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## NO POLITICS WITHOUT WOMEN

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# EDITORIAL

**NO POLITICS WITHOUT WOMEN**

The first round of the municipal elections in Cuba, which were held on November 26, has brought an interesting result. Not in regard to the selected delegates, since their own internal mechanisms prevent any significant change (the delegate lists are aligned with the Communist Party of Cuba which in turn will elect other Party officials and these will subsequently do so for other Party positions), but rather in regard to the attitude of the Cuban people towards the vote.

The worst participation rate in post-revolution electoral history was recorded on Sunday, November 26, 2017: more than 1,200,000 Cubans did not go to the polls. In addition, more than 300,000 blank votes were recorded, which are considered the protest vote, and there were also more than 300,000 null votes or invalid ballots.

In this context, we have asked ourselves if the disappointment with the system of Cuban government has something to do with the absence of women in their politics. We are not referring to the physical presence of women. Beyond quotas and slogans, a closer look reveals that the positions of real impact in the Party are occupied by men, and that the political system is the product of the imposition of an absolute patriarchal system that destroyed any small opening for feminism on the island after the revolution, and which has been dubbed “Machismo-Leninism”.

These elections are probably going to result in a man being in charge of the government who is not called Castro but, when will it be possible for a woman reach the presidency of Cuba?

**Agnes Koleman**

# WHEN WILL THERE BE A WOMAN PRESIDENT IN CUBA?



**Yanelis Morales**

**T**here has never been a woman president of Cuba nor has a woman come close to being an eligible candidate. While other Latin American countries have broken through this “glass ceiling” with women who became the president of their country (Violeta Barrios in Nicaragua, Mireya Moscoso in Panama, Michelle Bachelet in Chile, Dilma Rousseff in Brazil, and Cristina Fernández in Argentina) during the last decades, Cuba cannot be listed among this advanced group. Women’s right to vote was approved on the island in 1934, and it was not until two years later that women were able to vote for the first time.

It should be noted that, in the history of the continent, women never staged a coup d’etat nor set out to maintain absolute power for an

unlimited amount of time. The ones we mentioned, all reached the highest seat through elections. The history of the island, on the contrary, has followed a very macho line of development, from which it has never succeeded in breaking away, including – or to an even greater extent - in the period of the Revolution that began in 1959. They have been only men, and so few that they can be counted on the fingers of one hand - and with a finger to spare - those that have ruled the island for more than half a century, can be summed up in two brothers of the same surname.

All this time, the upholding and reproduction of power, as far as its ideological basis has proceeded through a reaffirmation of patriarchal leadership, wrapped up in a cult of personality and an epic speech that dispensed with

the female figure as the subject of political changes. This masculinization of national life was also based on the model of the supreme leader, devoid of a public visibility for the wife or the rest of his family, with the same paternalistic pretext with which the idea of a woman was reduced in general to a passive object of power, established as a beneficiary or someone to be assisted, through measures such as the legalization of abortion, and the massive incorporation of women into areas of studying and work (demands that were added to the traditional slavery in the domestic sphere).

In 2009, the feminist movement was continuing to knock on Cuba's doors, where gender approaches were still confined to academia and literary studies, to the point that Raúl Castro himself had to realize that women did not have enough of a presence in public offices, when he said at a women's congress: "It is a shame that after 50 years of revolution, with all the progress that we have made on so many issues [...], only a few female leaders have emerged in the different areas." In that year, women occupied 27% of the parliamentary seats in the country (including the assemblies at the municipal, provincial and national levels), despite constituting half of the population. The percentage was going to change in the years ahead, taking dramatic leaps (already by 2010, women held 33% of these seats, and by 2013, the percent reached 48.86%, which put the country in first place in Latin America and fourth in the world.) Therefore, it is worth asking how life has continued to function in light of such figures and if there was a real change in the mental and social

structures, over such a short period of time, if an advance of feminism had taken place, or if we are only dealing with the result of another measure taken from above.

Evidently, the centralism of power has merely brought about new statistics rather than a positive change in reality, by not allowing for the logical development of civil society and feminist action. Manuel E. Yepe, an official journalist from the state media, acknowledged that it was "necessary to reinforce the revolutionary political will to correct such stubbornness" (Cubadebate, February 16, 2013). In practice, it was not necessary to create a quota or law about gender parity, because in Cuba the vertical power of the state was capable of imposing the norm for women to benefit from these different positions, sometimes even forcing their own willingness. Now, do these female leaders have a gender perspective, or have they come to reproduce the same type of patriarchal power? In this regard, says professor and feminist Teresa Diaz Canals: "Due to the excessive politicization of the life of the feminine social movement, this gender approach is not present in politics at all. [...] Our female leaders are replicating a discourse that is patriarchal, pro-government and top-down that cannot really reach the heart of our society."

Among those who address the issue of gender in Cuba there is a play on words, from the dominant concept "Marxism Leninism", to name the new type of patriarchy imposed during the period of socialism and that corresponds to the top-down superstructure of the state, which is autocratic in nature and

excludes individual initiative, and which reproduces an androcentric model. It is called "Machismo-Leninism", and it starts from the formation at an early age, when girls and boys without exception have to exclaim a motto before entering the classrooms: "We will be like Che". Multiple generations grew up under a series of obligations that have sought to bring about the homogeneity of the population, in accordance with ideological patterns that reinforced macho behavior and gender stereotypes.

With few or no possibilities of feminist activism and women groups that have emerged from below in an authentic manner, the figure of state power reserves the right to occupy that void created by the legal and institutional apparatus itself. This view has been affirmed by the researcher Liudmila Morales Alfonso: "... without feminism, the gender dimension of many social problems that today constitute concerns in Cuba is diluted. Thus, a vacuum is created, which is occupied by the State as

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**Do our female  
leaders have a gender  
perspective, or do they  
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power?**



the universal guarantor of rights. And with it and its masculinist character, the absence can become a structure for the reproduction of power relations and for the naturalization of inequalities that move the debate away from an understanding of social relations, in terms of gender" (Socialism and Feminism in Cuba: Does it Add Up to Equality or a Call for Differentiation? Cuba Possible).

Under these conditions, some of the main problems are systematically hidden or denied. Cuba may be the only country in America where there are no statistics on femicides, nor are there any systems in place for the monitoring of gender violence. Even Mariela Castro, Raúl Castro's daughter, and director of the National Center of Sexual Education of Cuba (CENESEX) has come forward to claim that: "We do not have, for example, femicides. Because Cuba is not a violent country, and that is an effect of the revolution "(Tiempo Argentino, November 4, 2015). The most urgent problems, such as the undeniable cases of femicides, meanwhile, have to emerge only by alternative means, through illegal independent journalism and social networks on the Internet.

However, we have seen that, based on internal and international social pressure, the ruling party has begun to adopt language and approaches inherent to feminism as a state discourse, while it relies on statistics that show the growing presence of women in public office. This, beyond the formalism of certain data, serves in practice to hide the limitations suffered by the Cuban woman in a society marked by poverty, the lack of

civil liberties and a macho culture that constitutes the relations of dependence towards men, and an environment made worse by the submission of women to the figure of the State-male-provider.

I am in agreement with the Italian feminist Silvia Federicci in that it is correct to always distrust state feminism, and – I would add – that there is that much more reason for this distrust when it is a society restricted by what the same theory has defined as the “systemic machismo” of Marxist ideology: “But we have verified that women who are integrated into the State, who do politics [...] do not change the policy of the State [...] They only give us the illusion that something has happened [...] That is why I have no confidence in the women who are from the State, I only have confidence in women who are building from below, based on new forms of organization.”

When Cuban artist Tania Bruguera gave a performance in 2016, recorded on video, about supposedly running for president of Cuba, she came to take down many “Machismo Leninist” stereotypes. She opened, among others, a question: will it finally be possible to imagine a woman as president in Cuba? This mock self-nomination took place in the context of the race between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump for the White House. In addition, Raúl Castro had announced his retirement, hence the probable end of the era of this surname in power was approaching, at least formally, something unprecedented for several generations on the island. Bruguera

explained: “People should be able to have this fantasy of another political system.”

We could ask ourselves if Cuban society is capable - and if its women are - in the current context, to develop this “other” fantasy in which a woman occupies the presidency of the country. Are we at least entering the point where it is imaginable? No woman has been tossed out among the possible names to replace Raúl Castro, nor has one been able to become a symbolic capital in a society – all within an electoral system where neither political parties nor political programs are allowed, where both male and female leaders, when they arise spontaneously and promote profound changes, are much more likely to go to prison or into exile than to hold public office.

Perhaps the most interesting question posed to the conscience of the men and women of Cuba, would not be if a woman might hold the role of maximum representative of power tomorrow, something that should seem as possible as any other unexpected plan - there are currently two female vice presidents-, but whether that Cuban woman could be found acting right now on behalf of those below her and with a true gender perspective.

More difficult than assigning a woman to fulfill the role of this fantasy, lifting her up to the presidency, would be to realize that gender equity and the disappearance of any type of violence or discrimination against women could be achieved democratically, along with other human rights. Without such achievements, is it possible to imagine a nation with true democracy?

# THE PEDDLERS OF ILLUSIONS AND THE ORPHANS OF HOPE



**Enix Berrio Sardá**

One of the most important political figures of the twentieth century in Cuba is more known for uttering the phrase: “In Cuba women are in charge”, than for his achievement as the first president. However, he said this a whopping 72 years ago. And at least that’s the way it should be, since Cuban women make up half of the country’s population and they are expected to be responsible for the development of the other half.

The Cuban Revolution’s track record on behalf of women is commendable and, at the same time, controversial. Let’s take a look at today’s statistics: Cuban women constitute

66% of the country’s professionals and technicians, occupy 49% of the seats in parliament, govern 10 of the 15 provinces, along with 66 of the 169 municipalities, they are almost half of the members of the Council of State, several of them are ministers and two are vice-presidents of the country. Impressive.

However, despite the performance described above, which is enough to meet the goals of the IV World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) on education, employment, sexual and reproductive rights, as well as legal regulations focused on differential pay and other resolutions, women in Cuba are not in charge. This is worth clarifying, there is no reference



*Visual Poem by Francis Sánchez*



being made here to an ahistorical and outdated matriarchy, but to a truly inclusive and participative society that promotes gender equality in all areas.

On the one hand, it is true that the advancement of women is an extraordinary social achievement. On the other hand, there are also essential things that still hang above them, in the domestic sphere, in the daily life of the neighborhood, in their daily efforts to bring harmony to the family, and, above all, in the participation in the real decision-making that could change the situation of the country. Cuban women continue assuming the same culturally assigned gender roles that have kept them as the slaves of men and power as in the past.

It is true that 60 years are not enough to eradicate the patterns of influence of a patriarchal culture that generate subjectivity which manifests itself in discriminatory conceptions towards women. However, the problem of discrimination in Cuba is very complex and

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### **In the last six decades, men have dominated the economic and political power**

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### **The empowerment of Cuban women will depend on the ability of all citizens to support it collectively**

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multifaceted, so any appropriate treatment of it goes beyond the implementation of short-term government policies or the rhetoric of propaganda. They are structural in nature, that is, they relate directly to the dysfunctions of a model of socio-economic and political development.

Over the last six decades of building socialism, the economic and political power in Cuba has continued to be held by men. And for this to be so, the establishment is supported by an ideological violence that is sustained by the military gerontocracy of the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) that merges historical feats with political legitimacy as the only way to reach real power. As a result, women lose.

In the same way this military gerontocracy over the last 25 years has demonstrated not only its way of doing politics but also a singular interpretation of the philosophy that sustains it. They have applied this with a

supreme sense of voluntarism towards governmental policies that led to the fragmentation of Cuban society before the advance of old and new problems that undermine its very basis, endangering the very essence of the Nation. All of this can be understood by looking at the: economic crises and growing poverty in which inflation has a damaging impact on the meager and demoralizing salaries, political corruption, drug addiction, prostitution, the crisis of values and enshrining of moral double standards, the increase of machismo and intrafamily violence which result in femicides. As a result, women lose.

They also lose, when in outright violation of the most basic human rights, the Cuban State and Government repress in every possible way the increasingly numerous critical and dissident voices that are calling for efficient solutions to their urgent and legitimate claims based on gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, cultural preferences and political position that transcend the pathetic, stagnant, reactionary and phantasmagorical Federation of Cuban Women, an organization of the official civil society that, on behalf of the PCC, stands as the only space for bringing together Cuban women over 14 years of age. This is the height of social abnormality.

However, as prisoners of the logic of survival, the PCC pretends that it is doing something substantive in relation to true gender equality in all areas. What happens is an effort made through some highly visible small investments that enable the easy use of positive propaganda about the benefits of the system. By doing this, most people get the impression

that they have not been forgotten, which calms them down and makes it easier for them to accept the system's explanations and apologies. Yet, the socioeconomic model has not changed. Because they are based on a false premise, their promises never become more than the illusions being sold to the female orphans of hope.

As long as the current decrepit socio-economic and political system remains in Cuba, women will not be in charge. Hence, Juana 'the Cuban,' Natacha 'the engineer who sells rum and other things' and Yumisisleidys 'the female fighter in hotels and discos,' my female neighbors and yours, the millions of female compatriots confronted by the harshness of life and the lack of hope in real change, all these women, are unable to care about how many women there are in a Parliament which does not legislate (and even less so on behalf of women) or how many unknown female vice presidents, that specialize in receiving letters of credence from the new ambassadors, are appointed.

The future does not exist. In historical moments of high degree of uncertainty, like the current one in Cuba, the best way to influence the future is to invent it. The real and sustainable empowerment of Cuban women will depend mainly on the ability of the citizens to imagine and build it collectively, and to decide and act committed to this shared vision. But this effort must take place within the framework of "rules" that are absolutely different from the current system of ideas and the institutional framework that has made us all helpless and brought misery to the homeland.



# AIMARA PEÑA

por Agnes Koleman



**"The government believes that women in politics are an easy enemy to destroy"**

*Studied to be a teacher, her interest in community politics stems from her experience as an activist, she is a journalist and independent librarian, which has brought her closer over the course of years to the necessities and pressing needs of the neighborhood.*

Aimara Peña (Sancti Spiritus, 1988) decided to stand as an independent candidate to become a delegate of the National Assembly of People's Power in Las Tosas, the village of 2,000 inhabitants where she resides, in the province of Sancti Spiritus. She studied to be a teacher, her interest in community politics stems from her experience as an activist, she is a journalist and independent librarian, which has brought her closer over the course of years to the necessities and pressing needs of the neighborhood.

Aimara is determined to demonstrate that the work of activists on the island is completely legal, to motivate other neighbors who are afraid to participate in politics and, above all, to give a new and true strength to the role of delegate, as a figure responsible, according to her, not only to send a message, but to press the government to heed what the people are demanding.

Despite counting with support in her community, as the elections approached, the Citizens for Change initiative, which had been supporting her, turned its back on her, and on the day of the vote, a strong State Security operation coerced the neighborhood and obstructed the vote in which she could have been elected. However, Aimara endured the meeting until the end, and is firmly determined to continue trying to be the voice of her community, despite the obstacles that women face in doing community politics in Cuba, both by the government and the political opposition.

**Have you ever been discriminated against for being a woman once you decided to announce yourself as an independent candidate for becoming a delegate of the National Assembly of People's Power?**

When I decided to run for this election, I was aware that for a woman to do politics is difficult anywhere in the world, but in Cuba it is twice as difficult. I have been involved in political and social activism for several years, I have done independent journalism and I know from personal experience that in Cuba, being a patriarchal state, there are cultural and political barriers that are more powerful than the legal ones. I remember that when I arrived in Havana from Colombia, the customs authorities and State Security detained me and confiscated a copy of the Cuban Electoral Law, which they described as subversive material. Then, an officer came up to me and said: "Girl, what do you do, do you have any children?" I answered yes, and he said reproachfully: "It is hard to believe that a woman like you is concerned with these topics." Being a woman, for the repressors, is a weakness, and therefore a woman that chooses to do politics is an absurd decision, since we should be taking care of our children.

**How did your family react when you told them you wanted to become a delegate? Did anyone make an issue out of the fact that you're a woman?**

My family is respectful of my decisions, but they worry about my safety, and that

was one of the issues that generated the most conflict. As an activist, you always have State Security forces on top of you, but the pressure becomes even stronger when you enter the electoral process. At that moment, the grassroots organizations in the community (the Communist Party, the Union of Young Communists, the Federation of Cuban Women) start to be concerned about you, and this entails the beginning of defamatory campaigns against you, in which they accuse you of being “a bad wife and mother” for taking up your time with politics. These type of macho comments, always made in public, make it difficult to maintain a sense of harmony within the family.

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**From whom did you receive more support, men or women?**

Within the community, I received support from women, as well as from men, but women undoubtedly show more respect, because men in Cuba don't take the idea very seriously that a woman can make a difference in political issues. There is a popular belief that men are more suitable for public service, and women should develop themselves within the domestic sphere.

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**What kind of threats have you received from the State Security forces?**

Most of the threats made by the State Security forces have been aimed at the stability of my family: my children, my husband, my mother and my father. They have tried to negotiate with the schooling

of my eldest son, and to defame my reputation as a wife and mother. In fact, they have carried out some of these threats, because they are convinced that a woman's family is her weakness, but they have not managed to get me to turn away from my vocation.

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**So the threats are mostly related to being a woman ...**

Absolutely. For them, being a woman in this society and wanting to do politics is something that simply doesn't go together, and the fact that a woman is active in politics is in itself a weakness. They focus their threats on our roles as mothers, daughters and wives. They believe that we are an easy enemy to destroy.

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**Yet, they haven't destroyed you ... after everything that has happened, why have you decided to continue?**

Because I'm convinced that I'm doing the right thing and I'm doing it well. I announced myself as a candidate because I was going to win, even if I did not get nominated. The experience that my community went through was a victory that they will never be able to change: the fact of having changed the image of what elections have always been like in Las Tosas and turning it into something competitive where there are different options, has opened a path from which there is no turning back.

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**Why did Candidates for Change turn their back on you? What role do women**

**have in the platform?**

I'm not sure, I've heard from third parties that the board decided to suspend me from my duties and cut ties and communication with me, without even informing me.

In this project there are several women, I don't know the exact number of them, but I can say that none of them make decisions on the platform level. Although, they granted us ranks with impressive titles, we were always informed about the decisions after they had already been made. And when some shone for their work, they turned their back on them as they did to me. I believe that the fact of being a woman is still a problem up to today in regard to doing politics within the Cuban opposition, and the fact that leaders do not recognize this is the first symptom.

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**Despite not being able to count on the support of Candidates for Change, you decided to present yourself as a candidate for delegate all the same...**

Although what happened with Candidates for Change was only a week before my nomination assembly, and even though I was detained by the State Security forces, who happily reminded me that I had been abandoned; I wasn't alone, and I didn't feel isolated. I made a commitment to all the people who always supported me and I was ready to do it because I had worked on this more than a year. Although I wasn't able to get the nomination, during the assembly I managed to demonstrate within the community that there is no democracy and that the official discourse,

according to which all Cubans have the right to choose and be elected, was dismantled. I could not leave everything half-done just because someone made a decision that was very different from what I had been striving for.

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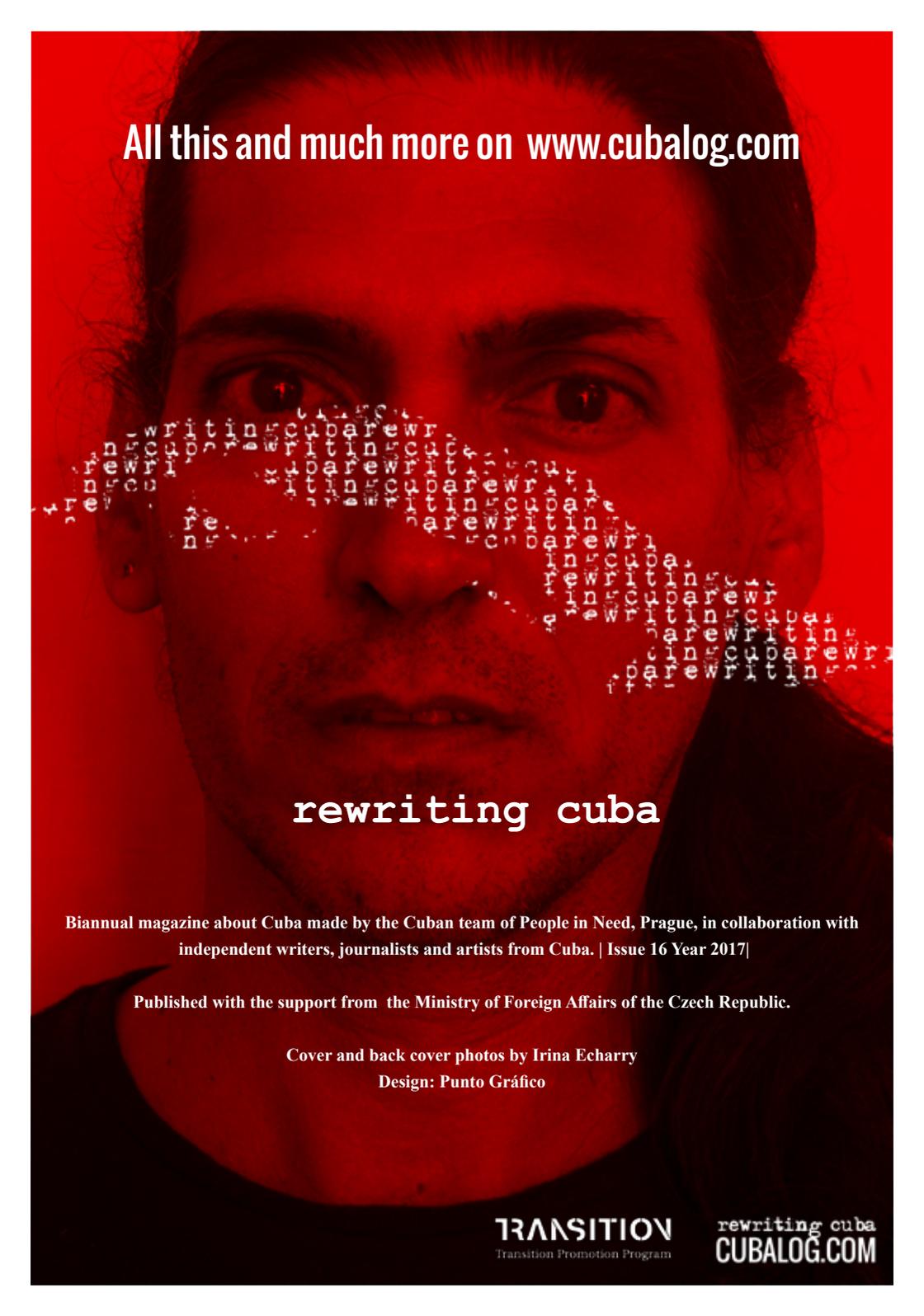
**Do you want to continue doing politics?**

Since I was very young I have had a calling for public service; I have the desire to do good things for the community, and the work has just barely begun. This experience has shown me what our reality is, but the change will occur when the idea matures and the people manage to break through the fear and the obstacles that are holding them back today. Meanwhile, you have to work under any circumstances; an idea, a desire, a goal cannot be abandoned before they are achieved.

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**Why do you think it is important for women to do politics in Cuba?**

I believe that women are perfectly capable of understanding the problems of others and of carrying our projects. The political class has to connect with the reality of its environment in a human way and not to lose sight of this during its mandate; and in that, women are really good. Furthermore, in Cuba women should not give up on their aspirations to participate in politics, because they have an obligation to earn the respect and their right to the spaces that the stereotypes of society have taken away from them.



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