishing recently, seems to be slowly making its way upwards again, and tobacco is also doing well. Will that be enough? And will the reform efforts work? Hope dies last. But it will be a long time before more people come back than leave the island.

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About *ila*:

*The "Informationsstelle Lateinamerika e. V." (*ila*) is a non-profit association based in the Oscar-Romero-Haus in Bonn, Germany. The aim of the association is to publish critical and independent information from Latin America. The focus is on news and background information from a grassroots perspective. The association has been in existence since 1975 and publishes the magazine of the same name, *ila*. ([Cubaheute](#))*