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Trump’s Stance Toward Cuba Causes Uncertainty, Resignation

by Daniel Vázquez
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US President Donald Trump’s threatening rhetoric towards the Cuban government has created uncertainty and resignation among Cuba’s population—the apparent result of a popular intuition that the recent period of relationship-building activities was too good to last for long.

For more than half a century, the relationship between Havana and Washington has caused upheaval at the grassroots level, a theme for television programs and protest marches; consequently, the last three years of negotiations were like a breath of fresh air and created new opportunities for many Cubans, even though the negotiations were seen as part of a thorny process, fragile, and with an uncertain course.

Always hanging on the news from Washington, Cubans were aware of the Barack Obama administration’s limited capacity to maneuver closer to Havana due to the existing embargo, which only the US Congress can end. Likewise, it became clear that the new relationship would only develop as far as Raúl Castro allowed—and he had warned that he would not yield political power to the US nor to the internal opposition (NotiCen, Jan. 26, 2017, and April 6, 2017).

Last November, Trump’s electoral victory sparked concern about a return to a hostile state of affairs such as existed during the George W. Bush era, when remittances sent to Cuba were limited and Cuban-Americans could only visit relatives on the island for a period of 14 days every three years, with their spending capped at US$50.00 a day.

Could be worse

“Trump’s announcements about Cuba could have been worse,” said Artemio, a taxi driver who covers the route from downtown Havana to José Martí International Airport. There has not been a decrease in travelers from the US, he said, adding that he felt some concern from Cubans who are permanent residents of the US but have not been able to gain US citizenship.

Many Cubans, like Artemio, were heartened by the fact that despite Trump’s verbal hostility, the US Embassy remains open, commercial flights between the two countries are still in operation, and remittances are still flowing in.

Many Cuban Americans are still spending their summer in Cuba or sending their children to visit relatives. Likewise, many Cubans are still spending extended time periods in the US, coming and going under five-year, multiple-entry visas that are one of the advantages gained from the recent period of rapprochement.

Raúl Castro has limited himself to criticizing the White House for the unilateral decision to halt the advance of relations, especially after Trump’s June 15th announcement at Miami’s Artise Theater, when he detailed measures designed to hamper operations that benefit the Cuban military sector and to exercise greater control over US travelers to Cuba (NotiCen, June 15, 2017).
That announcement was broadcast live on Cuban state television, an unusual decision apparently aimed at showing Trump’s position, but above all, at pointing out exactly who accompanied Trump in Miami: Cuban-American politicians such as Sen. Marco Rubio and members of the Cuban opposition who rejected Obama’s initiatives.

“Cuba and the US can cooperate and coexist respecting their differences,” Castro told the National Assembly on July 14. He refrained from escalating his criticism of the US president, but acknowledged the advances in the bilateral relationship that took place during Obama’s time in office.

Havana immediately noted the interruption in the rapprochement process and reassigned the two diplomats who were the most visible faces of the Cuban Foreign Ministry during the negotiations with the US. Josefina Vidal was appointed Canadian ambassador and Gustavo Machín was named ambassador to Spain.

**Benefits in the midst of confrontation**

The flow of US visitors to Cuba has skyrocketed since 2015. As many as 280,000 Americans visited Cuba in 2016, adding to the record 4 million foreign visitors for the year, according to Cuban government data. During the first half of 2017, tourism left US$1.5 billion in Cuba, and a total of 4.7 million tourists are expected to visit this year. The number of Americans visiting the country has continued to increase in 2017 according to sources from Cuba’s Ministry of Tourism.

Nexos, the American Airlines magazine, dedicated seven pages of its June/July issue to the people, traditions, natural environment, and tobacco products of western Cuba. The article’s photos are an enticement to explore the island. US airlines have cut ticket prices to Cuba by half and are offering non-stops flights and service from various cities.

In July, Royal Caribbean Cruises Ltd., a US company, announced that it would offer a second cruise service to the island starting in March 2019; for now, its Empress of the Seas continues to have the island on its itinerary. Norwegian Cruise Lines has also announced an increase in the number of cruise ships stopping in Cuba.

Airbnb has registered more than 560,000 guests in Cuba and paid over US$40 million to Cuban hosts since it entered that market in April 2015. The company offers accommodations in 70 Cuban cities. The cost of a room for one night in Havana fluctuates around the US$40 range; for the owner, that means an income superior to the monthly salary of a state employee.

Remittances continue to rise. In 2016, US$3.4 billion was sent to Cuba from the US, according to a report from the Havana Consulting Group. They had totaled US$2.3 billion in 2011 and reached US$3.3 billion in 2015. Remittances have surpassed Cuba’s revenues from exports of nickel, sugar, tobacco, medicine, and even tourism, according to the same source.

In downtown Havana, tourists are everywhere; meanwhile, it’s not unusual to see police checking the personal documentation of the local population. The government still maintains billboards of a jovial Fidel Castro on the main avenues. The growth in small restaurants, bars, and cafes is easily observed, as is the proliferation of the new consumers who don’t have to rely on a state salary. But it is also easy to perceive the precariousness and dejection of those who have not found their place in the new economy.
A decisive year

The negotiations between Castro and Obama left a visible imprint on Cuban society. The increase in the flow of goods, money, and travelers from the US have altered the perceptions of those on the island who, after half a century of political indoctrination and communist militancy, believed that only problems would arrive from the neighbor to the north.

The change in mindset is observed in the immigration and customs officials who cordially welcome Cuban Americans arriving from the US. It’s also noticeable at the neighborhood level, where many Cubans are trying to enter the private sector, which already has more than 500,000 self-employed workers. Some Cubans who hold Spanish passports have begun traveling to the US to work for short stints.

For a country with a precarious economy, every year is crucial. The current year will be framed by the November 2016 death of Fidel Castro, and by Raúl Castro’s announced retirement in February 2018. Other influences are the instability of Nicolás Maduro’s government in Venezuela and the declining flow of Venezuelan oil, as well as the January termination of the wet foot-dry foot policy that had allowed Cubans arriving on US soil to settle in the country with certain rights and protections (NotiCen, Jan. 26, 2017).

“Trump’s threats will not solve anything. In essence, we have seen this movie many times,” said Ernesto, a professor and historian, in reference to the many ups and downs in the relationship between Havana and Washington. For now, however, the concern is what the change in tone in the relationship will mean for Cubans who can no longer escape to the US, and whether the US consulate will decide to reduce the number of tourist visas it grants.

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