12-10-2015

Uncertainty about the Future of the Cuban Adjustment Act Fuels Exodus to the U.S.

Daniel Vázquez

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Uncertainty about the Future of the Cuban Adjustment Act Fuels Exodus to the U.S.

by Daniel Vázquez
Category/Department: Cuba
Published: 2015-12-10

The flow of Cubans into the United States has increased since the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between Washington and Havana in December 2014 unleashed controversies and fears about a possible end to, or revision of, the Cuban Adjustment Act (CAA), in place since 1966 and the cause of continuous complaints by the island's government (NotiCen, Jan. 29, 2015).

The announcements from Presidents Barack Obama and Raúl Castro that they had agreed to reinitiate bilateral relations were received by the island's 11.2 million inhabitants with surprise, caution and even doubt about the real possibility of immediate benefits. In addition, the revelation that the two administrations had been negotiating in secret for 18 months gave rise to fears that other surprises might be in the works.

The rapprochement launched a new wave of migration to the US, both of Cubans living in other nations and of those in the island. Many who left Cuba years ago to live in Europe or Latin America, strangely enough, have continued looking to Florida as their ideal destination, viewing it as a type of second national enclave where more solid economic, cultural, and emotional conditions exist to help them establish themselves.

According to the US Coast Guard's 2015 fiscal year reports, between Oct. 1, 2014, and Sept. 30, 2015, 4,462 Cubans tried to reach US shores by sea. In addition, more than 43,000 Cubans arrived during that same period through other US ports of entry, such as airports and border crossings in Mexico. That is a significant increase from the 24,278 who arrived during the previous fiscal year (from October 2013 through September 2014).

Analysts believe that the last few months have shown a significant new exodus, although not as large as the Mariel Boatlift of 1980 or the 1994 raft exodus. The reasons for the new mass departure, they say, are the economic wear and tear of living in Cuba, the fact that Raúl Castro's internal reforms have not yielded the desired benefits, and the possibility of the collapse of Chavismo in Venezuela.

Members of Obama's administration have said that there are no plans to dismantle the CAA and that the complex framework of the embargo, in operation since 1961, can only be taken apart by the US Congress. In an interview published in La Nación in mid November, Fitzgerald Haney, the US Ambassador to Costa Rica, said, “The Cuban Adjustment Act has more than 50 years in force, we don't see why it should change.”

Calls for the elimination of the Cuban Adjustment Act and the embargo have increased among those who are of the opinion that both arrangements are counterproductive in a new era of bilateral relations. At the same time, the island's political lobbying in the US has ratcheted up, with lobbyists seeking to sell Cuba as a business and tourist destination and trying to whip up fears that investors from other nations will take the advantage. Politicians like Texas Gov. Greg Abbott seem ready to
start new business ties with the island in the name of promoting "free enterprise and the freedom that flows from it."

**Exodus in a new scenario**

The conditions for this increased flow of refugees differ from those of the 1990s. Now practically any Cuban can obtain a passport easily, leave Cuba without needing to obtain bothersome exit permits, and settle somewhere off the island for two years – instead of the 11 months previously permitted – without losing his or her resident status (NotiCen, Nov. 29, 2012).

Other internal regulations have contributed to the economic conditions that support the migration. Once-prohibited real estate and auto sales, authorized this decade (NotiCen, Jan. 12, 2012), make it possible for potential immigrants to have enough money to pay for paperwork, airplane tickets to Mexico or Ecuador, and the US$4,000 or so needed to pay for visas, various methods of transport, lodging, and "coyotes" on the way to the US.

Self-employment encouraged by the government’s economic reforms, a greater flow of tourists that require a service industry, and the increase of remittances sent from the US also have helped to increase the resources of those who decide to leave the island by land routes through Central America and Mexico (NotiCen, March 10, 2011). That route avoids the risky sea crossing of the Florida Straits and the threat that the US Coast Guard might intercept the migrants and return them to the island.

**New visa requirements**

From 2008 until November, Cubans could fly to Ecuador without a tourist visa and then travel the 5,500 km to the US. As of Dec. 1, Ecuador reinstated a visa requirement for Cubans after large groups of Cubans en route to the US were held up at the border between Costa Rica and Nicaragua when Nicaragua denied them entrance into the country. The surprising return of the visa requirement for Cubans sparked protests in Havana at the end of November, with shouts of "visa" and "liberty" in front of the Ecuadoran Embassy.

Mariselis, a nurse from the western province of Pinar del Río with no relatives in the US, sold all of her family possessions to raise around US$1,000 in order to travel to Ecuador. She lived in Quito for 10 months until she could raise the necessary money to cross into Colombia, pay someone to take her by boat to the Mexican coast and then on to the US border.

"In earlier times, my only route to emigrate from the island would have been to launch myself on a raft, risking death at sea, or that the Coast Guard would return me to the island," Mariselis said.

A characteristic of the new migratory flow is the use of mobile telephones and the Internet during the journey. Social networking sites and instant messaging are continuous sources of information along the route. Practical instructions are shared about transportation, available lodgings, and auspicious times and areas for crossing borders, Mariselis said.

Alberto, a Cuban who had lived for years in Buenos Aires, arranged his trip over a year and a half of Skype calls with fellow Cubans who had crossed through Central America on foot. His greatest fears were extortion by immigration agents, robbery of his money and possessions, or betrayal by taxi drivers while crossing the border at Nuevo Laredo.
In Miami since August, Alberto is waiting for official permission to work. He immediately found a job as a cook in a restaurant for US$1,400 per month and receives about US$200 in food stamps monthly. He says that he has found more opportunities in three months in the US than in years in Latin America. Alberto said he believes that, in spite of having lived many years in Argentina, his reasons for asking for refuge as a Cuban are as genuine as those leaving the island for the first time.

"I am as much a refugee as those leaving the island now, because I was a part of the generation that left some 20 years ago when the official Cuban discourse was much more intolerant toward sexual diversity and it was impossible to express the smallest political disagreement," said Alberto, whose family and friends have also left the island. "Having lived in another country does not extenuate the political disagreements of my generation nor my many years of vulnerability as an exile."

Alberto said he does not propose to ever return to Cuba. In Miami, he has reencountered friends and relatives that he hadn't seen for 20 years, and he intends to reconstruct the fabric of his life, torn apart in the 1990s when the island suffered the worst economic crisis of its history.

Mariselis, on the other hand, even though she declared herself exiled, and in spite of her disagreements with the Cuban government, plans to return as a tourist when she obtains her green card. "It will be my way of sharing my prosperity with those I left behind, and to show the Cuban government that in the US we have better opportunities," she said.

The controversy has grown over the supposed use of CAA benefits by those who, in another time, were a part of the Communist government hierarchy and committed acts of political harassment against their countrymen. Now elderly, ousted from the pinnacle of power and with children completely integrated into Miami life, the former uncompromising defenders of the regime have ended up living alongside their former victims.

In a half century, everyone involved seems to have accumulated arguments in favor or against maintaining, eliminating or reformulating the CAA. Meanwhile in Cuba, rumors continue circulating that the CAA's "days are numbered." The masses discuss their theories about the influence of Castro's propaganda campaign against the embargo and the CAA, and of the political tensions on those issues in the United States. And they don't discard the possibility of political maneuvers that will launch fresh stampedes of Cubans to the US or generate conflict in neighboring lands.

-- End --