

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

It's Time for a Policy Change on Cuba

Doug Bandow

December 6, 2018

Still, criticism of government is heard. The latter source said “you can talk about making the system better, improving efficiency, increasing growth.” Added a widely-traveled artist, “it should be possible to make the revolution more flexible, democratic.” This broader discourse, explained CSG, “occurred not by fiat, but because a variety of actors in a fraught middle ground forged space to engage in robust analysis and debate.”

The Obama opening helped. He “was very good for us,” said one Cuban. American University’s William M. LeoGrande observed that “the political space available not for dissidents, but for people that you might call independent critical voices calling—broadly, civil society—calling for reforms in the socialist system, and sometimes dramatic ones, but not calling for its replacement that political space for those people, in my judgment got wider after the normalization of relations.”

The regime felt threatened. Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez denounced Obama’s “deep attack on our ideas, our history, our culture and our symbols.” A Western journalist told me “Obama’s visit was tremendously challenging, like Kryptonite,” for the government. “They completely underestimated his popularity.”

The Communist Party turned to repression. Ted Henken and Armando Chaguaceda respectively of Baruch College, City University of New York, and the Universidad de Guanajuato noted that “Havana has responded by circling the wagons of the state and doubling down on political centralization,” but that “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.”

Also putting pressure on the regime is the flight of the young. A former government official said only one of his four grandchildren remains in Cuba. In Brazil, doctors sent to labor under contract by the Cuban government have filed lawsuits demanding their full salaries. Even younger communists with whom I spoke acknowledged the need for meaningful reform, while insisting that they were not dissidents.

Despite this ferment, President Trump's approach forecloses any dialogue or interaction which might encourage Havana to loosen controls. He said: "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." Taking the president at his word, he expects the Communist regime to dismantle itself—something he has not demanded of even worse dictatorships he befriended.

Nor would any government comply. 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, administration policy makes positive change less likely. Demanding the regime's surrender ensures hardliners will work harder to prevent the rise of a Cuban Gorbachev. One Cuban who wanted change said there were officials who desired to chart a more moderate course, but "when U.S. policy becomes more aggressive, it complicates the jobs of these people." Similarly, argued Laverly, "U.S. hostility leads to an under-siege mentality in Cuba, limiting space for debate and calls for change."

Mid-level government officials with whom I spoke were conciliatory but not obsequious. "We are very open to American companies," said one, and recent history "shows that we have common ground and we should build on that." But they denigrated U.S. policies made to satisfy Cuban-Americans and dismissed making political changes under pressure. Even a reform-minded journalist who belonged to the Communist Party said "let Cuba do it in its own way." U.S. pressure is "colliding with national pride. If Washington says to do something, some people say no, because the U.S. says so," he explained.

Perez argued that Cuba "won't get dramatic change at once." Instead, he predicted change "more as gradual evolution" with a "transition toward a different society." The process "will necessarily take some time." Washington's policy should be "to nurture this process."

Further complicating the U.S.-Cuban relationship is the possible sonic attack on American diplomats, which caused Washington to essentially empty its embassy and shift visa operations successively to Colombia and Guyana. U.S. intelligence figures the Cuban government was not to blame—which makes sense, since it negotiated the opening to America. Russia has been suspected, but Moscow would risk much launching such an operation in Cuba. Unfortunately, the administration appeared to treat the controversy as an opportunity to ratchet up pressure on Havana, again mostly hurting the Cuban people.

Of course, it will be best when the Cuban dictatorship disappears. But the president's action is the triumph of ideological blindness over painful experience. If nearly sixty years of embargo and other sanctions won't create democracy on the island, his arbitrary tightening won't do so.

Far better to send more Americans, more money, more goods, and more opportunities to Cuba. More Western employment and contact would spread the virus of liberty. Amnesty International's Marselha Goncolves Margerin argued that "increased political dialogue, travel, and trade between the United States and Cuba is fundamental to advancing human rights." The embargo should be lifted entirely, though any relaxation would be a move in the right direction. Particularly useful would be allowing Americans to travel freely to Cuba.

That wouldn't guarantee change, of course, but President Obama's promise of a different future greatly unsettled the Cuban government. The latter's repressive response demonstrated the

regime's weakness, not strength. Washington also should look for practical areas where the two governments can work together for mutual advantage. Geoff Thale and Marguerite Rose Jimenez of the Washington office on Latin America noted, "While cooperation has survived during periods of great hostility, it has thrived during periods of increased engagement."

"Just about anything can go wrong in a country like Cuba," one person told me. So true, but that is to be expected. As a serious governing philosophy, communism is dead in Cuba. Observed Feinberg: "Over six decades, the vanguard party has become the rearguard party." Those leaders serious about the island's future have begun to consider a freer way forward. Reformers looked to the U.S. and lauded Obama's strategy. None had anything positive to say about his successor.

"We need the Americans back," one businessman desperately exclaimed. De la Rosa asked me to let people in Washington "know they are hurting us. They are hurting common people." And empowering opponents of change in Havana. Alas, the president continues to treat Cuba as a political issue, important only because of its impact on the next election. I found many Cubans enormously frustrated by the refusal of American policymakers to look beyond the exile community to those living on the island.

There may be no better test of a public policy than the more than half-century U.S. embargo on Cuba. A foreigner living in Cuba complained of "magical thinking in Miami" which contends that "this time we are almost there" in overthrowing the communist regime. But President Trump knows better. He broke with precedent to engage North Korea. He should offer Cuba the opportunity to join the rest of the world, making political gains as well as economic benefits likely.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.