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Nine Months of Lowered Tensions and New Relationships with U.S. Curb Cuba’s Official Propaganda

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Nine months after the Cuban and US governments announced their intention to resume diplomatic relations after 54 years of hostilities, Cuban society contemplates the accelerated changes, now more evident in the political plan than in economic advances, and the once fiery speeches, propaganda, and official marches against the neighboring enemy have almost disappeared.

Havana continues to be hard hit by shortages and deterioration, but the billboards against Washington have been lowered, people openly admire the richness of the neighboring nation without fear, taxi drivers now display both countries’ insignias in their ramshackle US cars, and women sport the iconic stars and stripes painted on their fingernails and toenails. The US flag flies high in front of the US Embassy next to the Caribbean Sea, although an immense Cuban flag nearby tries to hide its neighbor's prominence.

The restoration of relations with the US has broken down the half century of rhetoric churned out by former President Fidel Castro, along with his brother, President Raúl Castro, minister of defense for decades. Typically, the island was presented as a besieged territory, well-armed militarily, and perforated by underground shelters; a Messianic nation predestined to suffer, resist, and defend itself.

When Fidel Castro handed over direct control of the government in the summer of 2006 and his pragmatic, discrete, and not-the-least-bit-charismatic brother jumped to the forefront, there was a very evident, extensive transformation into a government that spends less on creating political platforms and parades. In contrast, it shows more willingness to control the local economy, resources, and productivity, although those reforms have had setbacks and met many obstacles in the indebted country with precarious infrastructure.

Raúl Castro’s rapprochement with the US seems to be the most difficult of all his decisions regarding economic and policy shifts, after former benefactors of the island, such as Russia, China, and Venezuela, faced their own economic difficulties and thus limited their once-abundant remittances and resources. Cuba now is trying to strengthen old ties and place itself into the orbit of its closest and most important market from the 18th century until 1959.

Progress in bilateral talks

On Sept. 11, a joint negotiations team met in Cuba to chart a course for the normalization of relations after the historic opening of embassies in Washington in July and Havana in August.

The agenda for the next bilateral meetings could include addressing compensation for the economic and personal damages in Cuba attributed to US governmental policies and for the US properties that were nationalized in Cuba after the triumph of the 1959 revolution and treated as an economic loss to the US. Other topics to be included are human trafficking and human rights; the debate on this last issue has been a point of contention between both countries.
Other matters slated for future dates are cooperation in environmental protection and the prevention of natural disasters, health, civil aviation, telecommunications and Internet, direct mail service, and the fight against transnational crimes.

A few days later, on Sept. 18, the US announced new provisions that will loosen the embargo and are designed, according to the authorities, to support the Cuban private sector. Approved under Obama's executive powers, these provisions will facilitate the flow of people, information, money, and resources. They authorize US businesses to offer telecommunications and Internet services between the two countries and give permission to open offices, stores, warehouses, and bank accounts on the island (NotiCen, March 26, 2015, and April 16, 2015). Among other benefits, these changes will eliminate the cap on remittances, open educational opportunities by permitting online courses, and allow humanitarian aid in case of disaster.

Cuba continues to insist on the end of the US embargo and the return of the Guantanamo military base, but, realistically, the changes depend on the maneuvering capability of the US president and not on Congress, where dissenting voices accuse Obama of being too soft in his treatment of the communist neighbor.

**Protagonists and allies of a new era**

The Cuban government's strategy relies on a greater role for some groups and institutions at the expense of others. The influence and mediation of the Catholic hierarchy, already important in 2010 when political prisoners were freed and sent to Spain, has gained greater strength with Pope Francis as mediator for the two countries. This prominence has been reaffirmed with the recent papal visit to Cuba, concluded just hours before his arrival in the US.

In addition, the Raulista strategy has reached out to the community of Cubans off the island. The official press has gradually stopped referring to them as sellouts, traitors, and gusanos, and instead has put them into two categories: the émigrés, who supposedly left because of unavoidable economic urgency, and the exiles, who continue to maintain disagreements and hostility toward the Cuban government.

Cuban officials now express themselves in a more conciliatory tone toward their compatriots who left the island and settled in US and who, although they qualify for political-refugee status and are granted extensive benefits, travel back to the island and send millions of dollars in remittances. Such visits and remittances by Cuban-Americans sustain the Cuban coffers.

Already this year, the brusque attitude and hard gaze of the Cuban immigration agents seem to be a distant memory; these are the same agents who at the beginning of the decade did not greet or welcome travelers from Miami while they processed their documents at the Havana airport. Now, with the new posture of detente, rapprochement, and economic calculation coming from the official leadership, any reticence toward Cuban-Americans has been swept away in the airports and during their stay on the island.

The Cuban-Americans’ goods, money, and business-management experience now help their relatives on the island to open their own lodging, food, and transportation businesses.

At the same time, there is an actual possibility that Cuban emigrants will regain their status as permanent residents on the island through "repatriation." They lost their resident status upon leaving to emigrate to another country, but now a new panorama has opened with the
possibility that they might buy houses and register them in their names, spend long holidays, reside permanently on the island, or retire there and have unrestricted access to public health services.

For decades, those leaving Cuba carried in their mind that, as the government proclaimed, they had made a drastic and irrevocable decision. Now, instead, emigrants return who have a successful life abroad but, at the same time, enjoy spending time in Cuba.

In these new times of economic benefits and political realignments between the US and Cuba, the opposition groups on the island have been marginalized and remain under arrest, detention, and indifference. The outcomes of 18 months of secret negotiations between Obama and Castro took them by surprise, and initially baffled them.

Arrests and beatings continue on the women known as the Damas de Blanco (Ladies in White). Every Sunday, after attending mass, these women march silently through Havana's Miramar residential neighborhood, where most of the embassies and foreign businesses are. They march for human rights and clemency for both common and political prisoners. Usually, opposition groups like the Damas de Blanco are reviled by the authorities because they have received sponsorship and support from the US (NotiCen, June 17, 2010).

The siege against the opposition continues as a way of reaffirming that the increasingly extensive discussions with the US should not be interpreted as an expression of the Cuban government’s weakness and rules out the opponents as legitimate partners, viewing them as pressure groups of foreign interests. Other countries moderate disagreements and streamline economic agreements with Cuba in a race for access to the economic benefits that will come when Cuba opens to US.

The Americans already arrived

While both governments move forward with their systematic talks, more than 31,000 Cubans arrived in the US during the first 10 months of this fiscal year, an increase of 30% over the preceding period, US Customs and Border Protection told the press in early September. The Cuban Adjustment Act (1966) and the "wet foot/dry foot" policy determined that Cubans who arrive on US soil can stay, but those intercepted at sea are returned to Cuba.

The exodus continues. The average Cuban, who has lived through half a century of shortages, restrictions, and quick political turns, knows that the benefits of this new phase may take time to arrive, or may never arrive at their table and in their pocket. The people have a good memory, and they ridicule the process with slogans from the Cold War, when a defiant Fidel Castro used to shout that he was ready for the landing of US Marines.

This summer, in an iconic Old Havana square, an old man dressed in a vintage Cuban military uniform shouted in jest to the foreign visitors, "Bring on the Americans! Bring them soon! We’re waiting for them!" But he did not say it in reference to an imminent invasion of the US Marines predicted by Castro but rather to the national desire to receive a stream of tourists and their dollars. The Americans finally arrived in Cuba this year, and, strangely enough, they arrived because of the labor of the historic Castros.