

“Cuban Twitter” Affair Exposes USAID as Instrument of Regime-Change

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The Obama administration has scrambled to deflect criticism and ridicule sparked by an Associated Press story exposing a failed attempt by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) to set up a Twitter-like social media network as an instrument for regime change in Cuba.

The operation, dubbed ZunZuneo—a Cuban term used to describe the call of a hummingbird—consisted of mass text messaging to Cuban subscribers, who numbered 40,000 before the venture was shut down for lack of funding in 2012.

The AP report, published on Thursday, makes it clear that USAID was running a covert operation aimed at promoting political upheavals in the island nation. Conscious that the so-called economic reforms being instituted by the Castro government to encourage foreign investment and private enterprise will deepen social inequality and promote social unrest, Washington sought to set up a communications platform to allow it to manipulate these developments to promote its own strategic aims.

Working through a labyrinth of dummy companies and foreign computer servers located in Spain, Costa Rica, Ireland and the UK, and an offshore bank account in the Cayman Islands, the overriding aim of the operation was to conceal the US government’s responsibility for ZunZuneo’s creation and operation, not merely from the Cuban government, but from the tens of thousands of Cubans who were signed up as subscribers. The phone numbers themselves were turned over to the US government by an American “asset” inside the Cuban government.

The text messages sent via ZunZuneo were for the most part restricted to weather reports, sports scores and items on music and celebrity trivia. One of the thousands of pages of documents obtained by AP, however, said that the plan was to “gradually increase the risk” through the introduction of antigovernment political content and, ultimately, to be able to mobilize “flash mobs” during “critical/opportunistic situations.” It described its ultimate aim, regime change, euphemistically, as a plan to “renegotiate the balance of power between the state and society.”

Also concealed from ZunZuneo’s Cuban users was that USAID and its contractors were using the operation to gather personal information aimed at determining who among them could prove useful to US operations on the island. The US agency, according to the AP report, was classifying Cubans according to five categories, ranging from the “democratic movement,” which it described as “still (largely) irrelevant,” to the “Talibanes,” the term used to describe firm supporters of the Cuban regime.

A statement issued by Cuba's Ministry of Foreign Relations charged that the episode "demonstrates once again that the government of the United States has not renounced its subversive plans against Cuba, which have the clear purpose of creating situations of destabilization in the country to provoke changes in our political order and to which it continues dedicating multi-million dollar budgets each year." It demanded that Washington "cease its illegal and covert actions against Cuba, which are rejected by both the Cuban people and international public opinion."

The State Department, USAID and the White House all attempted Thursday to deny that the ZunZuneo project had been a "covert" operation, rather merely a "discreet" one.

"There was nothing classified or covert about this program," State Department spokesperson Marie Harf told reporters. "Discreet does not equal covert. Having worked for almost six years at the CIA, and now here, I know the difference."

White House spokesman Jay Carney said at a press conference: "In implementing programs in non-permissive environments, of course the government has taken steps to be discreet. That's how you protect the practitioners and the public. This is not unique to Cuba." He added, "It was not a covert program. It was debated in Congress."

And Matt Herrick, USAID's media director stated, "It is...no secret that in hostile environments, governments take steps to protect the partners we are working with on the ground."

All of these rationalizations fly in the face of the fact that the secrecy surrounding the program was designed not to keep just the Cuban government—whose state-owned telephone company was being paid hundreds of thousands of dollars for text-messaging fees—in the dark, but to conceal the origins and aims of ZunZuneo from the Cuban workers and youth who were using it. The fear was that any knowledge of its control Washington would utterly discredit the project, given the long and shameful record of US intervention on the island.

As for the claim that it was "debated in Congress," this came as a surprise to several Congressmen of both parties, including chairs of committees overseeing USAID appropriations, who said they knew nothing about it.

Senator Patrick Leahy (Democrat, Vermont), who chairs the Senate Appropriations subcommittee that oversees the USAID budget, was particularly critical. "If you're going to do a covert operation like this for a regime change, assuming it ever makes any sense, it's not something that should be done through USAID," he said.

Leahy also expressed consternation over the fact that the program was launched in the immediate aftermath of the Cuban government's arrest of Alan Gross, a USAID contractor who was caught smuggling spy-grade satellite communications and computer gear into Cuba. Gross worked for Development Alternatives, Inc., which in 2008 was awarded a \$40 million contract to run a "Cuba Democracy and Contingency Planning Program."

Leahy and others in Washington clearly fear that the episode will further discredit USAID, endangering its usefulness as an instrument of US foreign policy.

USAID describes itself as "the lead US Government agency that works to end extreme global

poverty and enable resilient, democratic societies to realize their potential.”

The agency, however, has a long and bloody record, particularly in Latin America, in promoting regime change and carrying out other crimes against the region’s population. In the 1960s and 1970s, its Office of Public Safety (which has since been shut down) trained Latin American police forces in counterinsurgency tactics including torture and assassination. Among its more infamous officials was Dan Mitrione, who working under the cover of an agricultural advisor, conducted sessions in Brazil and Uruguay in which he had homeless men dragged off the streets, torturing them to death before assembled police officers.

President Evo Morales expelled USAID from Bolivia last year, charging that the agency was funding nongovernmental organizations, opposition groups and some peasant unions for the purpose of destabilizing the government. Ecuador followed suit, with President Rafael Correa similarly charging that the agency was funneling money to his political opponents and intervening in the country’s internal politics.

In Venezuela, USAID, its Office of Transition Initiatives and the National Endowment for Democracy have poured millions into efforts to destabilize the governments of Hugo Chavez and Nicolas Maduro. Those most prominent in the organization of the violent protests that have taken place in the country over the last two months have been major recipients of this funding.

In Syria, USAID has been the lead agency in funneling money to the so-called rebels and in financing the operations of the so-called Local Coordinating Committees, which have been touted by pseudo-left groups like the International Socialist Organization as some sort of “revolutionary” alternative.

In Ukraine, USAID has funneled hundreds of millions of dollars through its own operations and those of the NED into right-wing parties and organizations, helping prepare the recent fascist-led, pro-NATO coup.

As Washington postures as the defender of small nations and champion of national sovereignty in its confrontation with Russia over Ukraine, the operations of USAID and its contractors and conduits from Ukraine itself to Cuba expose the real role of US imperialism in carrying out illegal and violent interventions all over the globe to impose regimes subordinate to American interests.

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