

Obama's Historic Trip to Cuba and U.S Double Standards on Human Rights

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March 21 – 22 will represent a historic moment in US –CUBA relations, as President Barack Obama is scheduled to visit the island, marking the first official visit by a sitting US President since Calvin Coolidge in 1928. When Obama first announced his intention to re-establish normal diplomatic relations between the US and Cuba in December 2014, he stated that he would eventually visit the island if the conditions were right, which some have interpreted as a reference to conditions that are conducive to regime change.

Tangible progress has been made towards normalizing relations since Obama's December 2014 announcement, including: a face-to-face meeting between Barack Obama and Cuban President Raúl Castro at the Summit of the Americas in Panama in April 2015; Cuba being removed from the US State Department's list of "State Sponsors of Terrorism" in May 2015; the reopening of Cuba's embassy in Washington in July of 2015 and the US embassy in Havana in August 2015, which included an official visit by US Secretary of State John Kerry^[1] to attend the ceremony; President Raúl Castro addressing the UN General Assembly in New York in September 2015; and, more recently, an agreement between Washington and Havana to restore regular commercial flights between the two nations, with more than 110 daily planned to service Havana and nine other Cuban cities. However, despite these signs of progress, Cuba continues to assert its sovereignty and will resist any attempts by the US or any foreign power to bring about regime change.



The developments in US-Cuba relations have already produced tangible results in the form of a 77% increase in the number of Americans that visited the island in 2015 relative to the previous year. Presently, the U.S. Treasury Department permits U.S. citizens to travel to Cuba if the nature of their visit falls under one of 12 specific categories^[2], with additional categories being contemplated for the near future. However, despite these significant gains, Cuba's full economic potential will not be fully realized until the US lifts its economic embargo against the island.

The US commercial, economic and financial embargo against Cuba, which has been in place

since October 19, 1960, makes it illegal for US corporations to do business with Cuba and restricts travel to the island; abolishing it would require approval from the US Congress. It is widely accepted that full diplomatic relations cannot be established between the two countries as long as the embargo remains in place. This is point was emphasized by Rodrigo Malmierca Díaz, Cuba's minister for foreign trade and investment, who has stated that the trade embargo represents the main obstacle for the full establishment of a diplomatic relationship on multiple occasions.

In 1991, Cuba formally requested the United Nations for assistance in ending the blockade. In response, beginning in 1992, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution each year criticizing the detrimental and devastating economic impacts of the trade embargo on the daily lives of the Cuban people. Over the last 24 years, this resolution has gotten overwhelming international support with no more than four countries voting against it in a single year; the US and Israel were the only exceptions that voted against it on each occasion. Nonetheless, despite near unanimous support for the resolution in recent years, including the most recent vote of 192 - 2 on October 27, 2015, the US has been steadfast in its refusal to lift the embargo.



Outside view of Guantanamo Bay prison :
Reuters

The Cuban government regard president Obama's visit as a means by which to strengthen bilateral relations between the two nations in a manner that accords mutual respect for self-determination and national sovereignty. As such, Havana expects meetings to include discussions on the eventual elimination of the economic embargo and the return of Guantanamo Bay to full Cuban control. Unfortunately, Havana and Cubans in general might be in for a disappointment, as Obama has persistently avoided the subject of lifting the embargo outright and has often employed the language of human rights in combination with outdated Cold War era ideological discourse when discussing the future of US-Cuba relations. Furthermore, he recently announced that his historic visit to Cuba will involve discussions on Cuba's human rights record with both President Raúl Castro and Cuban civil society, which is primarily comprised of groups opposed to Castro's Socialist regime.

President Obama's commitment to meeting with anti-Castro organizations based in Cuba is not particularly surprising given that his administration has not relented in its criticism of the Cuban government on issues of human rights and democratic principles, even after the two countries announced their intention to re-establish diplomatic relations. The Obama administration has continued to publicly call on Cuba to improve its record on free speech, release political prisoners, and institute a system of multi-party elections. In fact, John Kerry's remarks at the opening ceremony for the US embassy in Havana included the following statement: "We will continue to urge the Cuban government to fulfill its obligations

under U.N. and Inter-American human rights covenants". In fact, Obama's decision to engage with anti-Castro elements of Cuban civil society has raised speculation that he might be seeking domestic Cuban support for US claims that the island nation is a persistent violator of human rights.

Generally speaking, the concept of human rights as a justification to intervene in the domestic affairs of sovereign countries[3] is relatively recent. Since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the concept of human rights has been frequently used by Americans as a tool to justify interventions in the domestic affairs of sovereign countries. The concept of human rights, as currently constructed, is supposed to be based on egalitarian principles or norms that are fundamental to human beings regardless of their ethnicity, geographical location, language, religion, etc. These include the right to a fair trial, interdiction of genocide, freedom of speech, freedom of expression, and freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

The trade embargo targets all Cuban people indiscriminately, which directly violates articles 2[4], 13[5], and 25[6] of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). In fact, a profound investigation conducted by the American Association for World Health[7] in 1997 declared that "the U.S. embargo of Cuba has dramatically harmed the health and nutrition of large numbers of ordinary Cuban citizens...the U.S. embargo has caused a significant rise in suffering-and even deaths-in Cuba. For several decades the U.S. embargo has imposed significant financial burdens on the Cuban health care system...since 1992 the number of unmet medical needs-patients going without essential drugs or doctors performing medical procedures without adequate equipment-has sharply accelerated. This trend is directly linked to the fact that in 1992 the U.S. trade embargo—one of the most stringent embargoes of its kind, prohibiting the sale of food and sharply restricting the sale of medicines and medical equipment—was further tightened by the 1992 Cuban Democracy Act." [8] Furthermore, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights also determined that "the impact of such sanctions on the human rights of the Cuban people and, therefore, insists that the embargo be lifted." [9]

Outside of the western mainstream press, Cuba is actually widely-renowned for its commitment to peace, social justice, equality, and humanitarian aid since its Socialist revolution in 1959. On the island itself, all Cubans are regarded as equals and are protected from discrimination based on race, colour, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, opinion, social status, etc. This is largely because the Cuban revolution, under the guidance of the Castro regime, sought to eliminate all forms of exploitation and ensure gender, social and economic equality within society, in addition to attaining full employment. Specifically, the Castro government designed and implemented a variety of programs and services in the areas of professional training and job creation, and established universal access to education and health care in order to achieve equality and protect citizens from all forms of discrimination.

Despite the severity and longevity of the embargo, it was not particularly effective in undermining the objectives and achievements of the Castro government. The Cuban government has managed to attain higher life expectancy, lower child mortality, lower child malnutrition, and lower poverty rates compared to any other Latin American country (Navarro, 2014, Vandepitte, 2011). For this reason, Cuba ranked third in all of Latin America on the United Nations Development Program's Human Development Index (HDI)[10]. More precisely, according to the United Nations Human Development Report 2014, "Cuba's HDI value for 2013 is 0.815— which is in the very high human development

category—positioning the country at 44 out of 187 countries and territories”[11]. Furthermore, a 2014 World Bank publication confirmed that Cuba’s education system is comparable to those of Canada, Finland, and Singapore. Previously, the World Bank recognized that Cuba’s international “success in the fields of education and health, with social services that exceeds those of most developing countries and, in certain sectors, are comparable to those of the developed nations”[12].

Even more impressive is the fact that Cuba has been active in providing practical foreign aid in spite of the US embargo, primarily in the form of sending highly-trained specialists, such as teachers, doctors, and engineers, to developing countries where such skills are needed. Cuba has been sending doctors to countries in Latin American and Africa that are unable to meet the health care needs of their citizens since 1959. This is a practice for which the island is particularly well-regarded internationally, as evidenced by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon’s statement that Cuban doctors “are always the first to arrive and the last to leave. They remain in place after the crises. Cuba can be proud of its health care system, a model for many countries”[13]. There are presently “around 50,000 Cuban health professionals work in 66 countries worldwide”[14]. Recent examples of Cuban foreign assistance include sending Cuban doctors to West African countries during the last Ebola outbreak, and sending a team to Haiti after shortly after the earthquake in 2010, where they were largely credited with ending a serious cholera outbreak.

Based on the domestic and international achievements of Cuba’s socialist government, it could be argued that Cuba’s interpretation of human rights goes well beyond the reductive version defended by its American counterparts. For instance, Cuba protects and regards as essential the right to work, housing, free and equal access to education, cultural activities, and health care services, none of which are recognized as human rights by the US. This is because the US definition of human rights only recognises civil and political rights as such, while disregarding cultural, economic and social rights, which the American government has associated with welfare states, and socialist and communist regimes since the Cold War[15]. Therefore, the US essentially uses an incomplete and largely insufficient definition of human rights to justify its trade embargo on socialist Cuba, as well as countless military and political interventions abroad.

Although, Washington contends Cuba’s human rights record is the main obstacle to the full re-establishment of diplomatic and economic relations between the two nations, a quick glance at the history of American economic and foreign policies in the 20th and 21st centuries reveals that Washington has rarely hesitated to cooperate with despotic and corrupt regimes whenever it suited their interests. Specific examples include Pinochet in Chile, Suharto in Indonesia, the Shah in Iran, and the repressive House of Saud in Saudi Arabia. History has demonstrated that Washington is hardly averse to intervening in the domestic affairs of other countries to further its own interests while citing the protection of human rights as its prime objective. There is a long list of governments whose overthrow were facilitated by the US for refusing to fully adhere to its dictates, including Guatemala (1953-1954, 1960), Indonesia (1957-1958, 1965, 1975), the Dominican Republic (1960-1966), Chile (1964-1973), Cambodia (1955-1973), Laos (1957-1973), the Congo (1960-1964), Greece (1964-1974), Bolivia (1964-1975), Zaire (1975-1978), Iraq (1990-1991, 2003), and Afghanistan (1979-1992 and 2001-2014). This (incomplete) list of interventions not only demonstrates that the US has consistently violated human rights all over the world, but also that the Washington administration does not hesitate in providing support for brutal dictatorships if it is in its interest to do so. Therefore, history shows that Washington does

not possess the creditability to lecture Cuba about human rights, given its own record of violating or ignoring the fundamental principles of human rights when it served to further American ideological and economic interests.

Given that past efforts to overthrow Cuba's socialist regime via military force and political and economic interference have been largely unsuccessful, the US attempt to re-establish relations could simply represent a change in tactics. To be more precise, the new strategy relies on dialogue and negotiation to achieve the same objectives sought during the cold war era, namely ideological and economic change. President Obama's decision to meet with dissident civil groups could simply be a tactic to strengthen US calls for more transparency, democratic reforms, and greater attention to human rights in Cuba, which could be used as prerequisites for lifting the economic embargo.

The restoration of full diplomatic relations between the US and Cuba will only be possible if the US relinquishes control of Guantanamo Bay to Cuba, the embargo is completely lifted, and Washington respects the sovereignty of Cuba's socialist regime and does not actively seek to impose American imperialist "values" on Cuba's domestic affairs. The American government cannot continue in its hypocrisy of criticizing Cuba's human rights record while, at the same time, maintaining its embargo, which has been accused of violating the human rights of Cubans by a number of prominent and respected international organizations, including the United Nations, Amnesty International, the American Association for World Health, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, and the World Health Organization, just to name a few. If Barack Obama truly wants the reestablishment of normalized relations between Cuba and the US to be a crowning achievement of his legacy, then he would be well advised to abandon Cold War tactics and rhetoric. Specifically, in the case of Cuba, Obama should dispense with the strategy of cultivating domestic agents to interfere in the island nation's domestic affairs or calling for reforms in the areas of democracy and human rights, particularly when considering the sordid record of the US in these matter. President Obama needs to acknowledge that the US trade embargo has likely had a much greater impact in terms of infringing on the human rights of the Cuban people and rectify the situation by doing everything in his power to have it completely lifted, even if has to resort to exercising his "executive power will" to bypass an uncooperative Congress.

Notes

[1] By attending the ceremony to mark the reopening of the US embassy in Havana, John Kerry became the first US Secretary of State to visit Cuba in 70 years.

[2] These 12 consist of: "family visits; official business of the U.S. government, foreign governments, and certain intergovernmental organizations; journalistic activity; professional research and professional meetings; educational activities; religious activities; public performances, clinics, workshops, athletic and other competitions, and exhibitions; support for the Cuban people; humanitarian projects; activities of private foundations or research or educational institutes; exportation, importation, or transmission of information or information materials; and certain authorized export transactions."

<http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/pages/jl9740.aspx>

[3] The contemporary definition of the term "Human Rights" was only formulated shortly after the conclusion of World War II when the UN General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of

Human Rights in 1948. Many western liberal philosophers contributed to the development of this concept of human rights, including Thomas Paine, Kant, John Stuart Mill, and G.W.F. Hegel, just to name a few.

[4] “Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.” (<http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>)

[5] (1) Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.

(2) Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country (<http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>).

[6] “(1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control” (<http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>).

[7] “The American Association for World Health (AAWH) was founded in 1953 as a private, nonprofit charitable and educational organization, and serves as the U.S. Committee for the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). Its purposes are to inform the American public about major health challenges that affect people both here and abroad, and to promote cooperative solutions that emphasize grassroots involvement.”

(<http://archives.usaengage.org/archives/studies/cuba.html>)

[8] <http://www.medicc.org/resources/documents/embargo/The%20impact%20of%20the%20U.S.%20Embargo%20on%20Health%20&%20Nutrition%20in%20Cuba.pdf>

[9] <http://www.amnestyusa.org/pdfs/amr250072009eng.pdf>

[10] “The HDI is a summary measure for assessing long-term progress in three basic dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, access to knowledge and a decent standard of living... a long and healthy life is measured by life expectancy. Access to knowledge is measured by: i) mean years of education among the adult population, which is the average number of years of education received in a life-time by people aged 25 years and older; and ii) expected years of schooling for children of school-entry age, which is the total number of years of schooling a child of school-entry age can expect to receive if prevailing patterns of age-specific enrolment rates stay the same throughout the child’s life. Standard of living is measured by Gross National Income (GNI) per capita expressed in constant 2011 international dollars converted using purchasing power parity (PPP) rates”http://hdr.undp.org/sites/all/themes/hdr_theme/country-notes/CUB.pdf)

[11] http://hdr.undp.org/sites/all/themes/hdr_theme/country-notes/CUB.pdf

[12] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/salim-lamrani/world-bank-cuba-has-the-b_b_5925864.html

[13] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/salim-lamrani/cubas-health-care-system-_b_5649968.html

[14] <http://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=1782243562&Country=Cuba&topic=Politics&subtopic=Forecast&subsubtopic=Political>

[15] <http://www.counterpunch.org/2016/03/18/human-rights-hypocrisy-us-criticizes-cuba/>

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