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Cuba and EU Improve Strained Relations

by LADB Staff

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Cuba and the European Union (EU) are moving in slow motion toward restoring full diplomatic and cultural relations, which were strained after President Fidel Castro's government cracked down on dissidents and hijackers in April 2003 (see NotiCen, 2003-04-24). Compared to the economic blockade the US maintains against Cuba, the EU sanctions imposed after the crackdown were mild and slightly comical.

Nevertheless, the EU's decision to impose them in the first place and the criticism that lifting them in January has caused underscores how much the issue of dissidents and human rights has become the core of the EU's Cuba policy. In recent years, the US has focused as much on the alleged mistreatment of dissidents in Cuba as on its socialist orientation and has successfully pressed Europe to help get formal condemnations against Cuba in the annual UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) meetings in Geneva.

In 1996, the EU adopted a Cuba policy (the common position), proposed by then Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar, a close friend of Washington and a strident opponent of the Cuban government. The common position is similar in intent and wording to the 1996 Helms-Burton Act, which broadly increased sanctions against Cuba. The EU adopted the common position after an intense campaign by Washington to get an EU policy parallel to its own (see NotiCen, 2003-02-06). The common position mimics the US claim that Cuba harbors hundreds of political prisoners and deprives dissidents of their rights.

Since 1996, the EU has conditioned better relations on improvements in Cuba's human rights behavior. Cuba has consistently held that the EU has no business judging its human rights record or deciding who is a political prisoner and who is not. When Cuba arrested 75 journalists and others in April 2003 and convicted them of acting as paid agents of the US, the EU followed the US line that they were jailed for expressing opinions.

Following the 2003 trials, the EU canceled certain cultural contacts with Cuba and began inviting Cuban dissidents to embassy parties and celebrations in Havana. Cuba responded in kind by not inviting EU diplomats to official gatherings and even refusing to return embassy phone calls. Thus began the "cocktail wars."

More serious was the EU decision to suspend consideration of Cuba's application to take part in the trade and aid benefits offered in the 2000 Cotonou Agreement between the EU and the Africa, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) group (see CubaSource, 2000-10-20).

Spain reverses Cuba policy

The impetus for ending the Cuba-EU quarrel came from Spain after voters there replaced the anti-Castro Aznar in the 2004 elections. Aznar's successor, Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, insisted that the EU change its common position. In November 2004, Cuba re-established formal contact with Spain's ambassador in Havana and signaled its interest in better relations by releasing 14 of the 75 convicts in the closing months of the year. As a modest step in the direction of reconciliation, the EU Council for Latin America advised EU foreign ministers last December to improve relations with Cuba by ending the cocktail wars.

At its Jan. 31 meeting, EU foreign ministers decided to stop entertaining dissidents but not to invite Cuban officials to embassy functions either. The EU decision will be reviewed at the next ministerial meeting in June. However, Castro took the EU decision to put Cuba on a kind of six-month probation as an insult. "They are going to spare our lives for a few paltry months, until June, observing how I behave," he said.

Castro said that his intention was not to harm relations with the EU but that Cuba had nothing to be pardoned for. "Cuba does not need the United States, Cuba does not need Europe. What a delicious thing to be able to say that we do not need any of those people." Despite Castro's bombast, Cuba clearly welcomed the thaw but is walking a fine line between seeming to give in on the dissident and prisoner issue and refusing to be bullied into compliance with EU dictates.

National Assembly President Ricardo Alarcon said he was sure the prisoner releases would continue. "I am sure they will," he said. "It would be very unusual if the rest completed all of their sentences." But while in Madrid visiting King Juan Carlos, Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque set conditions for further reconciliation. He said Cuba was willing to discuss human rights, but the EU would have to stop supporting the US in Geneva every year. And under no circumstances would Cuba release all of the 75. "Their crime was not in thinking differently but in working and acting for a foreign government," he said. "We are willing, for example, to reach an agreement with the European Union on the subject of penal systems, or justice systems, or electoral systems, or on the subject of human rights on the international level."

With diplomatic relations already re-established with Spain, Cuba's Foreign Affairs Ministry (MINREX) started in early January to re-establish ties to all 25 EU members.

Measuring policy change by tiny steps .

On the surface, the EU's Jan. 31 decision would appear to be a minor recalibration of an officially hostile attitude, leaving the EU stuck in an endless Cuba-policy loop. Since the thaw is only for a six-month period, it is more like a truce in the cocktail wars than a permanent policy change. An EU official said that, if Cuba did not meet EU demands on human rights, it might reimpose all the old sanctions during the review in June.

Furthermore, the thaw came with renewed EU pronouncements that it was committed to keeping up a "constructive dialogue" with the dissidents and that Cuba must "unconditionally release all political prisoners." An EU spokesperson told The Miami Herald that the goal was to keep up the pressure on Cuba.

In March, EU Development and Humanitarian Aid Commissioner Louis Michel made the first trip to Cuba by a high EU official since the cocktail wars began. He told reporters that his talks with Castro and Perez Roque had been frank and productive and that they had expressed a willingness to discuss all issues including human rights, prisoners, and the Cotonou Agreement.

Michel also met with four prominent dissidents but gave no indication whether that meant dissidents would enjoy continued attention from EU states. He said the EU sanctions "had accomplished nothing," but did not say that was the end of them. EU split on Cuba policy The EU's decision to return to something like normal diplomacy brought scorn and some vitriolic attacks from Cuba's critics. One of the effects of inviting the former communist states of Central Europe into the EU is that they brought old hatreds with them.

The Cuba issue has caused a rift within the EU as some of those states, especially Poland and the Czech Republic, actively oppose rapprochement with Cuba because of traditional Cold War antipathy to communism. Former Czech president and veteran anti-Soviet dissident Vaclav Havel has called for the overthrow of Castro, a project possibly under study by the Czech Foreign Ministry's department in charge of promoting "transition" in Cuba. Havel and other critics frame the Cuba issue in terms of their own experiences in Soviet-occupied countries during the Cold War. Havel has written that the EU is engaged in "appeasement" and is "dancing to Fidel Castro's tune." He imagines the EU progressing from that to building missile bases in China, apologizing to Saddam Hussein, and holding peace talks with al-Qaeda.

Under Czech pressure, the EU's revised policy on dissidents was not made binding on member states. The Czechs vowed to go on offering cocktails to dissidents, and diplomats from other EU nations said they would carry on their meetings with them. Several EU ambassadors got right to work listening to prominent dissidents on the subject of how to free political prisoners and bring about other changes in Cuba.

In a February press briefing, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher went along with the notion that the EU's Jan. 31 announcement was a policy reversal instead of a tenuous and largely symbolic gesture that may or may not lead to change. "Suspending the restrictive measures [cocktails] without achieving the goals for which they were put in place will...dishearten the peaceful opposition," Boucher said. This hardly squares with statements from many EU states that they will continue cultivating their relations with dissidents and the programs supporting them in the Czech Republic and elsewhere.

What is EU policy?

It is unclear what changes the EU intends to make in its collective Cuba policy other than ending the cocktail wars. Doing so only returns the "war" to the status quo ante bellum. A report from the University of Miami's Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies accused the EU of "duplicity" pretending concern about human rights while continuing its extensive trade, investment, and tourism in the island.

Though obviously unfriendly to Cuba, the report makes a valid point. EU states carry on extensive economic relations with Cuba and do not fully cooperate with the US trade and travel sanctions, giving the impression that the EU "borrows" some of the lesser US expressions of displeasure with Cuba while maintaining pragmatic connections with the island.

Before leaving on a European trip in April, Foreign Minister Perez Roque said the main problem in dealing with the EU on human rights issues was that "the EU still has no policy of its own." "It is still suffering," he said, "from the remnants of the unfortunate influence of Jose Maria Aznar's Spanish government, which dragged the European Union into adopting the Washington agenda as if it were its own."

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