

President Trump: Just Another Jailer of the Cuban People

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Nowhere has the president's foreign policy been a bigger bust than in his promiscuous imposition of economic sanctions. So far, Cuba, Iran, North Korea, Russia, and Venezuela have refused to surrender despite the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" policy. That hasn't stopped Trump from exhibiting one of the classic signs of insanity: doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.

Trump's hope was for a quick victory in Venezuela. When that country's military refused to switch sides and make the National Assembly's Juan Guaido president, as the administration had expected, Washington had no answer. Steadily increasing economic restrictions only further impoverished the desperate population. And thankfully, Trump has so far preferred bombast and bluster to military action.

The administration searched desperately for someone to blame. They settled ultimately on Cuba, which is aiding Nicolás Maduro's government in Venezuela, and Barack Obama, who relaxed the half-century economic embargo against the Cubans. National Security Advisor John Bolton declared: "The Obama administration's misguided Cuba policy provided the Cuban regime with the necessary political cover to expand its malign influence and ideological imperialism across the region."

This is nonsense, of course. The Cuban and Venezuelan governments have been closely linked since 2002, during the Bush administration. Havana's support for Venezuela had nothing to do with Barack Obama. Cuba's behavior is nasty, but not nearly so bad as what Washington tolerates from its allies, such as slaughtering thousands of civilians, as Saudi Arabia has done in Yemen.

In 1959, Fidel Castro and his revolutionaries took power. Although many Cuban Americans eagerly hoped for Fidel's ouster, the regime survived an economic contraction of more than a third, known as the "Special Period." So the Cuban-American community insisted on new and tougher sanctions, which only hurt the Cuban people more. After six decades, U.S. policy had failed to overthrow the Castro regime, yield democracy, improve human rights, or even win compensation for nationalized property.

Of course, Washington's sanctions also hurt the Cuban economy. But that country's poverty is primarily Havana's fault. If socialism worked, why would the island need access to capitalist economies to succeed? Anyway, there is plenty of European money in Cuba. The embargo did, however, allow the communist government to blame the United States for its own economic mismanagement.

Nevertheless, even officials in Havana recognize that their state-controlled economy is a disaster. Cuba continues to lose ground to the rest of Latin America. Food shortages are rife; hard currency from relatives abroad is necessary to keep many families afloat. Economic opportunity is absent. A retired diplomat told me that three of his four grandchildren now live abroad, an experience all too common on the island.

After Fidel Castro yielded the presidency to his brother, Raoul, the regime reluctantly loosened restrictions over the private sector, which came to provide around 40 percent of employment. Public employees desperately sought even part-time private jobs to supplement their earnings. At one restaurant, I met an anesthesiologist who washed dishes to get access to hard currency. No wonder, noted American University's William LeoGrande, "among ordinary Cubans, the desire for a better relationship with the United States is almost universal."

Although Raoul Castro has formally yielded the presidency to Miguel Diaz-Canel, he retains a veto over real change. The regime's much-touted constitutional reforms served largely to reinforce the status quo. There has been no loosening of political restrictions.

Indeed, the expanding marketplace and huge disparity in compensation created serious dissatisfaction among workers stuck laboring for the government. In response, the regime cracked down on private entrepreneurs, complaining that they ran too many businesses, cheated on their taxes, and undermined Cuba's socialist ethos. Regime apparatchiks know they are losing control.

Still, there is growing private space. The internet is expensive, but still accessible. A staff member at a communist publication told me that he was "not saying that people have free access to information, but they have more," including through shared USBs. Observed Ted Henken and Armando Chaguaceda, of Baruch College, City University of New York, and the Universidad de Guanajuato respectively, "a variety of actors in Cuban society—including political dissidents, independent digital journalists and the island's innovative entrepreneurs—have staked increasingly bold claims to the public spaces that have emerged in recent years as a result of Havana's limited economic reforms."

Reluctant to jeopardize his reelection chances, President Obama waited until his second term to upgrade bilateral relations with Cuba, permit more investment, and allow additional American visitors. In response, Cuban entrepreneurs invested in Airbnb, taxicabs, restaurants, and other tourist services. Obama "was very good for us," one Cuban told me. Cubans treated Obama as a rock star when he visited the island in 2014; three years later, cars still display stickers with his photo. An American journalist told me, "Obama's visit was tremendously challenging, like Kryptonite" for the Cuban government. "They completely underestimated his popularity."

This process highlighted the best of Washington policy. "If you want to create more space for debate, expanding the entrepreneurial class is one way," argued Collin Lavery of the group Cuba Educational Travel. Even tourists do more than spend money: a survey found that U.S. visitors typically engage Cubans about politics and culture.

Yet two years ago, President Trump decided to play to the radical older elements of the Cuban-American population—the younger generation is much more open to change—and partially reversed the Obama opening. He restricted both individual visits and business investment. Uncertainty compounded the impact of the new regulations. Complained the

Engage Cuba Coalition, the administration created a “more convoluted, confusing and counterproductive approach.” This caused many Americans to go elsewhere, leaving Cuba’s small entrepreneurs high and dry.

“So many people opened businesses for American tourists,” Julia de la Rosa, who owns an Airbnb with her husband, told me. “Now there is little demand.” American tourists are more likely to stay at Airbnbs and bed and breakfasts, use taxis, patronize private restaurants, hire individual tour guides, and the like. After the Trump retreat, revenues to private restaurants and lodgings fell dramatically, by 40 percent and more. Ironically, executives with the Trump organization visited Cuba during the Obama years to scout locations for a possible golf course.

Some entrepreneurs complained to me that when visiting Washington, they cannot even get a hearing from administration officials or other diehards like Senator Marco Rubio (who, they note with asperity, has never visited the island from which his parents fled). Restaurateur Niruys Higuera told me she wanted “to make him understand how much damage he is causing the private sector.” Unfortunately, he and the administration appear to care little about the Cuban people.

More concerned about the votes of Cuban Americans, President Trump has demanded Havana’s surrender: “We will not lift sanctions on the Cuban regime until all political prisoners are freed, freedoms of assembly and expression are respected, all political parties are legalized, and free and internationally supervised elections are scheduled.” (Curiously, he has not insisted on the same from other dictators—think Crown Prince Mohammad “Bonesaw” bin Salman.)

The administration recently compounded its folly by giving full effect to earlier legislation allowing Americans to sue companies using nationalized Cuban assets and sharply curtailing visits to the island. Such measures will not change regime policy. One Cuban reformer told me: “It is very naive to think that more pressure on the Cuban government will get it to do what the U.S. wants.” Indeed, the communists survived far worse when the Soviet Union collapsed, ending subsidies that had kept the island afloat. Argued Laverty, “U.S. hostility leads to an under-siege mentality in Cuba, limiting space for debate and calls for change.” True believers are likely to work even harder to prevent the rise of anyone who favors serious reform.

When it comes to Cuba, the administration remains prisoner to a toxic mix of ideology, politics, and fantasy. The embargo failed, so intensify the embargo. When the results remain the same, do more of the same. When all else fails, denounce Obama.

Instead, sanctions should be lifted entirely. While this wouldn’t guarantee quick democratic change, flooding the island with Americans and American money would make such a transformation more likely. Plenty of Cubans I spoke with desperately desire a freer future. None of them believed that Trump-imposed isolation offered such a path.

What they want is trade, tourism, and contact. “We need the Americans back,” one businessman told me. De la Rosa asked me to let people in Washington “know they are hurting us. They are hurting common people.” A foreigner living in Cuba complained of “magical thinking” that “this time we are almost there” in overthrowing the communist regime. President Trump is just another jailer of the Cuban people.

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