

Cuba and the contradictions of Barack Obama

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On April 13, 2009, just before the V Summit of the Americas in Trinidad and Tobago, Barack Obama eased economic sanctions against Cuba by lifting restrictions affecting Cubans living in the United States. Now they can travel to their country of origin whenever they want (before restricted to 14 days every 3 years), and send unlimited remittances to family members (before restricted to \$100 a month).¹



Although Havana did not participate in the Summit, due to its expulsion from the Organization of American States (OAS) in 1962, Cuba was a dominant theme. During her inaugural address, Argentine President Cristina Kirchner exhorted Washington to eliminate the state of siege imposed on the Cuban people since August 1960. The other 32 Latin American and Caribbean heads of state also called on the White House to end the anachronistic and cruel policy that harms all sectors of the Cuban population.²

President Obama declared his will to seek “a new beginning with Cuba.”³ “I believe we can move US-Cuban relations in a new direction,” he emphasized. “I am here to launch a new chapter of engagement that will be sustained throughout my Administration,” he concluded. For her part, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton acknowledged that US Cuba policy “has failed.”⁴

Nevertheless, as soon as the Summit of the Americas wrapped up, the White House changed its tone. On April 19, 2009, David Axelrod, political consultant to the president, signaled that this administration would not immediately lift economic sanctions. We are still “a long way” from that, he said on CBS.⁵ Similarly, Clinton made a not so friendly or diplomatic statement regarding the government of Havana calling it a “regime that is ending,” which raises serious doubts about her will to resolve differences between the two nations.⁶

Later, President Obama demanded that Cuba make domestic changes as a pre-condition to bilateral dialogue, specifically calling for a reduction in the taxes on US currency exchange, while knowing with scientific certainty that the government of Raúl Castro would not accept any interference in the domestic affairs of the country. In effect, this is like Havana demanding that Washington establish a universal healthcare system in the United States before engaging in any negotiations.⁷

For his part, Raúl Castro reiterated his disposition to dialogue with Washington about anything “human rights, political prisoners and press freedoms,” based on equality reciprocity, and non-intervention.⁸ He also made clear that the ball is in Obama’s court: “Cuba has not imposed any sanctions against the United States nor against its citizens. It is not Cuba that blocks US businesses from commercial interactions with our businesses; it is not Cuba that tracks financial transactions made by US banks; it is not Cuba that has a military base in US territory against the will of its people. It is not Cuba that must make gestures. There is no political or moral pretext that justifies the continuation of that policy.”⁹

The pressure to ease sanctions against Cuba is multiplying in the US. The prestigious Lexington Institute published a 50 page report titled Options for engagement: A resource guide for reforming U.S. policy toward Cuba. The political studies institute recommended that the Obama administration withdraw the conditions imposed on Cuba as a prerequisite for any dialogue, pointing out that Havana does not respond to intimidation and will not accept any breach of its sovereignty.¹⁰

Democratic Representative Kathy Castor of Tampa Florida also insisted that the government increase the number of airports authorized for flights to Cuba in order to accommodate the growing demand and to address serious logistic problems. Currently only Miami, New York and Los Angeles have permission to provide flights to Cuba.¹¹

Finally, the powerful US Chamber of Commerce has launched a campaign in favor of lifting trade restrictions with support from members of congress. –Conventional wisdom holds that if something we have tried for years has not worked, we should think about trying something else. We have done something for 50 years that has not shown results. Today is the time to seek other means— opined Thomas J. Donohue, president of the organization that represents nearly 3 million US businesses—We are losing important business opportunities in a market that is only 90 miles off our coast. These opportunities are being exploited by other countries like China, but it is still not too late for us to recover them— he added.¹²

But instead of taking a step in this direction, Obama adopted the opposite position. In fact, in May 2009, the Treasury Department fined the petroleum company Varel Holdings \$110,000 for having exported technology to Cuba by way of an affiliate based outside the US, even though the transactions took place between June 2005 and June 2006, that is to say, under the Bush administration. Once again the extraterritorial character of the economic sanctions is plain to see. Thus, far from listening to the demands for a more rational policy, Obama prefers to follow in the footsteps of his predecessor.¹³

Another decision made by the Department of State illustrates the US lack of credibility regarding its will to normalize relations with the island nation. On April 30, 2009, Washington once again included Cuba –without valid reason– on the list of countries that sponsor terrorism, provoking a strong reaction from Havana, which accused the United States of being a “international criminal” in reference to the aggressions committed against Afghanistan and Iraq. In addition, Washington “historically has a long trajectory of acts of state terrorism not only against Cuba,” reminded Bruno Rodríguez Parrilla, Cuba’s Foreign Minister. “Cuban territory has never been used to finance or conduct acts of terrorism against the US. The Department of State that emits those reports cannot say the same,” he added referring to the more than 5,780 terrorist attacks committed against Cuba that have

cost the lives of 3,478 individuals since 1959.¹⁴

Ricardo Alarcón, president of the Cuban National Assembly, also criticized the US double standard in the war against terrorism referring to Luis Posada Carriles, international criminal responsible for more than 100 deaths who is living in Miami and who Washington refuses to prosecute or extradite:

“Why doesn’t Washington finally respond to Venezuela’s formal extradition request for Luis Posada Carriles? It was submitted more than four years ago and there has been no reply.

International conventions against terrorism are very clear and leave the US with no option. Posada must be extradited in order to conclude his trial for the in-flight destruction of a civilian plane or the US is obligated to prosecute him for the same crime “without any exception whatsoever.” Immediately extradite or prosecute Posada or the US will remain in violation of Article 7 of the Montreal Convention for the Protection of Civil Aviation and all other legal instruments against international terrorism and Resolution 1373 of the UN Security Council of September 2001”.¹⁵

President Obama is not fulfilling the promises he made to international opinion. For example, after presenting himself as firmly against the military trials instated by the Bush administration in Guantánamo –Cuban territory illegally occupied by the US- which he has called a “monumental failure,” the White House resident decided to simply continue with the military commissions, thus annulling de facto the closing of Guantánamo prison and raising the ire of international institutions.¹⁶ He also decided to block the publication of photos depicting the acts of torture committed by the CIA, contradicting himself once again, as he affirmed on many occasions that he would pursue transparency regarding the abuses committed under the mandate of Georges W. Bush.¹⁷

The entire world has its eyes fixed on Barack Obama, who has a historic opportunity to end a protracted aggression of fifty years against the Cuban people. There is no justification for the current status quo.

Article in french, [Cuba et les contradictions de Barack Obama](#), May 18, 2009.

Translated by Dawn Gables

Notes

1 Salim Lamrani, «El primer gesto de Barack Obama hacia Cuba», *Rebelión*, April 19, 2009. <http://www.rebelion.org/noticia.php?id=84026>

2 *Agence France-Presse*, «Presidenta argentina pide a Obama que levante embargo contra Cuba», April 17, 2009; *Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias*, «Cristina Fernández abogó por Cuba en discurso inaugural de Cumbre de las Américas», April 17, 2009; *Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias*, «Daniel Ortega rechazó política intervencionista de Estados Unidos», April 17, 2009.

3 *The Associated Press*, «Obama Seeks ‘New Beginning’ With Cuba», April 17, 2009.

4 Macarena Vidal, «Obama ofrece ‘un nuevo comienzo’ en las relaciones con Cuba», *EFE*, April 17, 2009.

5 *EFE*, «Asesor de Obama: EEUU está lejos de levantar el embargo», April 19, 2009.

6 *Agence France-Presse*, «Clinton afirma que régimen de Castro en Cuba 'está finalizando'», April 22, 2009.

7 Frances Robles, «Obama a Raúl Castro: 'Ahora es su turno'», *The Miami Herald*, April 19, 2009.

8 *The Associated Press*, «Castro Says Cuba Willing to Talk on Equal Terms», April 16, 2009.

9 *Agence France-Presse*, «Raúl Castro responde a Obama: No es Cuba la que tiene que hacer gestos», April 29, 2009.

10 Juan Carlos Chávez, «Informe sugiere 'más realismo' en nexos con Cuba», *El Nuevo Herald*, April 21, 2009.

11 *EFE*, «Piden que se pueda viajar a la isla desde más aeropuertos», April 28, 2009.

12 Néstor Ikeda, «Dueños de empresas y congresistas piden comercio con Cuba», *The Associated Press*, May 6, 2009.

13 Wilfredo Cancio Isla, «Multa a petrolera por exportar tecnología a Cuba», *El Nuevo Herald*, May 7, 2009.

14 *El Nuevo Herald*, «EEUU deja a Cuba en la lista de países terroristas», May 1, 2009.

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