

RADICAL REFORM

Initially, the new government was composed of a mixture of 26th of July Movement revolutionaries and prominent middle- and upper-class leaders who had opposed Batista. This was well received in Cuba and by the U.S. government. Reforms undertaken in the early days were widely supported. These reforms included legislation which reduced rents for low-cost apartments, telephone and electric rates, and the cost of medicines. Many wages were raised. Cane cutters, for example, had their wages increased 15 percent. Anticorruption laws, legislation banning gambling, and laws calculated to retrieve some of Batista's ill-gotten wealth also were widely applauded.

The government proved to be slow and inefficient, however, as different values and goals clashed. When the Agrarian Reform Law was passed on May 17, 1959, attitudes in U.S. business and government circles began to change and with them, those of the moderate political leaders. Redistribution of the land, though mentioned in the re-instituted 1940 constitution, was seen as too radical. Perhaps just as radical to some was the Reform Law's limitation on the size of farms to one thousand acres as mentioned in the 1940 constitution, excepting some sugar and rice plantations which were permitted to include as many as 3,333 acres. Foreign companies could hold more land if it were deemed in the national interest. Land which exceeded these limits was nationalized, with compensation to be made in twenty-year bonds with 4.5 percent annual interest. In the future only Cubans could buy land.

Some of the nationalized land was redistributed to *campesinos* (peasants), but most was not. Resignations followed, changing the complexion of the government and increasing criticism from the U.S. The resignations made it easier for the new government to move further to the left so that the downward spiral in relations with the U.S. continued until relations between the two countries were virtually nonexistent.

Nearly all Cubans, including members of the middle and upper classes, shared in the joy at Batista's overthrow. Their children made up the bulk of revolutionary leaders. They had suffered at the hands of the army and police; watched corruption, which seemed endemic to the Cuban political and economic system, move wealth into the hands of those who had connections; and experienced the humiliation of having their economy controlled by foreign (mostly U.S.) companies. The honesty practiced by the new leadership and the early laws which aimed to help all the people, such as the reduction of rents and increase of wages, were, at first, a surprise, but they were seen as welcome signs of positive changes the revolution was to bring. However, the more comfortable sectors of the society became very anxious about the future as events unfolded: legislation affecting the property rights of landowners; the Roman Catholic hierarchy's criticism of the revolution as communistic; in 1961 the nationalization of all private schools (most of which were operated by churches); and perhaps most importantly, the development of what was called *fidelismo*, the apparent one-man rule by Fidel Castro.