

Democracy and the Restoration of Cuba-US Diplomatic Relations

Embassies in Havana and Washington on July 20

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The re-establishment of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the US and the opening of embassies in Havana and Washington, DC is a victory for Cuba. Negotiations between the two countries had been taking place secretly for 18 months before being made public on December 17, 2014. On July 1, 2015, the agreement was sealed through the announcement of a formal opening date of July 20 for the embassies. It is important to note that over the course of this two-year process, Cuba has not given up its principles. Two primary examples of Cuba sticking to its precepts pertain to the contentious issues of democracy/human rights and of Venezuela.

In the first instance, that of democracy/human rights, the two neighbours agreed it should be part of the discussion. Cuba has long declared that it is willing to put it on the table but only insofar as the issue of democracy and human rights in the US is also open for debate, and on the condition that Cuba's right to discuss this with the US as a sovereign independent country be recognized, on the basis of mutual respect and equality. Thus, this portion of the agreement was actually a demand by Cuba with a view to ending the long impasse of more than five decades since the US cut off diplomatic relations with Cuba. In fact, one session of talks on this subject of democracy/human rights between the two parties took place between December 17 and July 1. Cuba did not give up any of its principles and is continuing on its own path to bring about changes according to its own needs and evaluations.

Cuba's second potential challenge in upholding its principles has proven to be one of the most contentious issues in Latin America and the Caribbean: the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela and the legitimacy of President Nicolás Maduro. Coincidence or not, during the heat of the negotiations from December 2014 to July 1, 2015 between Cuba and the US, the latter took open and provocative steps that would have led to destabilizing Venezuela and the eventual overthrow of the Maduro government through a "slow-motion coup." Cuba nonetheless continued to support the Venezuelan government and to reject US attempts for regime change in Venezuela. Cuba did not abandon its principle of internationalist solidarity, which has become one of its hallmarks, just to curry favour with the US during their efforts to build diplomatic relations.

In addition to the above two examples of upholding principles, those of democracy and of Venezuela, we cannot overlook the fact that the three remaining prisoners of the Cuban Five were returned to Cuba on December 17, after more than 16 years in prison. There was no way Cuba would have agreed to even the first step of diplomatic relations without the return of these [three prisoners](#). The July 20 date means diplomatic relations and the opening of embassies, but nothing more. It represents a first phase that has the potential to lead

toward the long path of normalizing of relations. There remain many issues to be settled as part of normalization, such as lifting the blockade, returning Guantanamo to Cuba, ending discriminatory legislation on immigration and putting an end to US internal subversion and destabilization in Cuba in the name of democracy and human rights.

I would like to address one of these disputes: how US democracy promotion in Cuba relates to the blockade. Among other pieces of legislation, the two principal Congressional building blocks underlying the blockade consist of the 1992 Torricelli Act and the 1996 Helms-Burton Act. The former, whose real title is the Cuban Democracy Act, stipulates: "Assistance to support democracy in Cuba. The United States Government may provide assistance, through appropriate nongovernmental organizations, for the support of individuals and organizations to promote nonviolent [democratic change in Cuba](#)." The second legal framework is the 1996 legislation, whose full title is the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity (Libertad) Act. Section 109 is entitled "Authorization of support for democratic and human rights groups and international observers." It stipulates that:

"The President is authorized to furnish assistance and provide other support for individuals and independent nongovernmental organizations to support democracy-building efforts for Cuba, including the following:

- (1) Published and informational matter, such as books, videos, and cassettes, on transitions to democracy, human rights, and market economies, to be made available to independent democratic groups in Cuba.
- (2) Humanitarian assistance to victims of political repression, and their families.
- (3) Support for democratic and human rights [groups in Cuba](#)."

Based on this legislation, in June 2015, the State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Bill proposed by the House of Representatives for 2016 includes funding for the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). Regarding Cuba, "the Committee recommendation includes \$30,000,000 (an increase compared to 2015) for programs to promote democracy and strengthen civil society in Cuba, of which not less than \$8,000,000 shall be for NED." The rest of this \$30 million is earmarked for other organizations such as USAID. The funding is clearly indicated as being part of blockade legislation: "The Committee directs that funds shall only be used for programs and activities ... of the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity (Libertad) Act of 1996 and ... the Cuban Democracy Act (CDA) of 1992, and shall not be used for business promotion, economic reform, entrepreneurship or any other assistance that is not [democracy-building](#)."

The recently released Congressional Budget Justification Foreign Operations, Appendix 3 for Fiscal Year 2016 spells out the objective of democracy promotion for Cuba since December 17, 2014: "The President noted during his December 17, 2014 policy speech that the promotion of democratic principles and human rights remains the core goal of U.S. assistance to Cuba.... The United States will continue robust democracy assistance to Cuba to support civil society and greater human rights for the Cuban people.... The United States continues to provide support for democracy and human rights in challenging operating environments, including [Cuba and Venezuela](#)."

The single most important point about democracy in Cuba is that its approach is entirely up

to the Cuban people and its government. It is Cuba's sovereign right as an independent nation to take the path it desires. No other country may dictate the type of democracy that should exist in Cuba.

The US, for its part, has its own brand of democracy. Cuba does not have a program to undermine and subvert the status quo in the US, even though Cuba's views on the political and economic system in the US are public and well known. The fact that Cuba is a small Third World country does not grant the right to any powerful nation in the North to impose its system. This, in fact, is the bottom line of US democracy promotion. A careful read of the main US legislation cited above reveals an open declaration by the US that its multi-party election style and the free market (capitalism) are the goals of democracy promotion in Cuba.

Cuba has its own history and tradition when it comes to democracy. Ironically, the negative impact of US-style democracy is part of this heritage. In the second half of the 19th century, in the course of waging its independence wars against Spain, Cuba was confronted with challenges of socio-political priorities and organization. In the areas liberated from Spanish domination, this led the Cuban patriots to experiment with organizing their own constituent assemblies and constitutions, enshrined in which were what we would now call human rights. However, this course of action and set of evolving values were interrupted by US intervention in the war against the Spanish in which the US replaced the Spanish as the colonizer. During the period of US domination from 1901 to 1958, the invaders rolled back the embryonic yet positive benefits of democracy and human rights. For most of this period during the 20th century, the Cubans suffered under a political and socio-economic system that resembled, in very general terms, US democracy and its market economy. The Cuban transition to democracy was restarted with the triumph of the Cuban Revolution on January 1, 1959. From that period until now, it has undergone, and continues to undergo, many changes.

Cuban democracy and American democracy are two different political systems. Each one embeds its own respective values and traditions. They cannot be compared, as they are two different categories.

Are changes ever brought about in the Cuban political system? Yes, but not in the direction that US official policy would like. For example, from 1959 to 1974-76, Cuba exercised political power in the absence of elections and a constitution. However, during this period, participation in the Cuban political process was at its peak; today, many Cubans remain nostalgic about that time. In 1974-76, Cubans participated in drafting a constitution, voting upon it in a referendum and initiating elections. In 1992, reforms were made to the political and electoral system. Now there is talk about a new electoral law and other political changes. These new efforts are in response to Cuban analysis and needs, and not to those of the US. In other words, despite its weaknesses, Cuba is a democracy in motion.

What about the US? Does its political system bring about changes? Yes, but it does so only in the context of its own political system and within the boundaries and limitations that these impose. For example, there have been changes to party financing that do not at all negate the main feature of party politics and funding based on wealth and privilege. There are also amendments to the right to vote, but they cannot go beyond the context of the socio-economic-political system, which is based on racial discrimination and inequality coupled with apathy.

Thus, Cuban democracy and US democracy each has its own features. US democracy promotion in Cuba will continue even after July 20. Does this mean that the establishment of diplomatic relations and embassies remains an important victory for Cuba? In my view, yes. The situation has changed radically. Before July 20, there was no official convenient channel with the US for Cuba to register its opposition to these programs. Now that diplomatic relations have been established with embassies in both countries, Cuba can put its cards on the table with their American counterparts in Havana and Washington and state its case face to face with facts and proof. Does this mean that the American side will listen to reason and take into account the Cuban version of the facts? Not necessarily.

Nevertheless, the situation has improved in another way. Since December 17, 2014, Cuba has taken centre stage on the international political scene under the leadership of President Raúl Castro. While there are many interpretations of this December 17 event, what basically comes across is that “Cuba was right” all along, for more than five decades. Its heroic resistance in the face of the Empire paid off. Before December 17, 2014, Cuba was marginalized in international politics (aside from much of Latin America and the Caribbean and the South). Cuba’s voice has now stretched not only to the US and Europe, but to the whole world. It can no longer be viewed contemptuously.

Obama’s prestige also improved with his accomplishments internationally - including Cuba - and domestically. However, US Presidents are always at the forefront on the international scene; for example, Obama gave one of his first campaign speeches in Berlin for the 2008 US presidential elections for domestic and international consumption. Cuba has not had the luxury of automatic access to the limelight, apart from some sporadic and distorted international reporting on Fidel Castro. Going forward, as issues arise, the world will have to take notice of what the Cuban government says with regard to the subversive and destabilizing effects of US democracy promotion programs. Cuba-US relations will factor in mainstream international public opinion.

In an ideal world, this open international debate may further push Obama and his successor to work toward lifting the blockade, among other things, in Congress as the basis of their democracy promotion programs. Would it be a stretch for them to consider bypassing a hostile Congress by using their executive powers in order to divert these programs? These programs may destabilize Cuba to a certain extent, which would serve to undermine smooth diplomatic relations. This may put the US in an awkward position while Cuba may seem to come up clean. Is this a naive viewpoint? There is a new reality in the US. More and more visitors from all walks of life are visiting Cuba, including students, professors, artists and others in a position of influence, such as journalists. Once they are familiar with Cuba, how will they react if it were to become widely known that the US is using funds to destabilize Cuba? In addition, strange as it may seem, the American business community that is increasingly converging on Cuba may very well prefer to maintain its investments in, and trade with, a stable Cuban political system headed by the revolutionary government, rather than with a society that is in chaos because a handful of individuals with the assistance of US democracy promotion programs challenge the evolving status quo and upset the applecart. After all, it is Cuba as it currently exists that has been attracting businesspeople to invest in and trade with that country in the first place. At this time, it seems that the US tourist industry is one of the most active of the businesses. It is taking advantage of the desire of Americans to visit a safe and calm present-day Cuba as it goes through its changes of updating its socio-economic system. This is what visitors want to see, not a Cuba as a Caribbean mirror image of the US. Things can change in the US over the course of the many

years that it will take to lift the blockade and end subversive democracy promotion activities in Cuba. Who would have thought before December 17, 2014 that that historic step would take place?

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