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Speech By Fidel Castro Causes Exodus Fear

by LADB Staff

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On June 26, the Cuban National Assembly approved a constitutional amendment making socialism "irrevocable" in Cuba. While the change was generally seen in the US as a response to a dissident-sponsored petition drive to legislate, among other things, a free-market economy, President Fidel Castro said the amendment responded to aggressive speeches made earlier by President George W. Bush. Castro warned that Cuba might cancel the only two formal agreements it has with the US, leading to rumors of a mass exodus of Cubans to Florida.

The dissident Varela Project named after a nineteenth century Cuban patriot collected some 11,000 signatures on a petition asking the National Assembly to hold a referendum on measures protecting human rights, free speech, free association, and a free press; declaring an amnesty for political prisoners; allowing citizens to own private companies; changing the electoral laws; and holding free National Assembly elections. The leader of the project is Oswaldo Paya, who heads the dissident Movimiento Cristiano de Liberacion (MCL). The Varela petition received widespread international support.

Forgotten in the enthusiasm for it was the petition's coupling the legislative initiatives with a demand that the US end its embargo. Some legal scholars in the US and Cuba said the petition would be rejected by the Assembly on technical grounds because some of the measures require constitutional amendments, which cannot be made by petition. Amendments to the Constitution, which was adopted by a popular vote in 1976, must be approved both by the Assembly and by the voters through a referendum.

Socialism is now "irrevocable"

In late May, Castro launched a series of rallies and a petition drive through Cuba's mass organizations to change the Constitution making socialism "irrevocable." The petition also declared that Cuba's "economic, political, and diplomatic relations with any other state will never be negotiated under aggression, threat, or pressure from a foreign power." The official government newspaper Granma reported that nearly 9 million signatures had been secured by June 18 a week after the Varela Project petition was delivered to the Assembly. The Assembly unanimously passed the "irrevocable" amendment June 26.

The amendment met nearly universal condemnation in the US, and the word "irrevocable" was said to render the Constitution unamendable. But the amendment was essentially a reaffirmation of what the Constitution already said. It ratifies the several references to socialism in the Constitution, in particular, the declaration that "Cuba is a socialist state of independent and sovereign workers" (Article 1). An Associated Press story called the "irrevocable" petition an attempt to block the Varela Project. However, no petition to amend the Constitution can block another

simply by gathering enough signatures. The changes approved June 26 did not affect Article 137 of Constitution, which provides for amendments through Assembly and popular votes.

By focusing on the competing petitions as a kind of ideological duel, much of the US media and official Washington skirted the serious issues Cuban leaders insist are driving the current controversies into a full-fledged crisis. Castro cited endemic problems with the 1994 and 1995 migration accords and the 1977 agreement that set up the interests sections in Havana and Washington, along with Bush's apparent adoption of the radical exile community's agenda.

Bush, not Varela Project, is the issue

In his May 20 White House speech, Bush promised to modernize US propaganda outlets Radio Marti and TV Marti. He also proposed scholarships to bring children of dissidents and political prisoners to the US to study. In a key passage, Bush offered to ease the travel ban and trade embargo provided Cuba "begins to adopt" certain market and political reforms (see NotiCen, 2002-05-23). Castro answered Bush in a speech June 26 before the National Assembly as it considered the constitutional amendment. He accused Bush of making commitments to the exile extremists before the 2000 presidential election that included supporting an assassination attempt against him.

Castro said that after Bush's first year in office, the US "declared a world coup d'etat." Thus, Castro made it clear that the protection of socialism through a constitutional amendment was a response not to the Varela Project but to Bush's speech dictating the terms of Cuba's surrender. Castro said the importance of the "irrevocable" wording was that it would make it "extremely difficult" for the Assembly to overturn socialism sometime in the future. Castro concluded that the "Initiative for a New Cuba" Bush outlined might be imposed on Cuba by military or other intervention. That Cuba, he said, would be the Cuba of 50 years ago, "of [Fulgencio] Batista, of latifundio, of displaced campesinos, of unemployment, misery and abandonment, of illiteracy and ill health, of racism and racial discrimination, and corruption, assassinations, and torture."

Castro warns he might pull out of agreements

Castro's analysis of what the revamped Bush policy might look like received scant coverage in the US media. But his warnings that Cuba might close the US Interests Section in Havana and pull out of the migratory accords set off a brief flurry of predictions from public figures that he was about to unleash a new mass exodus from Cuba. Cuba has repeatedly complained to the US about Interests Section officers engaging in "conspiratorial activities." The complaints have been particularly strong against Ambassador Vicki Huddleston, principal officer of the Interests Section in Havana, because of her open support of dissidents, her widely publicized distribution of radios for promoting Radio Marti, and her frequent political attacks against Castro and the government.

US sees threat from Cuba US media and exile leaders took the warning as a major threat. Castro's "outburst," analysts said, was driven by a number of factors, including a worsening economy and more visible activity among the political opposition. Public discussion quickly turned to the question of succession, as many analysts said the "irrevocable" amendment was a sign of desperation and

the imminent end of Castroism. The Miami Herald said experts agreed the amendment "set the stage for a potential crisis." The newspaper cited a former CIA analyst who said the speech showed "Castro at his paranoid worst."

Rumors began circulating in Miami and Cuba that Castro would unleash a Fourth of July exodus on Florida and that boats would come from Florida to pick them up. Florida Gov. Jeb Bush said pulling out of the migratory accords or any mass exodus would be an "act of aggression," to which the US would respond strongly. A harsh Miami Herald editorial warned Castro that "[President] Bush isn't Jimmy Carter or Bill Clinton," and hinted that Bush might block remittances to Cuba to "wreak economic disaster," and impose a naval blockade around South Florida to intercept Cuban rafters attempting to reach land. Such a plan already existed, said the editorial.

Jose Basulto, leader of the Miami-based Hermanos al Rescate, said a mass migration from Cuba "would also serve Castro to flood the United States with spies, saboteurs, and agitators." Basulto's organization was set up to patrol the Florida Straits to assist Cubans leaving the island in flimsy rafts. But Basulto also said, "Brothers to the Rescue pleads with you not to play into Castro's hands because if you do, we will not be there for you." The exodus scare evaporated within days as the Cuban government announced it would tolerate no illegal emigration. It warned it would arrest smugglers coming to Cuba to take on passengers.

The Associated Press reported heavier-than-usual patrols around Havana's waterfront. On July 3, a Cuban patrol boat stopped a Miami-registered boat off the coast of Villa Clara province. The boat was provisioned for carrying passengers. Authorities arrested two Cuban-born US residents who will be charged with trafficking in people, which carries stiff penalties in Cuba. Rumors of softened Cuba policy in the making Ironically, the agitated reaction in the US to Castro's warning appears to have resulted from Bush overstating his "New Cuba" concept. But while it evoked an unusually serious response in Cuba, Bush's May 20 speech was taken almost everywhere in the US as a limp restatement of old themes.

Rafael Lorente said in a South Florida Sun Sentinel analysis that there was a "subtle shift" underway in the administration. Though rattling the sword, Bush was actually abandoning the older policy of waiting for Castro to die, after which socialism would collapse. In a background briefing, a State Department official said, "There's a real feeling that the [Cuba] policy hasn't worked, and they're looking for new ways to make it work. They're being flexible." Lorente says the shift is not aimed at forcing changes in Cuba but of appeasing the farm-bloc legislators who want more flexibility in trade policy, while retaining anti-Castro exile support in Florida.

The May issue of Cuba Trader reports that hard-line embargo supporters are dismayed that Bush's speech seemed to soften US policy. Instead of tough enforcement of key elements in the Helms-Burton Act, they say, Bush offered Castro an end to the embargo if he takes small steps toward the free market and electoral democracy. Particularly curious was Bush's demand for Assembly elections. He did not ask for presidential elections in Cuba, and the Assembly already is an elected body. This demand radically departs from present policy as embodied in the Helms-Burton Act, which forbids the president from negotiating with Cuba until a transition government that excludes Fidel and Raul Castro is in place. By offering to relax sanctions on Cuba in exchange for market

reforms and new Assembly elections in 2003, Bush acknowledged the existence of an elected parliament in Cuba, signaled a realization that farm-state pressure for trade with Cuba could not be ignored, and indicated that he might be ready to deal with a living Castro.

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