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USA-Cuba: Presidents Barack Obama and Raúl Castro Caught in Half Century of Conflict

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The relationship between Cuba and its historical rival, the US, is caught between intensified allegations of repression by opponents of Raúl Castro's regime and the increased demand for democracy and respect for human rights by President Barack Obama's administration, which is having worldwide repercussions.

The 2009 arrival of a Democrat in the White House with an attitude supporting renovation intensified expectations for a policy shift toward Havana after the two terms of former President George W. Bush (2001-2009) in which restrictions had increased: Cuban residents in the US were limited to traveling to the island once every three years with a maximum stay of 14 days and a daily spending limit of US$50 for expenses.

A new stage of bilateral negotiations also seemed ripe because of the retreat from power of confrontational leader Fidel Castro, officially replaced in February 2008 by his brother Raúl Castro, who has since failed to meet expectations to improve the exhausted, inefficient, and impoverished country.

The embargo or the thorn in Cuba's side

The Cuban government persists in claiming that disassembling the economic, commercial, and financial embargo would be evidence of Washington's redefinition of its relationship with the island. The losses associated with the embargo, enforced since 1962, reached about US$96 billion in November 2009. However, its full impact over time is estimated to be closer to US$236 billion, according to official Cuban statistics.

In January Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez urged Obama to use his "prerogatives" to curb the embargo without authorization from Congress, remove Cuba from the list of countries that support terrorists, stop supporting local dissidents, revoke US laws that allegedly encourage illegal emigration from Cuba, and end radio and television transmissions directed at the island.

Also, Havana requests the return of the territory that the US Navy occupies at Guantanamo Naval Base (on the eastern side of Cuba) and the release of five Cuban prisoners charged in 2001 with espionage in the US (NotiCen, June 21 2001) and (Aug. 11, 2005), who are considered heroes and "prisoners of the empire" by the Cuban government.

Since 2009, Obama has lessened confrontational discourse with the communist government, authorized sending remittances to Cuba, and removed restrictions enforced during the Bush administration regarding Cuban-American travel to the island.

However, the change in tone goes only so far. During a conference at the University of Louisville (Kentucky) in April, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that "if you look at any opening to Cuba you can almost chart how the Castro regime does something to try to stymie it."
"It is my personal belief that the Castros do not want to see an end to the embargo and do not want to see normalization with the United States because they would lose all of their excuses for what hasn't happened in Cuba in the last 50 years," Clinton said.

Clinton also said that when her husband, former President Bill Clinton (1993-2001), was seeking to improve ties, Fidel Castro ordered his military to shoot down two small civilian planes operated by the anti-Castro Cuban exile group Hermanos al Rescate, which were dropping pamphlets on the island in 1996 (NotiSur, March 1, 1996) and (July 19, 1996).

Senior Director for Western Hemisphere Affairs at the National Security Council (NSC) Daniel Restrepo said recently that Cuba is far from introducing improvements in human rights that would justify lifting the embargo. Obama does not envision lifting the sanctions if the Cuban government does not implement significant changes, something that "we are far from having seen," he said.

**The internal situation in Cuba**

Demands in the US and on the island that Obama soften his policies even more were stunted by the death of Cuban dissident Orlando Zapata Tamayo in February 2010 (see NotiCen, 2010-03-04) after an 85-day hunger strike in jail and by the public repression of Cuban opponents who condemned it as a "murder by the state."

This followed a previous incident. On Dec. 5, 2009, a US contractor was incarcerated for distributing laptops, cell phones, and other electronic equipment. Raúl Castro said that the contractor was "illegally supplying groups in civil society with sophisticated means of satellite communications" on behalf of the US.

Washington is maintaining its policy of condemnation of the communist regime, especially in light of clashes between pro-government groups and opponents in the streets. The Castro brothers say the international demands are part of the blackmail, lies, and manipulation of the western press and the conspiracy in which the European Union (EU) also participates.

Raúl Castro said in April that the country would disappear before he would yield to the pressures. "We will never yield to the blackmail of any country or set of nations, no matter how powerful, no matter what happens," he said. He also says the current US administration has not stopped supporting the subversion in the least.

The Cuban Catholic Church, usually measured in its declarations, called for the vicious circle to be broken. In April, Cardinal Jaime Ortega asked for the release of the 200 or so political prisoners, opposed the harassment of the women known as the Women in White, who are requesting the release of their sons and spouses, recommended the resumption of conversations with the US, and emphasized that Cuba is in "a very difficult situation."

In what is being seen as a significant policy shift following talks between Raúl Castro and Ortega, the Cuban government agreed to move some political prisoners to hospitals for medical care, move others to facilities closer to their homes to make family visits easier, and eventually release others.

Cuba suffers from the exodus of its people, from scarcity, from the lack of currency to pay its international debts and carry out purchases on the world market, and from denunciations of abuse in jails. The opposition, independent journalists, and bloggers say their work allows information about the internal reality to spread to the outer world.
"Many in the world are now seeing what we have seen for a long time, which is a very intransigent, entrenched regime that has stifled the opportunity for the Cuban people," Hillary Clinton said in April, just after the death of Zapata Tamayo.

**Washington activates the double track**

In the midst of these tensions, both governments have agreed to resurrect the bilateral rounds on immigration agreements, discussion of direct mail service, and collaboration on catastrophes such as the earthquake in Haiti.

The immigration dialogue has been interrupted since 2003, when Bush suspended it, and was reopened in 2009 on Obama's initiative. In 1994-1995, both countries signed an immigration agreement, in which the US allotted 20,000 visas to Cubans annually and the Cuban government repatriated, without retaliation, those who had tried to emigrate illegally but were intercepted by the US Coast Guard.

The first round of conversations on immigration occurred in July 2009 at the UN and the second in February 2010 in Havana, with the participation of Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Craig Kelly, the highest ranking official sent to the island since Obama arrived in the White House. Kelly met with dissidents during his stay in Cuba.

The president of the Comisión Cubana de Derechos Humanos y Reconciliación Nacional (CCDHRN) Elizardo Sánchez lauded Washington for its "double track" policy of simultaneously maintaining relationships with the authorities and the dissidents, unlike the EU and the Spanish government, which have moved away from the emerging civil society.

The US State Department has resumed granting visas to intellectuals and artists, including pro-government singer Silvio Rodríguez and dancer Alicia Alonso.

The Obama administration is engaged in "promoting democracy" by authorizing in 2009 the shipment of electronic products to the island: cell phones, cameras, computers, radios and televisions with satellite antennas. Also, Obama authorized US telecommunications enterprises to establish fiber-optic telecommunications and satellite services between the two countries.

In addition, the US has continued the sale of food and agricultural products to the island as a humanitarian exception to the embargo since 2000. Cuba imports 70% of its food and the US is its main supplier. These purchases came to US$710 million in 2008 and fell to US$528 million in 2009.

Assistant Secretary of State for the Western Hemisphere Arturo Valenzuela explained that a calm approach needs to be taken with Cuba and he does not expect a sudden change at the moment.

Secretary Clinton recently said that "there should be an opportunity for a transition to a full democracy in Cuba, and it's going to happen at some point, but it may not happen anytime soon."

The Cuban opposition and some in the Cuban exile community identify Obama as a source of support. In a move that angered some among the exile community, musical celebrities Gloria and Emilio Estefan organized a reception in Miami in April as a Democratic Party fundraiser, which the president attended, to thank him for his attention to the island. From the island, opposition voices also clamor for his support for the release of prisoners, the ending of repression, and the democratization of society.