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Daniel Vázquez

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Cubans Long for Migratory Reforms to Provide Greater Freedom of Movement to and from Island

by Daniel Vázquez

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Cuban emigrants and island residents long for President Raul Castro’s government to accomplish profound migratory reforms that will eliminate, or at least alleviate, the intricate, expensive, and lengthy procedures for travel abroad or for visits to the homeland. Those measures were implemented more than five decades ago and have been the reason for protests by broad sectors of the population.

In mid-April, Cuban parliament president Ricardo Alarcón said that sweeping migratory reforms were imminent but left out the details and deadlines. The Cuban population, including strong government supporters, waited in vain for President Castro to announce the expected reforms in December 2011.

Cuban migration policy has been a source of complaints from Cubans living on the island. They believe that their rights have been restricted to freely emigrate, travel abroad for long periods of time, or even to settle temporarily in another country; the emigrant community also complains of having to undergo excessive applications, expensive fees, entry permits, and visits to Cuba limited to a few weeks.

Gone are the days when the government thought that all Cubans who left the island would immediately relocate in the land of the enemies "of the revolution, the fatherland, and socialism," as the official press used to proclaim. Now the official discourse attributes the causes of migration to the internal economic crisis and tends to minimize political discontent as a trigger.

Migratory barriers, in detail

With a population of 11.2 million, the island has a net migration of around 30,000 people per year, with a noticeable loss of technicians and professionals. Expert Antonio Aja Díaz, in statements to the foreign press in Cuba, said the population residing outside the country exceeds 1.7 million, and, in the five years from 2005 to 2010, 12% of emigrants were professionals.

Many left during the migratory exodus of the 1960s, and later in 1980 and 1994, when there were massive departures of 130,000 and 36,000, respectively. During these crises, the majority of emigrants left by sea, mainly en route to the US. Between 1995 and 1999, the migration potential was estimated to be between 490,000 and 800,000 people, said Aja.

Those who legally emigrate have to negotiate a long process that includes a passport at a cost of US$60 in a country where monthly wages are about US$15, and they must also provide a letter of invitation (US$150 to US$200) from a foreign resident or citizen who will guarantee the Cuban consular authorities that they will cover the guest's expenses.

After an assessment that includes checking the guest's criminal record and verifying that their leaving does not constitute a professional or political loss for the country (e.g. military, some
members of the opposition, or professionals in priority sectors such as medicine), the government issues an exit permit (US$150) which can be extended to stay abroad for up to the 11-month limit. If they do not return within that period, they automatically lose their status as a permanent resident in Cuba but not their citizenship.

Beyond the payment of the traveler’s visa and ticket, the process becomes much more expensive, because, after the first month of stay abroad, the traveler must pay a monthly fee to the Cuban consulate, which ranges from US$40 to US$150, depending on the country where the traveler is residing. In addition, the Cuban passport is valid for six years and requires renewal every two years.

Sonia, a resident of Pinar del Rio in western Cuba who is on a short-term visit to her daughter in the US, believes that the current immigration policy is not only in response to domestic political interests on the island but also to the economic need of the state to feed its coffers with hard currency thanks to a right as basic as emigrating to or visiting another country.

On the other side, emigrants face a costly process to re-enter the island. The government does not accept dual citizenship and requires a Cuban passport of those who want to visit the country for stays of up to 30 days, which on exception can be extended by one or two additional months. The Cuba Max Travel Agency in Miami says the Cuban passport fees for emigrants are US$425, plus US $200 for a renewal every two years. After six years, a new passport must be purchased.

Some people do not want to return to their homeland on the grounds that the procedures and high tariffs are a government abuse against emigrants. Other emigrants without sufficient financial means must delay their family reunions. However, a half million Cubans return to the island each year with suitcases filled with medicines, food, and basic staples.

**In the labyrinth: without a visa and under suspicion**

To leave for at least a temporary visit of a few weeks or a few months has become a nightmarish maze for many Cubans. Some have died without having achieved their goal of spending time with family in the US. When a tourist-visa application is started, the applicant is under suspicion by the consular officials and meticulously evaluated as a potential emigrant.

Of all the foreign consulates in Havana, only Ecuador’s consulate exempts the visa requirement for Cubans, although they do request a letter of invitation from the host in the South American country. Mexico requires proof of the host’s solvency as well as strict evidence that there is a close and verifiable relationship between guest and host to warrant granting the visa.

In light of this situation, thousands of Cubans choose to leave the island by illegal means for the US or to countries in the Caribbean because they do not have the resources to pay the costs of the migration process, they are unable to obtain a visa from another country, or because they fear that eventually the island authorities will prohibit them from legally leaving the country temporarily or permanently.

Experts say the largest segment of the Cuban population leaving the island is women, followed by white men between the ages of 25 and 40. The black population lags behind in migratory options and historically has had fewer resources in the country. The US continues to be the main destination for Cuban emigrants. Illegal emigrants often use alternative routes such as Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Panama, or Mexico, and then go on to the US border.
Under the protection of the Cuban Adjustment Act, in force since 1966, Cubans can ask for political asylum at the US border or if they touch US soil (NotiCen, Oct. 20, 2000). They are returned to the island by the US Coast Guard if captured at sea (NotiCen, May 22, 2003, and March 10, 2011). The US Interests Section in Havana grants about 20,000 visas annually for Cuban emigrants by virtue of agreements between the two governments (1994-1995) to curb illegal emigration.

Thus, the ability to travel becomes a winding maze. A specific case: the US Consulate denied a visa twice consecutively to a disabled, elderly woman because it thinks that she will emigrate. This, because she is a widow, and her only son lives in the US. It does not matter to them that the son is a US citizen or a professional above reproach. Neither is it enough to convince the officials that the applicant has traveled as a tourist to other countries and faithfully returned to her home in Cuba.

Each consular interview appointment for a tourist visa to the US is scheduled between two and four years in advance. Thus, the situation is a nightmare for older Cubans who routinely face the denial of their visa from the US consulate to visit their relatives. These people are not interested in being "boat people." For these people, it is not an option to risk their lives at sea, illegally enter another country, and arrive exhausted at the US border.

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