

6-26-2008

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Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Lifting European Sanctions On Cuba Reveals Discord In Europe, U.S., And On The Island." (2008).
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Lifting European Sanctions On Cuba Reveals Discord In Europe, U.S., And On The Island

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Cuba

Published: 2008-06-26

Europe's foreign ministers have voted to scrap sanctions against Cuba. The sanctions have been suspended since 2005 with little hope of ever imposing them again. While they were in place, the sanctions had no practical effect on Cuban-European Union (EU) relations. Imposed in 2003 following the imprisonment of 75 people whom Cuba called mercenaries and whom those opposing the government called dissidents, the sanctions did nothing more than to ban high-level visits by Cuban officials to EU nations and limit diplomatic attendance at certain international events.

Unlike the US blockade of Cuba, the EU sanctions had no economic effect. But in their symbolism they had significant political effect. Their lifting revealed fault lines and points of division both between and within the bastions of the involved parties. Rumors of one such fissure began with the response of Cuba's ex-President Fidel Castro to the news of the European decision.

Writing not in his usual venues on the pages of Cuba's print media but rather on the Cubadebate Internet page (www.cubadebate.cu), the legendary statesman got right down to disarticulating the measure. "The vile means of suspension that the European Union adopted on June 19 has been reported by 16 international press agencies. It implies absolutely no economic consequence whatsoever for our country. On the contrary, the extraterritorial laws of the United States, and therefore its economic and financial blockade, continue fully in force," said Castro. "At my age and in my state of health, one doesn't know how long one will live, but from this moment I want to record my scorn for the enormous hypocrisy that surrounds such a decision. This is made even more evident when it coincides with the brutal European action of expelling unauthorized immigrants coming from Latin American countries, in some of which the majority of the population is of European origin. The emigrants are furthermore the fruit of colonial, semi-colonial, and capitalist exploitation," Fidel added. Fidel continued to lambaste the EU and US, but also Mexico, the anti-Cuban Miami mafia, and the "mercenaries and traitors at the service of the imperium" in Cuba. Neither the linkages nor the vituperation were at all unusual for Castro.

Unusual was that as late as a day after there was no reaction, either to Fidel's invective or to the European announcement, by the government headed by Fidel's brother Raul Castro. Nor was there popular reaction, according to the local and foreign media. Approached by a Reuters correspondent at an embassy reception for Uruguay's President Tabare Vazquez, Cuba's Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque would only venture, "We have seen the news, but we will take our time to evaluate the matter, to ascertain the official decisions, and, at the appropriate moment, we shall react." But, in what some in the international press began to herald as a possible rift between Fidel and his brother's government, Perez Roque added that, if the decision was as reported, it seemed like "a step in the right direction."

The official Cuban press, under a Brussels dateline, headlined the June 19 story, "Foreign Ministers of the EU agree to revoke unjust sanctions against Cuba." On June 21, Fidel issued a statement saying that "there are no conflicts" within the Partido Comunista de Cuba (PCC) and that he does not head any "fraction or group" within the party. Rather, he said, he was just continuing to speak publicly for "the convictions that I have defended all my life." That Fidel would venture his opinion on the EU sanctions before the appearance of any official government statement was surprising. Analysts found his disclaimer of tension within the party even more so. But speculation on political differences between the brothers has come up repeatedly in past months.

Fidel has written opposing proposals put forward by Raul on foreign investment and on the possibility of negotiations with the US. Last year, after Raul's government announced the signing of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, Fidel wrote on why he had not done so in the past and why he still had doubts about it. This pact and another on civil and political rights have both been signed, but neither has been ratified; they are still in play as matters of official policy, adding to suspicions of factionalism. Fidel has also opposed what might be seen in Cuba as market openings, policies having to do with the availability of consumer goods and services. Both have been seen and commented upon internationally as changes in economic policy.

On the EU issue, Fidel denied any but the highest intentions. "I didn't write any diatribe against Europe, I simply told the truth," he said. "If this offends, it is not my fault." Debate shows cracks in EU facade Where Fidel and the government might be on the same page, however, is on the question of capitulation to EU contingency demands for lifting the sanctions. Despite there being almost no real possibility of their ever being reimposed, the Europeans made it clear that a reason for revoking them was so they could engage in talks on human rights, among other things.

Spain's Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos had said the point was "to initiate a stage of dialogue that is not conditional, nor limited by measures that the Spanish government believes have never worked very well and have even been counterproductive." Spain worked for the lifting, he said, so that there could be a "reciprocal, unconditional, nondiscriminatory" political dialogue oriented toward achieving results within the framework of changes that Raul has begun to make.

One of the categories on which the Europeans hope to see progress is human rights, Western style. Cuba, as if to head off any unreasonable expectations along those lines, arrested five political dissidents within hours of the announcement. The five were detained after delivering a letter to the Interior Ministry denouncing mistreatment of a colleague in custody, Mario Perez. Dissident leader Marta Beatriz Roque told reporters the five were arrested for "failure to respect the commander in chief," and for "resistance." They were also charged with breaking the window of a police car. The episode was very brief, start to finish, and the five were promptly let go.

Roque has been accused of receiving funds from anti-Cuba organizations in Miami and is seen by authorities as a mercenary. The demise of the sanctions hits people like Roque particularly hard because the punitive package included extending invitations to dissidents to attend diplomatic functions. For them, this represents the loss of an important access to power.

The debate on sanctions also showed some cracks in the EU facade. The 27 member states were not of one mind on the question. It all threatened to come to nothing late in the game when Germany appeared to change course in its support of the Spanish initiative. On June 16 Germany surprised the Spanish negotiators on the General Affairs Council with a demand for a postponement. Germany appeared to have veered toward the Czech Republic, United Kingdom, and Sweden, which all wanted sharp language on the issue of Cuba's remaining political prisoners. Of the original 75, 20 have been released, most for medical reasons. With no clear explanation from the Germans, speculation was rife that the apparent change followed US President George W. Bush's urging German Chancellor Angela Merkel to undermine the plan when the two met in Berlin on June 11. Some current analysis has it that, while the sanctions are meaningless, their demise could become a wedge to dislodge the more destructive US blockade, which Bush has said he wants to keep in place at all costs.

Meanwhile, it is said, Germany has difficulty holding to a position on foreign affairs because of its own political split; the country is ruled by a coalition. Merkel is a Christian Democrat; Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeir is a Social Democrat. In making the change, the EU acknowledges recent reforms in Cuba, a diplomatic success for the Raul Castro government. Spain began the struggle for the change in EU policy when Raul took over about two years ago. It has characterized Raul's reforms as important and in so doing has engaged the opposition of Sweden, the Czech Republic, and close US diplomatic ally, Britain. These countries see recent changes as cosmetic and cling to the view of Cuba as a human rights violator. They acknowledge that, for instance, since Raul, there have been no long sentences for dissidents, but they appear to agree with opposition sources that these same people are now arrested more frequently for shorter periods, as in the case of the five about whom Marta Roque complained.

Bringing the recalcitrant countries aboard required the inclusion of some cautionary text in the declaration. Sources privy to the process said a paragraph was added to say that the decision would be reviewed after a year and that dialogue would continue only if the EU decided it was effective. An effort was made to frame the declaration more as an incentive to further progress than as an acknowledgment of Cuban directions already taken. "Lifting the sanctions will give us the means to better help human rights in Cuba," said Jean Asselborn, foreign minister of Luxembourg. Also sounding newly tough was EU External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner, who said, "There will be very clear language on what the Cubans still have to do...releasing prisoners, really working on human rights questions. There will be a sort of review to see whether indeed something will have happened."

These last-minute changes might contain the language that most rankled Fidel. It was hypocrisy he railed about, and he found nothing more hypocritical than Europe's going on in that vein while simultaneously mistreating Latin American workers and unceremoniously giving them the boot. But there was no question, from the European point of view, that mollification was crucial to passage, to judge by the statement from Sweden's Foreign Minister Carl Bildt. "It's a repressive and reprehensible regime," he said. "We are open to dialogue with them, but they have been slamming the door in our face. Some people have detected major changes. My microscopes are not big enough to locate those particular changes, but we'll see."

Upsetting US policy

Finally, among US policymakers, it is not certain that a rift exists regarding Cuba policy, but it is clear that the EU decision occasioned a reversal of rhetoric. Prior to the decision, when success or failure of Spain's initiative was anything but certain, the US was forthright in its opposition. State Department spokesman Tom Casey told reporters, "We certainly don't see any kind of fundamental break with the Castro dictatorship that would give us reason to believe that now would be the time to lift sanctions." To put a fine point on it, lest there be any misunderstanding of the US position, he added, "We would not be supportive of the EU or anyone else easing those restrictions at this time."

After the decision, the US attempted to spin events its way, and national security adviser Stephen Hadley found the harsh language useful to his task. Speaking at a Washington press conference about EU relations, he lauded agreement on the approach to Latin America, "particularly in Cuba, an area where there has been disagreement in the past; great emphasis on the importance of supporting democracy and human rights in Cuba, and agreement also that, as you heard from the leaders, the first step or the real indication that something is going to be different in Cuba will occur when Cuba releases its political prisoners. And both the US and the EU are calling for that." But victorious Spain was not willing to let it go at that.

On the same day Hadley spoke in Washington, Spain's Secretary of State for the EU Diego Lopez Garrido was telling reporters in Madrid, "The EU has shown its independence and its autonomy on foreign policy because, before and after the decision, there were statements from the White House indicating its direct opposition. The White House has made it known to EU countries that it does not like this move at all."

-- End --