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Daniel Vázquez

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New Stage of Relations Between Washington and Havana Triggers Expectations of Cuban People

by Daniel Vázquez
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The recent joint announcement by US President Barack Obama and his Cuban counterpart Raúl Castro regarding the restoration of diplomatic relations after half a century of conflict between the two countries unexpectedly shook up life on the island and created a changing scenario for millions of Cubans whose hopes for a better future have been placed on their northern neighbor for decades.

A result of secret negotiations between the two governments, under the impetus of mediator Pope Francis and the Vatican, the bilateral approach sparked tensions for Republican politicians as well as the bastions of Cuban exiles and their congressional representatives, all of whom have agreed that President Obama reportedly made an unprecedented act of reconciliation with a historic enemy without sufficient commitments for democratization and respect for human rights.

Supporters of Obama’s decision believe that diplomatic ties with Havana will be the best way to politically influence the island after the Cold War policy that did not achieve the objective to overthrow the Castro brothers and instead has kept the Cuban people hostage. Obama said on Dec. 17 that Washington's policy toward the only communist enclave in the Western Hemisphere had failed and caused US isolation in Latin America.

Regardless of the direction that the 2015 rounds of talks will take and what new decisions may arise, this new page in bilateral relations has not been an abstract incident for ordinary Cubans, who for nearly five decades were bombarded daily with Cuban official propaganda about the terrible and powerful empire neighbor just 145 km away, to which the Castro government has tended to attribute all failures and hardships on the island.

Cuban citizens respond cautiously

After five decades of systematic protest marches designed by the Cuban government and staged in front of the US Interests Section building on Havana’s Malecón, the promenade along Havana’s coast facing the Caribbean, the Cuban population proceeded with caution and did not publicly show their approval to the December announcement of the change in diplomatic approach. Therefore, there were no expressions of euphoria in the streets but murmurs of surprise and many speculations.

Many Cubans believed on that historic day the restoration of bilateral relations would imply the automatic suspension of the trade, economic, and financial embargo against Cuba implemented by the US in 1961. However, the embargo is part of a framework that can only be dismantled by the US Congress, now dominated by a Republican majority adverse to President Obama.

Cuban state media announced the agreement between Obama and Castro emphasizing the return of three Cuban convicts serving sentences in the US for integrating a spy network dismantled in 1998 (NotiCen, Aug. 11, 2005). The three prisoners were exchanged for 65-year-old US contractor Alan Gross, in jail since 2009 for having introduced satellite communications equipment on the
island and attempting to install them for the Jewish community, an activity that was judged subversive by the Cuban government.

Circulating in Cuba in the past month are keen observations about the healthy state in which the three Cubans returned to the island, in contrast to the emaciated and toothless Gross who was returned to the US (NotiCen, Aug. 8, 2013). Gross’s obviously deteriorating health and fear of his death in prison could have been a catalyst for the negotiations between the two governments. The bilateral agreement also contemplated the release of 53 dissidents remaining in prison on the island.

For now, the signs with the famous phrase "Señores imperialistas, ¡no les tenemos absolutamente ningún miedo!" are still seen on Havana streets and buildings just like they have been for decades. Former President Fidel Castro, now 88 years old and the architect of thousands of hours of speeches to the populace about the impending US invasion, has been silent in recent weeks, increasing rumors about the definitive deterioration of his health. He has not appeared in public for a year.

Raúl Castro’s approach to the US has been interpreted as his greatest and final break with his brother. Less given to public appearances, the concise Raúl Castro has been a more pragmatic ruler: an admirer of the Chinese transition, enemy of waste, paternalism, and the economic disorder left on the island by the Soviet model, and conscious of the end of his generation’s opportunities after half a century in power.

**Cubans with an eye on the ex-enemy**

Washington and Havana began the year with the first round of negotiations in Cuba on Jan. 21-22. The US delegation was headed by Roberta Jacobson, assistant secretary of state for Latin America, the highest-ranking official to visit the island in half a century. At the end of the talks, the two delegations hinted that the dialogue process between the two governments was shaping up to be a long one to reach agreements. The day before the meeting, Obama used his State of the Union address to urge the US Congress to work together to eliminate the embargo.

Included in the many questions posed by Cubans about the new scenario is whether the Cuban Adjustment Act (CAA) might be repealed at some point. Since 1966, it has allowed Cubans to be welcomed as refugees into the US, enjoying a special status that enables them to request US residency a year after arriving. Cubans only have to reach US soil to qualify for political refugee status (NotiCen, Sept. 8, 2000). Today, they form a community of about 2 million in the US.

Consequently, the imagined imminent end of the CAA triggered a flood of illegal attempts to leave the island for the US. Reports by the US Coast Guard said there was a 117% increase of Cubans intercepted at sea in December 2014 compared with December 2013. In total, 481 Cubans were captured. In the fiscal year that ended in September 2014, 814 Cubans made it to US shores, while in the previous fiscal year the count was 359.

The increase in departures for the US was also interpreted as an indicator of the slow pace of reforms begun by Raúl Castro, who, since succeeding his brother in 2006, has tried to boost production, encourage agricultural production, alleviate the surplus of state employees, and liberate the productive forces through licenses for freelancers and cooperatives (NotiCen, Feb. 21, 2013).

Apparently, the results of the reforms are not progressing at the speed reported by the official press or the needs of the population who complain of shortages of basic foods and the high prices of agricultural products. The private production and services sector still has not gained strength.
because of high taxes, the lack of supplies, wholesale market, equipment and technology, training, and the need for a broader and more solvent clientele.

The turning of the page on the old bilateral dispute is occurring during a time of uncertainty about whether Venezuela can continue aiding Cuba with oil shipments. Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro faces internal turmoil because of shortages of staples, an abrupt drop in his popularity ratings, the discrediting of key figures in his administration, and the budget adjustments that must be made as a result of falling oil prices on the world market.

**Relaxing US controls**

Once more in Cuba’s history, the US is shaping up to be a providential lifeline. Obama approved a policy framework that, although the embargo cannot be dismantled, does allow several other benefits such as twelve authorized categories under which Americans can travel more easily to Cuba, use of their debit and credit cards while there, and the permission to return to the US with up to US$400 in products, including up to US$100 of alcoholic beverages and tobacco.

The amendments put into effect on Jan. 16 also increased the amount of the remittances that can be sent to the island from US$500 to US$2,000 per quarter and approved sending mobile phones, televisions, computers, and other devices. Phone-call rates between the US and the island are among the most expensive in the world: one minute of communication costs about US$1.

Also, the new rules provide support for the emerging private sector to help it operate without relying on the communist state. As a result, the US authorized the export of building materials, agricultural equipment, and tools. Human rights organizations, individuals, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have facilities in place to export products that will contribute to strengthening the civil society. Cubans are pinning their hopes on those assets, resources, money, and US visitors.

Without realistic expectations of many more years in power, Raúl Castro, now 83, has expressed his interest in leaving a directed political renewal on the island and a stable internal situation, which he has demonstrated by making decisions based on economic and international relations and not through opportunistic alliances with messianic communist or populist partners. Raúl's pragmatism has come at last to his old enemy.

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