

**More on Cuban Freemasons in the Development  
of Civil Society and a Political Opening**

**Cuba Futures: Past and Present**

**Bildner Center for Western Hemisphere Studies Cuba Project**

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Abstract

Cuban Freemasons (CF) and their Grand Lodge (GLC) have been largely ignored by researchers of Cuban civil society, in spite of the GLC being one of the oldest, largest, most widely spread throughout the island, and democratically organized member of such civil society. This paper will show, using data from a demographic study of the GLC, how it indeed constitutes one of the most important organizations of such civil society, thus filling an important gap in the literature. We discuss the most important traits of CF/GLC, which are relevant for developing Cuban civil society and a healthy dialogue among all Cubans, and which can help foster an opening in the island. Finally, some suggestions that would enhance the participation in civil society, and the contribution to an opening, of CF/GLC, are presented.

Introduction and Background

During a 2006 Bildner Center symposium on Cuba's Futures, several papers on the embryonic Cuban civil society were presented. They discussed several groups, inside the island, that ranged from Catholics to the Abacúa, and from internal dissidents to the remnants of the small Jewish community in Havana. We noticed how such pattern was also present in other forums such as the Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy (ASCE). Somehow, researchers failed to recognize one civil society organization that has continuously existed in Cuba for over 150 years, with nearly 30,000 members, distributed among 314 lodges, in every province, town and city in the country: the Cuban Freemasons of the Grand Lodge of Cuba (CF/GLC).

Several possible reasons exist for the omission, in the research literature of Cuban civil society, of the role of CF/GLC. One reason may be a poor knowledge of Cuban history,

and of its traditional institutions. A second reason may be that researchers are emphasizing dissident groups that oppose, in some manner, the current Cuban regime, which the GLC, as an institution, has not done. These researchers fail to recognize how civil society is not solely integrated by opponents of *the establishment*. A third reason may be an existing prejudice against Freemasons in general, something well-studied and documented in several papers published by the Centro de Estudios Historicos de la Masoneria Española (CEHME). For a detailed discussion of the omission of CF in the Cuban civil society research literature, see Romeu (2010).

This paper addresses two key research questions that have been systematically ignored by most researchers of Cuban civil society. First, that CF/GLC constitutes a legitimate member of Cuba's civil society. Second, in what ways can CF/GLC best contribute to the development of both, civil society and an opening of the current system. In the rest of this paper, we will answer affirmatively the first question and provide several examples of the second. Such will be our specific contributions to the literature.

Freemasons are an international organization self-defined as "the institution of morality". They are independent of any government, including the current Cuban one. They are run democratically, periodically electing the leadership of every Lodge, as well as of the Grand Lodge. Masons allow adult men of good standing, from every walk of life, race, religion, or political philosophy, to join. They discourage discussions about *partisan* politics or *partisan* religion. But any topic of legitimate nature and importance can be developed in the Lodge. Perhaps because of these characteristics, men of the stature of Washington, Juarez, Bolivar and Marti, in the XIX Century, and of Salvador Allende, Lazaro Cardenas and Winston Churchill, in the XX Century, were attracted to, and have joined, the Freemasons. We will not discuss its origins in this paper. Readers interested in the history of Freemasons in general, are referred to Harwood (2007). For a history of CF, readers are referred to Miranda (1933). For contemporary developments of CF/GLC, readers are referred to Torres-Cuevas (2003), and Romeu and Pardo Valdes (2010).

Masonic principles are based on tolerance, and include the three postulates of the French Revolution: liberty, equality and fraternity. There are strict rules for debate and order that govern interaction within the organization. And GLC has a fully developed legal body and an internal legal system, to deal with those who break them.

GLC members include Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Santeros, Abacua, etc. The Cuban Communist Party Congress of 1992, allowed party members, as well as government officials, to join the CF. Thirteen of the 75 Prisoners of Conscience convicted during the Spring of 2003, were also CF. Based upon such wide membership, we state that the GLC constitutes a cross-section of contemporary Cuban society.

Such wide constituency constitutes a singular characteristic among contemporary civil society organizations inside Cuba. It also provides one of the strongest features that GLC offers for strengthening civil society, a pre-requisite for bringing about an opening in the island. For more on developing an opening of the Cuban society, see Romeu (2008).

For, Masonic Lodges provide a forum for different elements of the Cuban society to mix, get to know each other better, and respectfully exchange ideas. No such other open and heterogeneous forum currently exists, inside the island, including the Cuban National Assembly (Asamblea Nacional del Poder Popular) which represents *the establishment*.

Asserting that Freemasons contribute to enhance civil society as a whole is not new. For example, Jacobs (1991) studied the contribution of Freemasons to civil societies in Europe, and Rich (1993), the role of freemasons in the education of Elites in future governments. Similarly, CF/GLC can help strengthen Cuban civil society, something particularly important after fifty years of single-party rule under Fidel Castro. The aged and ailing Castro transferred power to his brother Raul, an octogenarian like several other members of the inner circle, who will disappear in a few years for biological reasons.

On the other hand, Raul is currently pursuing, if slowly and cautiously, his own path of change. Several former cabinet ministers and highly placed government officers, who

responded to the older Castro, have been dismissed. New areas of the economy, such as agriculture and lesser commerce, are being opened to private enterprise. And a past-due Cuban Communist Party Congress, that promises to implement badly needed changes, has recently taken place. Thence, the urgent need to foster a wide and candid a national discussion about the changes to be made, as well as to support a transition to a younger generation of leaders, more open to new options and to broader opportunities.

On the other hand, socioeconomic conditions inside Cuba are poor. The combination of political and economic changes in an impoverished society is dangerous. For it can lead to a serious crisis, generating violence, civil war, and even foreign intervention.

To prevent such scenario, a peaceful and negotiated evolution, such as the ones occurred in Brazil, Chile and Spain, is preferred. But for such evolution to develop, a strong civil society, where alternative ideas from new leaders and groups can arise, and where candid discussions can take place, must first exist. CF/GLC can greatly contribute to this.

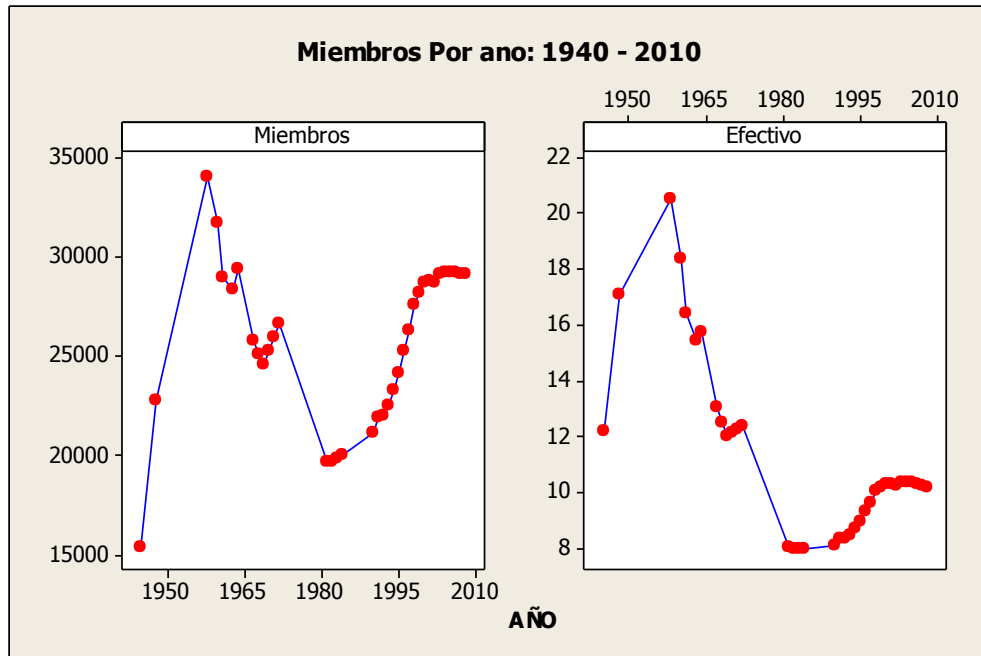
In the rest of this paper we discuss the particular characteristics that CF/GLC bring to the table, and suggest specific contributions for building a stronger civil society in the island. First, we overview the composition of CF/GLC. We then present some qualities of CF, and discuss how these can positively impact civil society. Finally, we suggest specific ways in which CF/GLC can influence civil society, and propose specific tools they will require to successfully accomplish such goal.

### Summary of the Demographic Study

The time series of annual membership in GLC is shown in Figure 1. Part A (left) shows total annual members in thousands. Part B (right) shows the *population at risk* which we call *Effective Masons*. Since women cannot join Freemasons, neither men below the ages of 21, nor the sick, those with police records, or the very poor, the *population at risk* is approximately one-fourth of the total population. Hence, dividing annual membership by one fourth of total population yields the number of CF per thousand men eligible for

belonging to the Institution, which we define as *Effective Masons*. Such indicator allows a fair comparison of membership across countries, regions and different time periods.

Figure 1. Membership by year: A) Totals; B) Effective Members.



Freemasons have lost membership in many countries during the second half of the XX Century. For example, in 1960 there were 4.1 M Freemasons out of 180 million US citizens, yielding 91.5 Effective Masons, (Table 1). In 2000, this same indicator dropped to 25.6 per 1000 eligible, a four-fold reduction.

Table 1. Example of Freemasons relative impact in the 2nd Half of the XX Century

	Year	Population	Masons	/1000s	Effective
<b>USA</b>	1960	179,323,175	4,103,000	22.8	91.5
	2000	281,421,906	1,800,000	6.4	25.6
<b>Cuba</b>	1960	6000000	34000	5.7	22.8
	2000	11000000	29000	2.6	9.6

In Cuba, due to the political and economic changes brought in by the 1959 revolution, the situation developed differently. Membership first follows a stronger decay than abroad. But after 1990, CF/GLC recover strongly (Table 1). Membership figures, by selected decades, for Total and *Effective Masons*, are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Development of Cuban Freemasons, approximately by decade.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Members</b>	<b>Lodges</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>EffMasons</b>
1948	22757	259	5329100	17.08
1958	34025	340	6638133	20.50
1968	25072	332	8040800	12.47
1981	19690	326	9794900	8.04
1990	21153	314	10433000	8.11
2000	28689	314	11142000	10.30
2008	29110	316	11417246	10.20

The highest and lowest membership figures, correspond to the start of the revolution of 1959 (Max), and right after the 1980 Mariel Boatlift (Min). The 1960-80 membership reduction was mainly due to three factors: (1) exodus of hundreds of thousands of Cubans, including several thousand masons; (2) attrition, due to (a) strong government restrictions on CF or (b) preference for the new political ideology; and (3) fewer affiliations, especially the young, insufficient to cover for losses from deaths, emigration and attrition due to the same two issues described in (2) above (Romeu, 2010).

For, from the mid 1960s, practically all the economy was in government hands. Citizens had to fill official forms, which asked about their religious and fraternal affiliations. Such affiliations could determine college careers, jobs to be held, and promotions. Lodges had to report the names of meeting attendees and topics discussed, and comply with directives requested by the Bureau of Religious Affairs (Oficina de Asuntos Religiosos) of the Communist Party, under severe fines and other strong penalties.

In 1992, after the demise of the Soviet Union, things began to change. The IV Congress of the Cuban Communist Party allowed its members and government officials, to join religious and fraternal organizations, and vice-versa. This resolution also sent a general message in the sense that becoming a Mason was no longer so negatively perceived. The loss of Soviet subsidies triggered economic reforms. International tourism developed

rapidly, creating jobs in foreign firms and forms of private enterprise. The opportunity for obtaining state-independent employment reappeared. As a result, GLC started growing again, with the additional infusion of such types of new members.

Table 3 compares annual membership growth, under two indices. First, using the growth index prior to the IV PCC Congress (2.1%), and after it (3%). The difference between the two provides an estimation of membership differential, attributed to party, government officials and formerly concerned citizens, which represents 2389 new members in 2000.

Table 3. Membership growth after the IV Congress of the Communist Party

Year	Population	GLC Members	Post IV-Congress	Prior Grwth	Diferential
1990	10433000	21153	0.03	0.021	*
1991	10574800	21918	21788	21597	190
1992	10645700	21962	22441	22051	390
1993	10716600	22539	23114	22514	601
1994	10787500	23321	23808	22987	821
1995	10858400	24169	24522	23469	1053
1996	10929300	25301	25258	23962	1296
1997	11000200	26344	26016	24465	1550
1998	11071100	27635	26796	24979	1817
1999	11142000	28173	27600	25504	2096
2000	11176406	28689	28428	26039	2389

After year 2000, membership growth again slowed down. The provincial distribution of members and lodges, circa 2007, is given in Table 4. Notice how the Western provinces (P. del Rio, Havana, Havana Metro, Matanzas, Cienfuegos and Villaclara), with larger and more numerous urban centers, and stronger economic development, have a larger index of *effective masons*, suggesting that CF is more of an urban phenomenon.

Even when, 1/3 of all Lodges, and 30% of all CF, have traditionally resided in the metropolitan area of Havana, in almost every town or village in Cuba there is at least one Masonic lodge. And often, one also finds the lodges of two other well-known Masonic organizations: Caballeros de la Luz, of Cuban origin and roots, and the Odd-Fellows.

Table 4. Distribution of (total and effective) Freemasons and Lodges, by Provinces

**Lodges and Members:**

PROVINCE	Area (km <sup>2</sup> )	Population	Lodges	Mmbrs	Effective
TOTAL	109,886.19	11,177,743	316	29127	10.42
PINAR DEL RIO	10,904.03	726,574	17	2706	14.90
PROV. HABANA	5,791.59	711,066	29	2494	14.03
CIUDAD HABANA	721.01	2,201,610	111	9329	16.95
MATANZAS	11,802.72	670,427	28	2370	14.14
VILLA CLARA	8,412.41	817,395	29	2667	13.05
CIENFUEGOS	4,180.02	395,183	14	1387	14.04
SANCTI SPIRITU	6,736.51	460,328	11	991	8.61
CIEGO DE AVILA	6,783.13	411,766	8	449	4.36
CAMAGUEY	15,615.02	784,178	14	709	3.62
LAS TUNAS	6,587.75	525,485	6	604	4.60
HOLGUIN	9,292.83	1,021,321	12	1138	4.46
GRANMA	8,375.49	822,452	10	1104	5.37
STGO DE CUBA	6,156.44	1,036,281	19	1992	7.69
GUANTANAMO	6,167.97	507,118	7	1187	9.36

In 2007, total membership is up to around 30 thousand. But by now, Cuban population has almost doubled, from six to eleven million. Hence, the *Effective Masons* have halved, from 20.50 in 1959, to 10.20 per thousand, in 2008. GLC impact is smaller than in 1959.

We have shown how there are, in every province, at least several hundred (and in some cases, several thousand) CF. We have shown how their Lodges include, in addition to all races, religions and ages, also members of the Cuban Communist Party, government officials, and political dissidents. And we have shown how the GLC is independent of the government. Hence, CF/GLC constitutes a legitimate member of Cuban civil society.

Cuban Freemasons and Civil Society

There are three basic premises that must be recognized when approaching the study of civil society. First, the existence of civil society is a continuous, and not a dichotomous function: there is always some form of civil society present. Secondly, civil society is



composed of independent organizations, but not all necessarily opposed to the status quo. Finally, the level of activity of a country's civil society provides an excellent indicator of the existing freedom and of the organization capability of its members.

We have shown how GLC constitutes a large and diverse group, with members from all races, religions, socioeconomic levels and the political spectrum, including those neutral, favoring or opposing the current status quo. This singular characteristic provides a natural forum for engaging in open discussion, based on fraternal tolerance. But CF/GLC also display additional characteristics that enhance life experiences of average Cubans.

Through their meetings, within and between lodges, CF/GLC can help re-create the *social capital*, promoting faster and broader economic development. Lodges can become training centers for democratic procedures via open debates, development and submission of proposals, etc. After obtaining the Third Degree (Master Mason), everyone is equal in the organization, having the same rights and obligations, including to elect or be elected.

Lodges can also train average citizens in the art of preparing and living within a budget, in raising funds to operate their organizations, and in the art of peacefully negotiating to obtain common objectives, etc., so important in a free and pluralistic society. In addition, Masonic training fosters reading and knowledge acquisition. A Master Mason has read, at a minimum, three liturgies and three catechisms, plus a number of other instruction material, and has participated in a series of seminars, where the ideals, rituals and other Masonic topics are developed and discussed.

The GLC has its legal body, and runs a powerful justice system that has recently expelled Past Grand Master Jose M. Collera Vento for breaking organization rules. PGM Collera's administration was characterized by several highly controversial decisions, such as the induction of women into the organization. After his recent expulsion, Collera Vento made public in the Cuban official media, that he had been, for the past 25 years, an undercover secret police agent, working inside the GLC. Such unexpected disclosure provides a new angle under which to analyze his controversial and divisive decisions as Grand Master.

GLC has a nation-wide, representative, and freely elected assembly, Alta Cámara, which helps the Grand Master run the organization. GLC also has a library, a museum and an institute for developing Masonic studies: la Academia de Altos Estudios Masónicos.

Since all Masons have equal rights, it is possible to respectfully object or debate opinions, even from GLC leaders, one key activity required by an open and pluralistic society. This would be more difficult in organizations such as churches and political parties where appointed leaders often maintain control and power.

Freemasons are an international organization. There exist Grand Lodges in most Western countries, including Latin America. In 2009, with participation from delegates of many foreign countries, including the US, the GLC celebrated its 150th Anniversary. Finally, CF inside the island and abroad, can now more easily visit each other, as well as their respective lodges. Citizen diplomacy is, frequently, more efficient than the official one.

### Discussion

Helping to strengthen and expand any civil society can be accomplished by helping to strengthen their religious, artistic, and fraternal, independent organizations, so that they can participate more actively in the everyday life of the country. But, to enhance further their participation, these organizations require a broader space, and additional resources.

Specifically, CF/GLC could contribute more within civil society if the government would eliminate the surveillance and other restrictions it has imposed to Cuban Lodges, through the Bureau of Religious Affairs of the PCC. Freemasonry is not a religion.

In addition, many lodge buildings are old and deteriorated, and need urgent repair. The government could sell GLC materials and furniture, and provide facilities, so buildings can be restored, just as the government does with Catholic churches. For, some Masonic Lodges have also historical value. And the government might ease the requirements for establishing new lodges, especially in new urban areas where they currently don't exist.

The government could also facilitate the access to the Internet and other media, so GLC and its member Lodges can develop publications and blogs, just like some churches and religious organizations currently do, and CF are able to access them. GLC intermittently maintains a Web Page (<http://www.granlogiacuba.org/>). But its cost in CUCs (Cuban Convertible Peso) weighs heavily on GLC budget. Current GLC Grand Master, Jose Ramon Gonzalez Diaz, has described this situation very clearly, in a special message recently posted in the mentioned GLC Web Site:

*We do have an Internet connection; but it has restrictions to access the web sites where (negative) information is published; in addition to the time limitation of our connection, which is determined by the amount of hours that we can afford to pay, with the finances that we have; which originates –exclusively- from the generous donation of Regular Powers that befriend us, and not from a “budget” that this GLC may count on; for GLC has no way to regularly obtain convertible currency with which to pay such service to the state providers.*

The Cuban government should allow GLC and lodges to acquire more computers and equipment (modems, printers, USBs, etc.) in CUPs (Cuban Pesos). Alternatively, the authorities could allow CF in the Diaspora, and other Grand Lodges abroad, to donate such equipment to GLC. Such types of donations are currently allowed to some churches and civil society groups. The Cuban government should give CF/GLC the same advantages it currently gives to other church organizations inside the island, such as the Catholic Church’s Caritas, to receive funding in hard currency, and other forms of material support, from their counterparts abroad.

With such material aid, and the corresponding government authorization, CF/GLC could again provide ordinary Cubans, in their communities, the socioeconomic support GLC successfully provided before 1960. Such activities included operating grade schools and universities, homes for the aged, meal programs for the poor and ill, underwriting sports teams, Scout troops, etc. Some churches and organizations are currently allowed to do.

The social projection, through the media and other public forms of citizen participation, of civil society institutions, is a key element for the development and growth of such civil society, and for its useful contribution to the welfare of the country, as a whole.

It is in the Cuban government's advantage, to foster the development of civil society, which would also help create a space where alternative ideas can eventually flourish. For an opening to occur, alternatives and people to propose them must first exist. Such was the path followed by civil society in Spain, Brazil and Chile, in the 1970s and 1980s.

But to achieve this, it is also necessary that foreign countries do not to utilize members of Cuba's (or any other) civil society, to support their foreign policy interests, or to meddle in the country's internal affairs. For, such actions would only provide conservative elements within the establishments who oppose any opening, with arguments to forestall the development of such civil society.

### Conclusions

We have shown, and supported with statistical results from a demographic study covering the second half of the XX Century, how the CF/GLC constitute a legitimate member of contemporary Cuban civil society. In addition, we have proposed specific ideas regarding CV/GLC future development and contribution to further an opening of the Cuban society.

Traditionally, Freemasons have displayed their best features and colors in moments of national crises. Examples include during the struggles for Latin American independence, and during the organization of its first republics, during the XIX Century (De Los Reyes, 2010). Examples also exist about the civil struggles for autonomy, in Cuba (Soucy et al, 2009) and in Puerto Rico (Ayala, 1991), at the end of the XIX Century. In such trying times, many great men joined the Freemasons, and the broader society benefited significantly from their civic and patriotic work.

But the times for violence and revolution have fortunately passed. Today, other forms of struggle, through the free press, the political parties, the civil society, etc., and other types of national problems such as civil rights, education, health, labor, and environmental, do exist. Because of their structure and philosophy, based on tolerance, education and free thought, Freemasons in general, and CF/GLC in particular, can successfully contribute to their successful and efficient resolution.

Freemasons are not a political party, or a political organization, even though, at times, they have acted as such (Vazquez, 2009). Freemasons define their own mission as: *taking some good men and making them better*. But, naturally, some of these better men, become interested in the issues of their time and society, and feel a call to participate in them. This has been one reason many individuals have joined the organization.

For, as Masons, individuals can (1) meet others, similarly interested in their ideas, and (2) disclose and discuss such ideas peacefully, in the tolerant and open-minded milieu of their Lodges, thus receiving enriching feedback, and eventually, carrying them out. This is perhaps the foremost social contribution that Masonic institutions make to civil society.

Ethically-oriented societies, such as religious ones, necessarily exclude members from other religions. Open societies, such as cultural, business and sporting clubs, do not have an ethical component that moves them to act in social endeavors. Freemasons, in principle, have both: the ethical foundation, and the wide spectrum provided by their ethnically and ideologically broad membership that, under the principles of tolerance and fraternity, can work toward defining common goals, mediating conflicts, and finding new opportunities to help establish the social dialogues.

We would like to close this paper with a quote from a book, edited by the GLC in 1936, which very clearly defines its Masonic philosophy (GLC, 1936; p. 12)

*(Freemasonry) does not intend to impede the struggles for the different ideals that exist among men, but to seek that everyone may be able to defend one's principles,*

*against the principles of others, without using any other weapon than reason, and without bringing to the struggle any other pursuit than the noble desire of seeing their ideals succeed, based upon its own merits. (Freemasonry) does not pretend to castrate the human thought, but on the contrary, to energize it in such a way, that it is no longer necessary to use imposition by force, to succeed.*

Therefore, working within civil society toward achieving a better understanding, and an opening of the Cuban society, falls well within the charter of the CF/GLC.

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