

## **Insisting on Sovereignty: Trump, Cuba and the General Transition of 2018**

***By R.O. Niederstrasser,  
Research Associate at the Council on Hemispheric Affairs and Arturo  
Lopez-Levy, Extramural Contributor***

*Arturo Lopez-Levy, Ph.D., is a lecturer at the University of Texas, and a leading expert on Latin American Politics and U.S. foreign policy towards Latin America and Cuba*

In his speech on June 16, 2017 in Little Havana, Miami, U.S. President Donald Trump announced the end of the détente with Cuba promoted by his predecessor, Barack Obama. <sup>i</sup> In Miami, surrounded by the crème de la crème of the most uncompromising Cuban exiles, including U.S. Senator Marco Rubio and Congressman Mario Diaz-Balart, Trump provided a dramatic narrative to a new presidential directive where concrete policy changes are of limited scope. The White House's new order postulates three fundamental categories: 1) Restoring travel restrictions for U.S. citizens by prohibiting individual travel under the general education license, allowed by President Obama in his last two years; 2) a ban on U.S. travelers, or U.S. companies doing business with Cuban companies under military ownership, specifically those of the Armed Forces Support Enterprise Group (GAESA) under the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Cuba (FAR); 3) the replacement of Obama's approach to advancing U.S. interests and values, regardless of the effects that the policy of détente might have on the Cuban government, by a return to the laundry list of demands enshrined in the Helms-Burton Act of 1996 as a precondition for any new negotiation. <sup>ii</sup> Among the concessions to be demanded from the Cuban government would be the early release of all political prisoners, the holding of multiparty elections under international supervision, the stepping down from power by Raúl Castro and the unilateral surrender to the United States of all U.S. fugitives in Cuba.

Trump's new policy preserves key aspects of Obama's reforms, allowing U.S. cruise lines and airlines to continue serving travelers to the island and leaving the embassies of both countries open in their respective capitals. U.S. citizens will continue to be allowed to travel to Cuba under some presidential licenses restricted to certain conditions defined as people-to-people exchanges. What will be eliminated is a person-to-person travel category within educational travel that allows Americans to design their own travels and

go to Cuba on their own. This method has been one of the most popular for young American travelers who want to visit the island. The repeal of their license affects the main group of U.S. travelers from the United States, the Cuban-American community. In that sense, Trump largely differs from President George W. Bush's regulations in 2004 and 2006 when the Cuban-Americans were restricted to a family trip every 3 years. Paradoxically, today, the congressmen in favor of the embargo demanding travel restrictions for the rest of the Americans are unable to persuade their voters to restrict their own travels.

The purpose of eliminating individual travel is to halt the normalization of Cuba as a natural travel destination in the minds of Americans, and to increase the monitoring of travel arrangements through the Treasury Department for travel itineraries, allowing for potential fines and official objections for Americans traveling to Cuba. To this end, the Office for the Control of Foreign Assets and other agencies are adopting rules prohibiting direct payments to companies associated with the economic apparatus of the FAR, establishing penalties and fines for travelers operating outside the new restriction.

This decision by the Trump government has been criticized by major international human rights groups such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. In a statement, Amnesty International's Director for the Americas, Marselha Gonçalves Margerin, commented: "Increased political dialogue, travel, and trade between the United States and Cuba is fundamental to advancing human rights in both countries. If President Trump returns to the Cold War rhetoric of isolation, we will return to a politicization of human rights on both sides, which will be detrimental to progress in an independent scrutiny of the human rights situation in Cuba".<sup>iii</sup>

Several Republican congressmen, including Justin Amash of Michigan, expressed criticism of the President by exposing the hypocrisy of maintaining a friendship with leaders of countries with questionable records on human rights such as Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States while reversing the policy towards Cuba arguing strict human rights principles on the subject.<sup>iv</sup> In a statement issued after Trump's speech, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce expressed its opposition to tightening the rules on tourism and business with Cuba. According to them, they "run the risk of giving up growth opportunities to other countries that, frankly, do not share the interest of the United States in a free and democratic Cuba that respects human rights".<sup>v</sup>

Restrictions on U.S. travel will also affect U.S. agriculture businesses. In particular, many small farmers have depended on exports to Cuba. Betsy Ward, President of the USA Rice Federation, said returning to Cold War policies would hurt U.S. farmers and would not benefit rural citizens who, to a large extent, supported the Trump presidential campaign. U.S. farmer groups have seen this change of measures as a significant setback for their business with the island, which could also jeopardize the increase in agricultural exports that already totaled \$221 million in 2016.<sup>vi</sup>

The reaction to Trump's confrontational rhetoric by agricultural lobbying interests in

Congress is also an important factor to take into account in the new realities of U.S.-Cuba relations. In the president's Cabinet, the Secretary of Agriculture, Sonny Perdue is a Republican who, as governor of Georgia, played an important role in the promotion of the sale of food to Cuba. Perdue said during the confirmation process in the Senate that he intended to promote the interests of U.S. farmers and agricultural trade with Cuba. This dynamic is important because whenever the lobbying group in favor of the embargo has collided with agricultural lobbyists, the latter has been victorious.

Although Trump's reversal of Obama's policy of *détente* is more bark than bite in concrete terms, this backlash has important intangible negative effects at a crucial time for the Caribbean island. The Council of State of Cuba has begun the process of convening the nomination of candidates for municipal and provincial delegates, as well as deputies to the National Assembly of People's Power (ANPP). This body is in charge of electing the new Council of State in early 2018, as well as its president. This is the first generational transition at the top of Cuban power since the revolution in 1959.

Raúl Castro, who has held this position since 2006, will not run for reelection. His program of modernization of the Cuban political system within the one-party model has included the adoption of term limits. In this way, a process of regeneration of the Cuban elites, which is already visible in the municipal and provincial bases, in the ANPP itself and in the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) would be completed at the helm of the Cuban state. Another important element is the transfer of the presidency for the first time since 1976 to a civilian. These elections will be organized by the National Electoral Commission (CEN), composed of 17 members, who will be in charge of the general elections convened in October 2017.

An important question is whether the presidency of the government and the Council of State will continue to be concentrated in one person as codified in Article 74 of the Cuban Constitution. Raul Castro, who could retain leadership until the 8th PCC Congress in 2021, has announced the need to make important changes to the constitutional framework. Miguel Díaz-Canel, the probable successor to the presidency, has made his political career in a step-by-step escalation that began in the Union of Young Communists, to then lead the Communist Party in two strategic provinces, Villa Clara and Holguin. His career is marked by processes of economic reform, coordination with the high command of the central and eastern armies, and an active relationship with emerging sectors of civil society such as the gay rights movements and the Catholic Church. Diaz-Canel has worked at the most important levels of the Cuban government, including a short period as Minister of Higher Education. He also has the backing of the two main factions of the system: the military bloc and the Cuban Communist Party provincial tsars.

It is plausible that the presidency of Diaz-Canel could impel the country to further reforms since the PCC needs to improve economic performance as a source of political legitimacy. This is important to overcome the loss of the charismatic and historical legitimacy associated with the rule of the original generation of the Revolution. Díaz-

Canel has already contributed to important openings such as the increase in internet connectivity on the island.

Any new direction will logically have a more institutional vision than the current leadership and therefore it will be subjected to the plurality of factions within the state apparatus. That augurs potential situations of bureaucratic bottlenecks and political prisoner's dilemmas in the adoption of public policies that although convenient for the CCP as a whole, they might require new collective action coordination of Cuban leaders in ways that were not regular before when neither Fidel nor Raúl Castro was vulnerable to attacks from the left over deviations from the original principles of the Revolution. Any new president will have to guard his flank and respect the role of historical players, such as Raúl Castro himself. It should not be forgotten that based on the powerful organization department of the CCP, Raúl Castro and José Ramón Machado Ventura will play a decisive role in the designation of the members of the new generation that will govern Cuba in the coming decade.

An important ideological challenge will be the celebration in 2019 of the 60th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution, deciding what to celebrate at a time when the important pillars of the system, such as the statist economy, have been subjected to important ideological attacks, even from the revolutionary ranks themselves. History in Cuban politics is not solely an academic analysis of the past. As one of the primary sources of legitimacy claimed by the CCP is to be the heir of the Revolution, the leadership needs some control over the narrative in which the current policies reinforces its condition of implementer of an epic of national liberation and a program of increasing social equality.

President Trump's aggressive rhetoric in Miami on June 16, 2017, surrounded by the most extreme elements of the anti-Castro exiles and some prominent faces of the internal opposition, provided important alibis to those in favor of a very restricted and controlled reform in the government in Havana. One of the key aspects of Cuban politics is a nationalist political culture that serves to shore up support for the government anticipating that the population rallies around the flag in the face of U.S. imperial projection.

Trump's aiming at Cuban companies owned by the military as a declared target of U.S. sanctions provides strength to the representation of the FAR as the main defensive bulwark of the Cuban nation in the face of external siege. Unlike other smart sanctions against countries like Burma, Russia or Venezuela that only targeted some specific outrageous behavior, in the Cuban case, the military is barely punished more than the rest because all of Cuba is under a regime of unilateral U.S. sanctions. These sanctions are condemned by the majority of the Cuban people and by the international community. This history of sanctions and a group of Trump's favorite exiles and internal opposition activists applauding the American president's show in Miami, only reinforces a history of popular rejection of Washington's interference in Cuba's internal affairs. The imposition by Washington of its "favorite Cubans" also suggests little chance that

the list of preconditions to continue the dialogue with Cuba will be successful. Trump may want to negotiate from positions of strength, but the Cuban government might decide to prioritize diplomatic moves in other direction while keeping all possible agreements from the Obama era as opened as possible. Cuba has recently improved its relations with the strategic rivals of the United States: China and Russia, with Latin America and with Europe, following the approval by the Euro-Chamber of an economic cooperation and political dialogue agreement in early July 2017.

Cuba's Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez categorized Trump's measures as "unsustainable." Even so, he said the Cuban government was willing to work for a better relationship with its northern neighbor. Trump's hostile language is already known by the Cuban government over decades and the Cuban Communist Party also knows how to counteract it. In contrast, President Obama's constructive rhetoric on his visit to Havana had been denounced by the more backward sections of the communist ideological apparatus as "more dangerous" by separating respect for national interests, revolutionary achievements, and Cuba's sovereignty from the acquiescence to some totalitarian practices of the Cuban Communist Party in conflict with international human rights standards and economic progress. Within a context of a roll back to hot rhetoric by Trump, Rodriguez's statements indicate that if any negotiation and dialogue process is not explored, Cuba does not want to appear as responsible for such failure.

The Cuban political elite remain consensual in not negotiating elements of sovereignty and is aware of the nefarious precedents that such concessions before 1959 created in the dynamics of asymmetric relations with the United States. This position of principles does not exclude, however, that important reforms of the economic and social model can be adopted, since the recently approved conceptualization of the economic and social model by the Cuban Communist Party eliminates the previous discourses that anathematized the market and the private property concentrating the stigmas in the so called "concentration of wealth" a term that is particularly flexible but not rejected by the population given the important symptoms of corruption and a culture of privilege in government figures, associates or relatives of some of the officials as part of the adoption of market structures.

The greatest challenges to the sustainability of the system remain economic and domestic. Market-oriented reforms have begun to create elements of marked inequality and there are signs that point to a juxtaposition of elements of race, social class, and even geographical region. Cities and jobs linked to tourism and foreign investment are receiving the greatest benefits from partial reforms, while the increase of travelers with higher purchasing power amounted to four million in 2016, an increase of nearly 15 percent over 2015, creates upward pressures on food prices. In this dynamic, workers in the strategic sectors that guarantee the equality achievements of the revolution's health and education, have not been the most benefited. Cuban international health efforts have more than 30,000 doctors in sixty countries, stretching to the limit the capacity of new hard currency income for that concept.



With or without Raúl Castro, from 2018 onwards, Cuba has embarked on a deepening of the generational change, economic reform, and political liberalization processes associated with greater religious freedoms, travel, private property rights with economic autonomy and access to the internet. The CCP remains the main political actor in the country, but with important tendencies towards a less homogeneous state, a more pluralized civil society and a more market oriented economy under the effects of globalization.

*Translated to English by R.O. Niederstrasser*

*Originally published by Foreign Affairs- Latinoamerica*

***By R.O. Niederstrasser,***

***Research Associate at the Council on Hemispheric Affairs and Arturo Lopez-Levy,  
Extramural Contributor***

***Additional editorial support provided by Jim Baer, Senior Research Fellow, and  
Jack Pannell and Laura Ruiz and Maria Rodriguez, Research Associates at the  
Council on Hemispheric Affairs***

---

<sup>i</sup> Jackson, David “Trump outlines new Cuba policy in Miami’s Little Havana,” USA Today, June, 16, 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2017/06/16/donald-trump-cuba-miami/102917748/>

<sup>ii</sup> “Helms Burton Act: Resurrecting the Iron Curtain.” Council on Hemispheric Affairs, June 10, 2011, <http://www.coha.org/helms-burton-act-resurrecting-the-iron-curtain/>

<sup>iii</sup> “Amnesty International Warns of Human Rights Consequences of Possible Cuba Policy Reversal,” AmnestyUSA.org, June 14, 2017, <https://www.amnestyusa.org/press-releases/amnesty-international-warns-human-rights-consequences-possible-cuba-policy-reversal/>

<sup>iv</sup> Daugherty, Alex “Trump defies congressional Republicans who want closer relations with Cuba,” Miami Herald, June, 16, 2017, <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/politics-government/article156588734.html>

<sup>v</sup> “U.S. Chamber Statement on Administration’s Cuba Policy Announcement,” U.S. Chamber of Commerce, June 16, 2017, <https://www.uschamber.com/press-release/us-chamber-statement-administration-s-cuba-policy-announcement>

<sup>vi</sup> “U.S. Agricultural Exports to Cuba,” State of Minnesota, Minnesota Department of Agriculture 2017 Report, [https://www.mda.state.mn.us/food/business/~/\\_media/Files/food/business/intlprofiles/profile-cuba.ashx](https://www.mda.state.mn.us/food/business/~/_media/Files/food/business/intlprofiles/profile-cuba.ashx)

