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FEATURED Q&A

Can the San Isidro Movement Force Change in Cuba?



Artists who are part of the San Isidro Movement held large-scale protests in recent weeks in Cuba. Members of the group are pictured in December 2019. // File Photo: Facebook page of San Isidro Movement.

Q Hundreds of artists, some part of a group known as the San Isidro Movement, came together in Cuba's largest protest in nearly six decades following online videos that went viral, appearing to show police detentions of government dissidents. How important is the San Isidro Movement, and why is it gaining traction now? What are the movement's end goals, and how likely is it to bring significant change to in the island nation? To what extent has the 2018 deployment of nationwide Internet services influenced the organization of social movements and groups in Cuba?

A Yoani Sánchez, director of digital journal 14ymedio: "The San Isidro Movement mixes activism and art, one of the reasons why it has touched very diverse parts of Cuban society. The hunger strike that several of its members maintained for more than a week and the protest of artists in front of the Ministry of Culture in Havana are the most recent chapter in a long history of disagreement among filmmakers, writers, musicians, painters and other creators in relation to the Cuban regime's cultural policy. What happened this December had been in the making for decades. For more than 50 years, the Plaza de la Revolución has wanted to make artists a sounding board for official propaganda. Every time that intellectuals have wanted to deviate from these strict ideological limits, they have received reprisals and warnings. There is a long history of coercion maneuvers: Fidel Castro's 'Words to the Intellectuals' in 1961, the Gray Quinquennium of the 1970s, purges against writers, public defamation of figures who refuse to fold their pen and talent to the ruling party, the forced exile of so many artists

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TODAY'S NEWS

POLITICAL

Nations Ban Flights From U.K. Over Variant of Coronavirus

Latin American nations joined others around the world in banning flights from the United Kingdom amid concerns over a new variant of the novel coronavirus.

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POLITICAL

López Obrador, Biden Discuss Immigration in Phone Call

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador and U.S. President-elect Joe Biden reportedly discussed the root causes of migration in a telephone call.

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POLITICAL

Former Governor of Mexico's Jalisco State Fatally Shot

Aristóteles Sandoval, a former governor of Mexico's Jalisco state, was shot to death at a restaurant in Puerto Vallarta. Sandoval was the only one targeted in the attack.

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Sandoval // File Photo: State of Jalisco.

POLITICAL NEWS

Nations Ban Flights From U.K. Over New Coronavirus Variant

Latin American nations joined others around the world in imposing new travel restrictions relating to the United Kingdom after British Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced Saturday that a new variant of the novel coronavirus had led to a surge in infections, Reuters reported. The governments of Argentina and Chile were among those to suspend flights to and from Britain over concerns about the new variant. Argentina's Interior Ministry said the last flight from Britain to Argentina before the new restrictions take effect is one scheduled to land in Buenos Aires this morning. Arriving passengers on that flight would need to quarantine for seven days, the ministry said. Additionally, Chile's government said nonresident foreigners who had visited Britain over the past 14 days would be denied entry. Chile's government said the restriction would be in effect for two weeks starting Tuesday at midnight. Also, El Salvador is banning travelers who had been in the United Kingdom or South Africa over the past 30 days or who were on flights that included layovers in those countries, President Nayib Bukele announced Sunday in a posting on Twitter, Reuters reported. Colombia, Ecuador and Peru also moved to ban flights from Britain, BBC News reported. Canada and several European countries also announced bans on incoming flights from Britain. British officials said Saturday that the coronavirus variant was spreading 70 percent faster than others, The Washington Post reported. Public health experts in the United States said that while the variant may appear to be more contagious than the already-existing ones, it does not appear to be more dangerous than those already detected in the United States, the newspaper reported. "I don't think there should be any reason for alarm right now," U.S. Admiral Brett Giroir, who has headed testing efforts, said Sunday on ABC's This Week television program. While variants of the virus occur, experts have said the novel coro-

navirus does not appear to mutate as much as the influenza virus, meaning that it is less likely that new vaccines would need to be developed every year to provide immunity to new strains, The Washington Post reported. News of the new variant has emerged as Latin American countries have struggled with new waves of infection. In Mexico, officials announced a ban on all nonessential activities and a partial lockdown in Mexico City and surrounding Mexico state, the Associated Press reported. While the move does not prohibit residents from moving around freely, it will close stores, cause the cancellation of cultural activities and shutter restaurants, except for takeout services. Brazil, which has the world's second-highest number of recorded deaths from Covid-19 after the United States, has registered record numbers of new infections in recent days, while parts of Peru have experienced testing positivity rates of close to 100 percent, The Wall Street Journal reported.

López Obrador, Biden Discuss Immigration in Call

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador and U.S. President-elect Joe Biden, who takes office next month, spoke by phone on Saturday, the Mexican leader said on social media, the Associated Press reported. The conversation reportedly focused on the root causes of migration in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and southern Mexico, and developing jobs and opportunities there to prevent more people from fleeing their homes. "We reaffirmed our commitment to work together for the good of our people and our countries," said López Obrador. In a statement posted to Biden's transition website, the former vice president's team said Biden "emphasized the need to reinvigorate U.S.-Mexico cooperation to ensure safe and orderly migration, contain Covid-19, revitalize the economies of North America and secure our common border." López Obrador, who is seen as close to U.S. President Donald Trump, was among the last world leaders to congratulate Biden on his

NEWS BRIEFS

World Court to Settle Border Dispute Between Venezuela, Guyana

The United Nations' International Court of Justice said Friday that it will intervene to settle a long-running border dispute between Venezuela and Guyana, the Associated Press reported. The case could take months or years to resolve. The dispute dates back to 1899. Last year, Venezuela argued the World Court did not have jurisdiction in the matter.

Former Governor of Mexico's Jalisco State Fatally Shot

A former governor of Mexico's Jalisco state, home to the notorious Jalisco New Generation drug cartel, was shot to death early on Friday at a restaurant in Puerto Vallarta, the Associated Press reported. Aristóteles Sandoval was killed in the attack, which only targeted him and had signs of a gang killing, according to the state prosecutor. Although high-profile cases possibly involving drug cartels are usually investigated by federal prosecutors, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said state prosecutors would be responsible for this probe.

Hurricanes Have Caused \$1.9 Bn in Damage in Honduras: ECLAC

Hurricane Eta and Iota so far have caused approximately 45.7 billion lempiras (\$1.9 billion) in damages and losses in Honduras, said the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, or ECLAC, Reuters reported Sunday. The figure is far lower than the \$10 billion estimate that the Honduran Foreign Minister Lisandro Rosales reported in recent weeks. "At the humanitarian level, there are more than four million people affected with 2.5 million in need," ECLAC said in the report. "There are 92,000 people in shelters and 62,000 houses affected," it added.

electoral win, waiting until the Electoral College confirmed his victory last week. The Mexican president sent Biden a letter that has been widely regarded as “somewhat chilly,” according to the AP. The letter included an implicit warning against U.S. involvement in Mexican internal affairs. “We must strive to maintain good bilateral relations based on collaboration, friendship and respect for our sovereignty,” López Obrador wrote, *El Financiero* reported. “We are confident that with you as president of the United States it will be possible to continue applying the basic principles of foreign policy established in our constitution. In particular, that of nonintervention and self-determination of the people,” he added.

BUSINESS NEWS

Colombia Reaches Vaccines Deal With Pfizer, AstraZeneca

Colombia has reached a deal with pharmaceutical companies Pfizer and AstraZeneca to provide 20 million doses of Covid-19 vaccines, President Iván Duque announced on Friday, Reuters reported. Colombia on Friday surpassed 40,000 registered deaths from the novel coronavirus and had a new record daily of confirmed cases of 13,277. In total, it had nearly 1.5 million confirmed cases of Covid-19. Duque said the government will begin the process of mass vaccination in the first weeks of 2021. Other countries in the region are also preparing for inoculation. Mexico’s government is planning to start rolling out vaccines this week, having contracted 34.4 million doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, the Associated Press reported. Elsewhere, Chile’s health regulator approved the emergency use of the Pfizer vaccine and is planning to deliver the first doses by Christmas. Ecuador’s health authorities also approved the Pfizer vaccine, and officials there hope to have the first 50,000 doses of the vaccine delivered in January. Brazil said it has negotiated deals for more than 300 million doses.

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and editorial, music and television censorship. However, unlike earlier rebellious acts in the cultural sector, the Nov. 27 protest and the San Isidro Movement’s demands come at a time of great fragility for Castroism. With the so-called Historical Generation that has kept power for more than half a century exhausted, a severe economic crisis and the deployment of Internet services for mobile phones two years ago, the Cuban regime seems to be up against the ropes. Groups on Telegram and WhatsApp, as well as live broadcasts via Facebook and other independent media digital platforms on the island have put in check a system that only knows how to respond one way—with repression. Can the military crush Cuban artists? The outcome is difficult to predict, but the context is new and exciting.”

A **Coco Fusco, author and professor at The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in New York:** “The San Isidro Movement was formed in response to Decree 349, a law enacted in 2018 that criminalized artistic activity carried out in public or private spaces without government authorization. Many artists interpreted it as an attack on an expanding independent cultural sector. Then came Decree 370 to curtail independent journalistic activity and Decree 373 to limit filmmaking, as well as Law 128 to regulate the use of patriotic symbols. These laws formalized an already existent practice of suppressing creative expression. The new laws and mounting harassment politicized the Cuban cultural sector and sensitized artists to the ongoing violation of human rights by the Cuban government. This heightened awareness explains why so many young Cuban artists protested on Nov. 27. The San Isidro Movement engages in nonviolent activism as well as cultural activities aimed at raising awareness of the impact of these laws. They have produced informational videos about Decree 349, collaborated with musicians in the produc-

tion of anti-decree anthems and organized exhibits about the uses of the Cuban flag in art. They give opportunities to artists, writers and musicians that are not supported by state institutions to engage with the

“**For an emergent generation of Cuban artists, digital technology is key to their ability to communicate, inform themselves and organize.”**

— Coco Fusco

Cuban public. Their goal is to advocate for a peaceful transition toward a more open and pluralistic society. For an emergent generation of Cuban artists, digital technology is key to their ability to communicate, inform themselves and organize. Social media outlets such as Facebook have become their alternative public sphere, allowing them to air grievances, build alliances and remain in contact with the Cuban diaspora.”

A **Ted Henken, associate professor of sociology at Baruch College, CUNY:** “In November, rapper Denis Solís was sentenced to eight months in jail for ‘disrespect’ after he broadcast on social media his altercation with a police officer who illegally broke into his home. This provoked members of the San Isidro Movement (MSI) to stage a hunger strike demanding Solís’ release. Instead, health and security agents raided MSI headquarters on the pretext of ‘controlling the pandemic.’ The real breakthrough of MSI was its effective breakdown of the wall of fear and isolation that had long separated such marginalized ‘artists’ from Cuba’s state-sanctioned artistic mainstream. After learning of the violent raid via their cellphones, on Nov. 27, more than 500 young artists and intellectuals staged

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an unprecedented sit-in outside Havana's Ministry of Culture in solidarity with the MSI, demanding a meeting with the minister to address not only the MSI's original aims but also the more fundamental issues of artistic freedom, freedom of speech and the right to dissent. While this mass gathering briefly forced ministry officials to the table, in subsequent weeks they reneged on their promises of dialogue and safeguards from retribution. Instead, the government unleashed a wave of character assassination in the official media and subjected movement leaders to arbitrary detentions and house arrest. Since Cubans gained paid access to 3G mobile Internet for the first time, the island has seen a nonstop flurry of digital technology-enabled sociopolitical mobilizations, including a digital campaign against an independent LGBT march organized via social media and a protest outside the Ministry of Communications in solidarity with the netizen founders of Cuba's SNET. While still very far from anything approaching a 'Cuban Spring,' this series of public denunciations of government policies indicates that the spread of web access that the government has justified as part of its urgent 'informatización' of Cuban society is also a Pandora's box of political headaches. It has unleashed pent-up demands and eroded two key pillars of government information control on the island: fear of the consequences of speaking out of turn and isolation from others who harbor similar complaints."

A **William M. LeoGrande, professor of government at American University:** "The controversy surrounding the San Isidro Movement is a symptom of deeper structural changes in Cuba. Fueled by the rapid expansion of Internet access, civil society is finding its voice through virtual communities beyond state control. These new social networks have begun to take real-world

action in defense of their common interests—the LGBTQ and animal rights marches in 2019, the taxi drivers strike in 2018-2019 and the ongoing women's campaign against domestic violence. Recent demonstrations in defense of artistic freedom are just the latest example, and surely not the last. The San Isidro Movement was founded by

“**These new social networks have begun to take real-world action in defense of their common interests...**”

— William M. LeoGrande

a small group of dissident artists during the 2018 protests against Decree 349, a law requiring that artists be licensed, and prohibiting works deemed pornographic, racist or violent. This November, rap artist Denis Solís was sentenced to eight months in jail for insulting a police officer, prompting fellow San Isidro members to go on a hunger strike demanding his release. When they were briefing detained by police, more than a hundred other artists representing a breadth of ideological views gathered at the Ministry of Culture in protest. In response, the government has tried to divide dissident artists from the broader artistic community, vilifying the dissidents as paid U.S. agents while conciliating others by offering dialogue and reassurances that artistic expression will be respected. Cuban leaders have rarely had to deal with grassroots political demands, but as Cuban society becomes more heterogeneous and more wired, challenges such as these will grow, forcing the state to choose between responsiveness and repression."

The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at gkuleta@thedialogue.org.

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