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Cuba Alert to Possible Brain Drain with Increased Migratory Flexibility

by Daniel Vázquez

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Cubans’ eagerness to travel off the island may lead to a stampede of professionals leaving the country beginning on Jan. 14, the date when, after decades of waiting, a more flexible immigration policy will finally come into force, despite warnings from the government of President Raúl Castro that restrictions will be maintained for individuals deemed important for national security and development (NotiCen, May 24, 2012).

The "brain drain" and the departure of the skilled work force has been one of Cuba’s most controversial subjects since 1959, when Fidel Castro took power and the country headed toward communism. There was a steady flow of upper- and middle-class professionals bound for the US, a nation that Cubans have been drawn to since the early 19th century because of its proximity and commercial and cultural ties (NotiCen, Aug. 16, 2012).

Since that time, the subject has been discussed with two approaches. The official position is that the departures are the result of a "talent-theft" policy by developed powers, especially the US. Others believe it is normal for any individual to want to live in a more competitive and more prosperous area than the island, where a worker’s average salary is not enough to adequately live on.

The new regulations will put the possibility of immigration for professionals to the test. In October, the government announced that those with a valid passport will be able to travel starting on Jan. 14 provided that they have the required visa from the destination country. The maximum stay outside the nation without losing permanent Cuban-resident status will be two years; until now, residency was lost upon completing eleven months out of the country.

The mandatory requirements have been eliminated that Cubans present a letter of invitation from a legal resident in the country to be visited and that they apply for an "exit permit" issued by the island for a total cost of US$300. In addition, the traveler had to pay the Cuban government a monthly quota of between US$40 and US$150 starting the second month, in case they planned to return to the island at eleven months, to maintain their status as a permanent resident. These procedures have caused resentment for decades.

Migratory and professional exodus

However, under the new immigration panorama, physicians, scientists, and athletes, among other "skilled workers," could have obstacles in leaving the country. Also, prominent dissidents will continue under the same travel bans currently in effect. The regulations stress that the government will deny passports when matters of defense, public interest, or national security so demand.

The restrictive policy to prevent professionals from leaving has already led to consequences within Cuban society, including young people who prefer not to attend university or who drop out if obtaining a degree stands in the way of their plans to emigrate or if it rules out the possibility of finding a better-paying job in the hotels and restaurants serving international tourists.
The exodus has not been only abroad; engineers, linguists, physicians, and even surgeons have preferred to leave their professions to provide services as guides and taxi drivers to foreigners. Two taxi rides from downtown Havana to the José Martí International Airport represent about US$30, more than the average monthly salary of around US$20.

For years, one of the most popular jokes in Cuba has been about a young man allegedly taken to the emergency room against his will because, according to his family, he was suffering from a nervous breakdown and delusions of grandeur because he constantly yelled, "I want to be a bellboy at the Hotel Nacional" (Cuba’s flagship hotel). The great irony of the joke is the young man’s true profession: surgeon in a famous Havana hospital.

The erosion of professional sectors in Cuba was heightened by the economic crisis in the 1990s when teaching conditions deteriorated and the collective dream crumbled that a professional degree guaranteed a more dignified and comfortable life. This year alone nearly 300 teachers have left the country, although 93.2% of the demand is covered, according to the Ministerio de Educación.

Cuba has provided systematic opportunities for "defections" by its professionals, who request political asylum in foreign countries while they are participating in sports, cultural, or official missions. Dancers, athletes, and first-rate doctors have been among the "deserters," who, in turn, have been banned from returning for five to eight years, while their families suffer obstacles to emigrate.

Mass media’s response has been a policy of omission about cultural, artistic, or sports celebrities who have left the country, such as singers Celia Cruz and Gloria Estefan or writers Reinaldo Arenas and Guillermo Cabrera Infante. The state-controlled press omits all mention of their names, achievements, works, and photos. These bans have extended to text and reference books.

Sports teams visiting other countries, especially the US, Canada, and Mexico, are often sponsored by Cuban agents who control the athletes’ mobility and accommodations, regulating contact with those who might offer tempting contract proposals. Still, many escape to fulfill their objective of becoming professional athletes.

A good part of the recently registered professionals in exodus are those sent abroad by Havana as part of collaborative agreements with other countries to serve the poorest areas, where locals often refuse to work. Cuba currently has more than 31,300 professionals, including 11,054 doctors and 10,997 technicians, in Venezuela alone, according to Cuban Ambassador Rogelio Polanco.

More than 1,000 Cuban doctors have abandoned their official missions and sought refuge in the US, which offers a special visa program for them, the Cuban Medical Professional Parole, although it does not imply automatic validation of their degree nor does it guarantee that they can work in their field in the US. Through these means and with a refugee visa, 1,574 doctors and other health professionals arrived in the US as of December 2010.

President Raúl Castro’s new regulations will allow the return of Cuban émigrés who were previously prohibited from doing so because of their illegal exit from Cuba or their desertion. Their return will be permitted eight years after the incident that established the ban, except for those who fled into the US naval base at Guantanamo. In contrast, the authorities promised to ease the way for emigrants who want to return to live permanently on the island.
This opens a new panorama for many Cubans. The opportunity to settle abroad for two years without losing their assets in their home country and be protected by dual citizenship could lead to a greater flow of remittances. The Spanish consulate has already issued more than 60,000 passports and could qualify up to 180,000 Cubans who under the law are recognized as Spanish descendants.

Castro continues the repetitive discourse of "updating" the local communist model using adjustments that analysts unanimously believe to be slow and insufficient. On the street, people are more pragmatic and strive to "do whatever it takes" to get better incomes, even in a crisis-hit Spain or barely speaking English in Florida.

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