

Cuba: A New Era - The normalization of U.S.-Cuba political relations

Tuesday 14 April 2015, by [HABEL Janette](#) (Date first published: 13 April 2015).

To understand this major diplomatic shift, which has historical ramifications for all of Latin America, one has to go back to the origins of the Cuban Revolution, a popular revolution driven by the will to break with North American domination and to fulfill the aspirations of the struggle for national independence, beginning at the start of the twentieth century. The revolution's slogan *Patria o Muerte* meant that national sovereignty would not be negotiable. And it was not negotiated. The political line that the leadership followed unflinchingly for half a century was shared by a majority of the population, which is why it was victorious in spite of exceptionally difficult historical and geopolitical conditions. Without mass support, Fidel Castro's policies would have failed.

This doesn't mean that the revolution was a walk in the park. The Cuban people greatly suffered for decades. They paid a heavy price for the Island's isolation, the North American military and economic embargo, and the policies of the Soviet Union. On top of the economic situation were political constraints and the authoritarian style of Fidel Castro—itsself a product of being a besieged fortress.

The normalization of U.S.-Cuba political relations was possible due to the changed geopolitical situation. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the fall of Latin American dictatorships, the emergence of popular regimes brought to power by mass mobilizations, and the relative decline of U.S. hegemony in its own backyard made Cuba's reintegration into the region possible. Two other factors also helped make the reestablishment of relations possible: first, Obama is now a lame duck; and second, today's Cuban diaspora is less aggressive and more open to dialogue with Havana.

Uneven Pace of Change

Many sectors of the population will not immediately feel these changes due to the continuation of the economic and commercial embargo. It will take an act by the majority of the U.S. Congress to abolish it, but Republicans would be opposed. Yet they are not a homogenous block. The big multinational agro-business corporations favor the lifting of the embargo. On the other hand, a minority of the Democrats oppose lifting the embargo.

Obama has some room to maneuver. He could make some changes on his own, such as lessening travel restrictions between the two countries. The amount of money permitted to be sent from the United States will be increased; tourists will be able to spend more and use credit cards. Financial reforms will be made in order to stimulate more imports. Travel laws and the issuing of visas are already being discussed. Let's not forget that cooperation between the U.S. military and the Cuban coast guard around Guantanamo Bay and drug trafficking has been going on for some time. But the focus of U.S. policy has been to help the private sector, especially small entrepreneurs, and to open up the Cuban internet which has so far been tightly controlled. For the White House, it's all about "putting pressure on the Castro regime" in order to support the economic reforms begun by Raul Castro.

The Cubans are guardedly optimistic. As is often the case in Cuba, jokes abound like “*Cuba si, Yanqui no’, but what’s taking them so long to arrive?*” Different parts of the population will be affected differently. Independent workers, those connected to the tourist industry, artisans, and those with family ties in the United States will benefit. Others like retired people, single mothers, and low wage workers will suffer from the scaling back of social spending. Social inequality will grow and may even lead to political tensions. Institutional changes are inevitable. In 2018 Raul Castro’s presidential term will end. A new era will begin, the outcome of which cannot be predicted.

The return to dialogue will be difficult but will proceed. Negotiations in Canada and at the Vatican took place for eighteen months. The Cuban Catholic hierarchy has been secretly involved in these discussions for years. The official visit to Havana by Roberta Jacobson, John Kerry’s deputy for Latin American affairs, marked the beginning of what was a complex process given the contentiousness between the two parties. The most aggressive sectors of the exile community have mobilized in order to demand restitution of the thousands of properties nationalized after the revolution. As the Cuban government has clearly explained, any negotiations on nationalized north American property must involve the embargo’s cost to the Cuban economy, and the property of those who emigrated to the United States are not to be included in these negotiations.

The threat of numerous Latin American governments to boycott the April 2015 Summit of the Americas in Panama if Cuba was not invited meant that Obama risked facing a nearly empty room at the gathering. On December 17 (2014) Obama acknowledged the failure of U.S. policy toward Cuba. Obama’s declaration that “we are all Americans”—those in the United States as well as Cuba—is a credit to his presidency. A new era is beginning for Cuba.

Janette Habel

P.S.

*

* “Cuba: A New Era”. <http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/4403>

This article is adapted from an interview published in L’Humanité. Translated from the French by Keith Mann..

* Janette Habel teaches in the Institute of Latin American Studies at the Sorbonne in Paris.