

1-26-2017

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## Recommended Citation

Vázquez, Daniel. "Cuba Deals with Crucial Changes: Recession, Fidel Castro's Death, and the End of the Wet Foot/Dry Foot Policy." (2017). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/10402>

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# Cuba Deals with Crucial Changes: Recession, Fidel Castro's Death, and the End of the Wet Foot/Dry Foot Policy

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Category/Department: Cuba

Published: 2017-01-26

Cuba looks ahead to 2017 with soberness and uncertainty, faced with its first recession since 1993, the recent death of Fidel Castro, Donald Trump's coming to power with a Republican majority in the US Congress, and Barack Obama's ending of the wet foot/dry foot immigration policy in one of his final acts as president.

The outlook has become more complex than usual. Cuba's Gross National Product decreased 0.9% in 2016, exports declined, and the fall of oil prices affected Cuba's bilateral agreements with Venezuela ([NotiCen, Nov. 3, 2016](#)). Despite austerity measures and cuts in fuel consumption in the second half of 2016 ([NotiCen, Aug. 11, 2016](#)) a certain air of optimism has been maintained because of the increase in US tourism and the ongoing negotiations with the Obama administration ([NotiCen, June 23, 2016](#)).

Castro's death on Nov. 25 meant the end of more than 50 years of his leadership in the nationalistic Cuban project and his ongoing confrontation with the US and its policies toward Latin America. In spite of his leaving power due to a health crisis in 2006, Castro preserved his influence until his last days.

Castro was considered to be the most dominant figure in 20th-century Cuban history, a worldwide symbol of the political left, and a shrewd strategist behind the regional resistance against US policy. But he faded away as the island's Latin American allies lost power—their political support drastically reduced along with the resources normally coming from the region—and as the internal economic reforms decreed by his brother, Raúl Castro, failed to accomplish all that was hoped ([NotiCen, Oct. 15, 2015](#)).

At the same time, Obama's ending of the wet foot/dry foot policy barely a week before leaving the White House and after persistent complaints by the Cuban government, is a transcendental change for Cubans who had become accustomed to viewing emigration to the US as an escape valve, both to solve personal situations and to provide money and welfare to those left behind.

## *End of an era*

"It is incredible to me all that has happened on the island in just a few months, and still, what awaits us doesn't seem to be good at all," Rubén, a doctor in one of Havana's principal hospitals, commented at the start of 2017. "We've lived through some of the worst moments in the last 25 years, but [we] always had expectations that something better was coming. This time the illusions have ended," he added, affirming that the government now has nothing to offer and is not even trying to sugarcoat the difficult circumstances.

The decline of Fidel Castro's influence began in 2008, after Raúl Castro took over the presidency and consolidated a new administration team. The aged leader's burial on Dec. 4 was the end of an era. His funeral and final homage were characterized by order and austerity. His ashes traveled in

procession from west to east across the island and were buried in Santiago de Cuba, just meters away from the tomb of Jose Martí, the most respected Cuban leader and scholar of all time.

“There is a lot of curiosity about what will happen,” said Isabel, a university professor. In her opinion, Fidel Castro’s “time of importance ended a while back,” and his sporadic comments and newspaper articles were seen as “vestiges of another time, without real links to present-day reality or with the younger generations” and as “interference with the reform process undertaken by Raúl.”

According to other observers, the former president was exerting pressure to avoid the most radical internal changes.

Raúl Castro has tried to strengthen the economy with measures like reducing the bureaucracy, permitting self-employment and small private businesses, offering agricultural incentives, renegotiating Cuba’s debt with its creditors, reestablishing relations with the US, and overcoming disagreements with the European Union (EU). He has distinguished himself with his more pragmatic style, his reluctance to draw attention to himself or to give long speeches, while at the same time pressuring and beating down the opposition. Unlike his brother, his time in power will be short; he has announced plan to retire in 2018.

The reestablishment of diplomatic relations with the US in 2015 gave Cubans cause for hope for growth through the eventual arrival of businesses and an increase tourism. Obama made decisions that permitted the flow of money, goods, technology, and travelers to the island. Tourism from the US grew at a dizzying rate in 2016, beginning with commercial flights direct from US soil. Businessmen and politicians went to Havana in search of rapprochement and agreements. Cuba gained popularity in the US media.

Dependent on tourism income and remittances, Cuba still needs to import oil to meet half of its daily electricity demand and faces the consequences of the deterioration of its infrastructure ([NotiCen, Feb. 11, 2016](#)) and technological parks, the housing deficit, an aging population, and the time lag in technology that undermine its economic growth. In addition, the years of communist paternalism have left their mark; cases of corruption are now more visible.

The benefits of Raúl Castro’s reforms have been slow in improving the lives of Cubans who do not have direct contact with tourist dollars and are dependent on meager state salaries or retirement pensions. Younger people are no longer resigned to letting the years go by waiting for the prosperity that has been promised since the days of Soviet subsidies. Ironically, they think that Castro lived long enough to see the results of the model that he introduced, and they often opt to emigrate.

However, Obama’s ending of the wet foot/dry foot policy puts Cubans who want to emigrate in a desperate position. Although Raúl Castro has relaxed exit requirements, Cubans still face difficulties when trying to obtain visas to travel to Europe, the US, or even Latin America ([NotiCen, Dec. 10, 2015](#)).

## *Trump’s arrival*

After Donald Trump’s electoral triumph, the Cuban government sent its congratulations—and organized national military training maneuvers, which had not been held since 2013. Cuba has usually stayed on alert under every Republican administration because of the support Republicans show for the Cuban exile community and their calls for political change and for Castro to step down from power.

Trump has met with members of the exile community in Florida and has promised them his support. A few hours after Castro's death, he described him as a "brutal dictator" and later threatened to break the rapprochement initiated by Obama, asserting that "if Cuba is unwilling to make a better deal for the Cuban people, the Cuban American people, and the US as a whole, I will terminate the deal."

The Obama team advised Trump that to reverse the policies toward Cuba would be difficult and unpopular. Trump arrives at the White House surrounded by the animosity of Hispanic immigrant groups and with potential conflicts with Mexico and other nations outside the Latin American region. It remains to be seen whether there will be an escalation of tensions between the two governments, as many Cubans on the street are predicting.

In Havana, people wonder whether Cuba will be a priority for Trump and whether he will dare to implement regulations that will facilitate the migratory flow of Cubans to the US. It is still unclear whether he will pay attention to the commercial interests who lobby for doing business with Cuba, including members of the Republican ranks who have already traveled to Havana.

For now, Trump's image in Cuba is that of a man who is "racist, arrogant, temperamental, and belligerent," as described by a resident of Old Havana who, with a smile, recalled Barack and Michelle Obama's walk down her street in April 2016. But she added, "I feel betrayed by Obama" because, at the last minute, he canceled the policy that would have allowed her and others in her situation to flee and try to live a free and prosperous life in the US.

The members of Cuba's internal opposition show more optimism toward Trump. They hurled reproaches at Obama for keeping opposition groups aside as he conducted secret negotiations with Raúl Castro to reestablish bilateral relations, and for initiating measures that economically benefited the Cuban administration without demanding political transformations and a profound democratization in return.

Trump occupies the White House at the end of the Castros' biological time. For more than 50 years, the Cuban government was able to keep itself situated in global geopolitics, with powerful allies such as China, and to do business with Europe. However, administration officials lack the late leader's political touch and are faced with a distressed economy and with young Cubans who are less politically indoctrinated and want capitalist goods.

### *Growing exodus*

As much due to dissatisfaction with the island's internal situation as with the predictions that the Castro-Obama rapprochement would lead to the end of benefits for Cuban refugees in the US, 2015 and 2016 recorded increased migration ([NotiCen, Dec. 10, 2015](#), and [Dec. 17, 2015](#)). According to the US Coast Guard, 7,358 Cubans tried to enter the US illegally in the 2015-2016 fiscal year and were intercepted, while 50,082 managed to enter (38,310 illegally and 11,772 with visas) in that same period.

Trump's pronouncements against immigrants unleashed a second Cuban migratory stampede with the objective of arriving in the US before January 20th, by any route and any means of transport. However, hundreds of Cubans are now stranded in Central America and Mexico. They had been on the road to "golden" America after having spent their savings and giving up their few assets. For many in South Florida and Cuba, 2017 begins with uneasiness, consternation, and heated tempers.

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