

Cuba after Obama's moves: Beginning a New Era

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ON DECEMBER 17, 2014 the White House and Raúl Castro's government agreed to the reestablishment of diplomatic relations and a significant relaxation of travel restrictions and remittances to Cuba, among other significant changes. This is a turning point for a relationship that, for more than 50 years, was characterized by U. S. efforts to overthrow the Cuban government, including the sponsorship of invasions, economic blockade and sabotage, numerous assassination attempts, and terrorist attacks.

It remains to be seen whether the alliance of anti-blockade pro-business Republicans and Democrats will succeed in modifying if not repealing the economic blockade established by the Helms-Burton Act, approved by the U. S. Congress and signed into law by president Bill Clinton in 1996.

Obama may succeed where previous U.S. administrations — such as Nixon's and especially Carter's — failed in their attempts at reestablishing diplomatic and economic relations with Cuba. The end of the Cold War, the departure of Cuban troops from Africa, and the less militant stance of Cuba in Latin America have, through the years, qualitatively downgraded the importance of Cuba in U.S. foreign policy.

At the same time, the U.S. capitalist class, except for its most rightwing fringe, has come to support not only the reestablishment of diplomatic relations, but even more so the elimination of the economic blockade. This has been the position adopted by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers in the last several years, and also the general stance taken by the business press.

Moreover, after exemptions to the U.S. economic blockade allowing the export of agricultural and certain processed goods to Cuba were authorized in 2000, firms such as Cargill, Archer Daniel Midland and Tyson Foods got involved in trade with Cuba.

Dozens of business people and politicians, particularly from the South, Midwest and Southwest have been visiting the island and discussing with the Cuban government future economic prospects, especially if the economic blockade is repealed.

Reflecting the attitude of their business constituents, many Democratic and Republican politicians, as in the case of Republican Senator Jeff Flake of Arizona, have been advocating political and economic relations with Cuba.

The Changing Cuban-American Community

The rightwing leadership of the Cuban exile enclave in south Florida remains the only political force firmly advocating for the continuation of the blockade. Its political clout is particularly important in a closely divided state like Florida, where Cuban-Americans account for approximately 5% of the electorate.

But the conservative exile generation of the '60s has been dying out, and by now the growing majority of the Cubans residing in south Florida came to the United States since the 1980s. In contrast with the older exiles, many of these people regularly visit the island and are more concerned with the welfare of their relatives than with Cuban exile politics.

No wonder, then, that public opinion polls have shown that a majority of the Cubans and Cuban-Americans residing in Florida favor a change in U.S. policy leading to full relations with the island.

The fact that Barack Obama won 48% of the Cuban vote (and larger proportions among younger Cubans) in the 2012 election is a clear indication of the political trends among Cuban-Americans away from the rightwing hard line.

Moreover, as the Cuban-American sociologist Alex Portes has indicated, the Cubans who have arrived since 1980 generally come from modest class backgrounds in the island and are hardly distinguishable from other Latin American immigrants to the United States in socio-economic terms.

Changes Inside Cuba — A Contradictory Road

For its part, the Cuban government has been intent in finding a way to resume diplomatic relations with the United States even though closer relations may in the long run undermine its legitimacy, as it won't be able anymore to blame the blockade for the continuing political repression and economic waste and inefficiency of the system, especially if Congress amends or repeals the Helms-Burton Act.

Ever since Raúl Castro assumed power, he has been moving towards adopting the Sino-Vietnamese model, meaning a state-capitalism that retains the monopoly of political power through the single party, and controls the strategic sectors of the economy, such as banking, while sharing the rest with a domestic and foreign private sector.

But this has been a very contradictory road where the Cuban government has tried to “have its cake and eat it too,” accompanying every economic change with restrictions that limit their effectiveness. Notwithstanding the rosy picture drawn by sympathizers of Raúl such as Emily Morris in *New Left Review* [\[1\]](#), the results of the Cuban government's new economic policies have been meager and unable to finally overcome the long economic crisis that has gripped the island since the collapse of the USSR.

The real wages of state employees, who still constitute approximately three quarters of the labor force, had only reached, in 2013, 27% of their 1989 levels. Since 2008, spending on education, health, social welfare and housing have diminished as a proportion of the state budget and of the gross domestic product.

Furthermore, for the last several years economic growth has been very low (1.2% in 2014) and capital investment has been a meager 10% of the GDP compared with the average 20% for Latin America as a whole. Marino Murillo, Cuba's Minister of the Economy, has said that the island needs at least two billion dollars a year in investment to achieve an economic takeoff.

This is the key to Raúl Castro's willingness to resume relations with the United States, especially in the light of the serious political and economic problems that Venezuela (Cuba's principal ally), Russia and Brazil are currently facing. For Raúl, any benefit he obtains from the agreement may be the lever he needs to vanquish the resistance in his own bureaucratic apparatus to the full implementation of the Sino-Vietnamese model.

Conclusion

Independently of the considerations that led the governments of Cuba and the United States to reach this agreement, it is a major gain for the Cuban people. First, it acknowledges that U.S. imperial power was not able to coerce the imposition of its socio-economic and political system — a victory for the principle of national self-determination for the Cuban people. It is up to Cubans and Cubans alone to decide the destiny of their country.

Second, in very practical terms, it can improve the standard of living of the Cubans and help to liberalize, although it's unlikely to democratize, the conditions of their political oppression and economic exploitation, making it easier to organize and act to defend their interests in an autonomous fashion against the state and the new capitalists.

This has been the case of China, where thousands of protests occur every year to protect the standard of living and rights of the mass of the population in spite of the undemocratic Communist one-party state.

Contrary to what many liberals thought right after the Cuban Revolution, the issue was never whether the end of the blockade would lead the Castro brothers to become more democratic. That possibility was never and is not in the cards, except for those who believe that the establishment of Cuban Communism was merely a reaction to U.S. imperialism — instead of what Che Guevara admitted was half the outcome of imperialist constraint and half the outcome of the Cuban leaders' choice.

What's real is the likelihood that the end of the blockade will undermine the support for and legitimacy of an undemocratic regime, thereby facilitating the resistance and political formulation of alternatives to its undemocratic rule.

That Cuba will be free from the grasp of U.S. imperialism, even if the economic blockade comes to an end, is not likely. The more "normal" imperialist power broadly experienced in the global South will replace the more coercive and criminal one of the era of the blockade, especially if a successful alliance develops between U.S. capital and the native state capitalists of the emerging model, as happened in China and Vietnam.

With the passing of the historic generation of revolutionary leaders in the next five to ten years, a new political landscape will emerge where left-wing opposition political action may resurface and give strength to the nascent critical left in Cuba.

Some may argue that since socialism of a democratic and revolutionary orientation is not likely to be on the immediate agenda, there is no point to put forward such a perspective. But it is this political vision, advocating for the democratic self-management of Cuban society, that can shape a compelling resistance to what is likely to come in the island in the implantation of a Cuban version of the Sino-Vietnamese model.

By invoking solidarity with the most vulnerable, and calling for class, racial and gender equality, a

movement can build unity against both the old and the emerging oppressions.

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P.S.

* From Against the Current n° 175, March/April 2015. <http://www.solidarity-us.org/>

Footnotes

[1] "Unexpected Cuba," <http://newleftreview.org/II/88/emily-morris-unexpected-cuba>