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Policy Changes in U.S. and Cuba Alter Immigration and Repatriation Trends

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The Cuban migratory scene changed abruptly after January's termination of the "wet foot, dry foot" policy, which put an end to immigration privileges for Cubans arriving in the US and left many migrants stranded on their journey through Mexico and Central America. Meanwhile, thousands of Cubans who had been living abroad are choosing to return to the island, although without renouncing their residency rights and jobs in other countries.

Barack Obama's decision to terminate the "wet foot, dry foot" policy on Jan. 12, a week before he left the presidency ([NotiCen, Jan. 26, 2017](#)), surprised Cubans who had already begun their journeys to the US across forests, seas, and national borders. The possible end of the policy had been looming since December 2014, when a radical change in US-Cuban bilateral relations was announced ([NotiCen, Jan. 29, 2015](#)). Because of that possibility, there was an immediate increase in the number of Cubans attempting to reach the US.

The willingness to repeal the "wet foot, dry foot" policy, which had been in force since 1995, was Obama's last gesture and was in sync with demands made by Raúl Castro, who for decades has claimed that the mass departures from Cuba to the US meant the loss of the country's professionals and was a source of internal political destabilization. In addition, Cuban and other Latin American governments have argued that this type of exodus creates risks for the migrants, encourages their mistreatment as well as illegal human trafficking, and causes international crises.

Changes to the migratory scene

Obama's decision was interpreted a twin-edged sword: Some considered it to be a concession to Castro, while others argued that Cuba would now have to take charge of its people's discontent. Previously, emigration was sometimes viewed as an escape valve—the desperate launching their rafts in hopes of a better economic, social, and cultural situation in Florida. During the fiscal year that ended on Sept. 30, 2016, 50,082 Cubans entered the US, compared with 43,159 during the previous fiscal year.

Since the policy change in January, hundreds of Cubans that were stranded in Mexico and Panama have been deported to Cuba. At the beginning of March, a number of Cubans were still in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, hoping that the Trump administration would grant an exception and let them enter the US. Some of them say they intend to remain there and support themselves with the money sent to them from relatives in the US, living in immigrant housing, and receiving food from religious organizations.

The administration of President Donald Trump has promised to revise the policies that Obama established for Cuba, but has not given any signal that it would return to anything similar to the "wet foot, dry foot" policy. For the moment, the Cuban Adjustment Act (CAA) is still in effect ([NotiCen, Dec. 10, 2015](#)), allowing Cubans to apply for residency after they've been in the US for one year, but only if they entered the country legally.

In spite of the changes to immigration, Cubans continue their attempts to enter the US. A group of 30 Cubans was intercepted in the Florida Keys by a US Customs and Border Protection crew on March 12. The policy changes did not dissuade the would-be migrants from setting off for the US, nor did the stress that living without documents and without the possibility to regularize their status in the US would bring.

Repatriation

Since the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in January 1959, more than a million Cubans have left their homeland by all kinds of legal or illegal means, even though during most of that time, exile or emigration meant the loss of their possessions and their permanent resident status. However, since the migratory reforms Cuba launched in 2013 ([NotiCen, Nov. 29, 2012](#), and [Feb. 21, 2013](#)), Cubans are no longer subject to the protracted and costly bureaucratic procedures that had been required to obtain a special permit for trips abroad, which were limited to 11 months. The procedures often included an extensive investigation, including a review of prison records and a survey of opinions from the would-be traveler's workplace. Under current rules, Cubans only need a valid passport and a visa to travel to other countries; they can stay abroad for 24 months without losing their resident status, and can extend that time limit with proper justifications.

According to January government reports, 671,000 Cubans have legally traveled to foreign countries over the last four years. Of that total, 45% have returned home while only 9.6% have declared themselves emigrants. The majority of those who traveled during that time returned within the 24-month authorized limit.

Together with these new migratory regulations, Cuban authorities have eased the repatriation process, an option previously limited to persons over 60 years of age or those who needed to return for humanitarian reasons. Now the option is offered to a wide spectrum of emigrants, making return possible to anyone except those the government consider to be a threat to national security.

Repatriation has become the way for Cubans abroad to acquire real estate and open businesses that sometimes serve as means of livelihood for family members on the island. The purchase of real estate sometimes becomes part of a long-term plan for an eventual return to Cuba as a retiree.

Likewise, repatriation represents the possibility of more reasonable rates for obtaining and extending Cuban passports, which are valid for six years. For Cubans who remain classified as emigrants, the passports costs almost US\$400 plus nearly US\$200 per renewal, which is required every two years. With exceptions, Cuban émigrés who visit the island must do so with their Cuban passport, even if they have already obtained citizenship in other countries.

Benefits

For a country with an aging population, a low birth rate, an obsolete infrastructure, and a fragile economy, the repatriation of thousands of Cubans implies the entrance of goods, money, and capitalist know-how, along with the reestablishment of human ties that for decades were fragmented by migratory obstacles and animosity towards emigrants, who were stigmatized by the Cuban government as "stateless."

According to official Cuban sources, 13,000 Cubans had voluntarily repatriated themselves as of the end of October 2016. More than 418,000 Cubans visited the island in 2016, according to the Ministry of Foreign Relations.

“Repatriation has been a way to make up for the policies that demonized emigrants, damaged families, destroyed lives, and impoverished the country,” said Joanna, a Cuban living in New Jersey who now spends vacations in a Havana apartment that she bought with a US\$35,000 loan from a US bank. “What the government has done is to correct an erroneous policy.”

In the opinion of many Cubans on and off the island, the recent repatriation of thousands of fellow countrymen has been one of Raúl Castro’s most pragmatic steps to better relations with the emigrant community, and at the same time, it has allowed the country’s economic situation to improve.

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