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U.S. politicians should stop punishing the Cuban people to win Florida votes

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“Where are you from?”, asked the 20-something as he passed me on the street in Havana. America, I replied. “I love America” he declared, before turning into one of the city’s many restaurants. He likely was a member of Cuba’s growing private workforce.

However, opportunities for young Cubans are too few. State controls continue to stifle the economy.

Ironically, among the biggest barriers to reform is President Donald Trump, who seems determined to preserve the fading communist dictatorship. Increased economic ties to the U.S. are the best means for Americans to undermine the regime. Yet the Trump administration partially reversed President Barack Obama’s opening to Cuba. This switch hurt the island’s many private businessmen and women, who complained to me on a recent visit that they cannot get a hearing from the administration.

In 1959, Fidel Castro and his revolutionaries swept the corrupt Fulgencio Batista from power. Alas they proved to be far better at tyrannizing opponents than uplifting citizens.

Fidel & Co. turned to Moscow, while Washington imposed an economic embargo. Even after the Soviet Union’s collapse, Florida’s politically active Cuban-American community blocked any change in policy. Today the Russians are back and Chinese are arriving. One of my tour guides observed: “In five years we all will be speaking Chinese.”

President Barack Obama broke precedent and relaxed federal controls—many cannot be repealed except by Congress—allowing more travel and business. He also reestablished full diplomatic relations. On my recent trip, Cubans told me how his policy gave them hope for a better future.

U.S. companies entered the Cuba market and tourists visited the island. The private sector grew to account for an estimated one-fifth of the economy and an even larger percentage of the workforce.

Then last year President Trump limited business and travel. The rules are complicated and confusing. To be safe, tourists can use groups familiar with the regulations such as Cuba

Educational Travel (CET), which handled my trip. However, many Americans simply choose to go elsewhere.

Which hit the nascent private sector hard. “A lot of private business feels crushed,” complained CET’s Collin Laverty. “So many people opened businesses for American tourists,” said Julia de la Rosa, who owns an Airbnb with her husband, Silvio Ortega. “Now there is little demand.”

Cubans I met complained that the new rules triggered a rash of cancellations and pushed down future bookings. Also hurt are “all the people you are going to hire for the restaurant, to make the beds, etc.,” said Ortega. Restaurateur Niruys Higuera complained of Washington: “you should know what you are doing before you implement regulations.”

Socialism failed because it always fails. Today the regime is unable to feed, pay or otherwise care for its people. I met an anesthesiologist washing dishes at a private restaurant to help ends meet.

After Raul Castro took over, observed one Cuban, “the people thought within a couple years things would change.” But his minimal reforms fell far short. Ongoing constitutional reform largely reinforces the status quo. His retirement as president so far has had limited impact.

However, the regime no longer possesses an information monopoly. People have increased access to cell phones, flash drives, and a relatively free internet. A staff member at a communist publication told me that perhaps 80 percent of people received alternative news.

The regime still treats opponents harshly, but criticism is heard. A Western journalist told me “Obama’s visit was tremendously challenging, like Kryptonite,” for the government.

Also putting pressure on the regime is the flight of the young in search of economic opportunity. A former government official said only one of his four grandchildren remains in Cuba.

Yet President Trump foreclosed any interaction which might encourage Havana to loosen controls. Argued Laverty, “U.S. hostility leads to an under-siege mentality in Cuba, limiting space for debate and calls for change.”

Far better to lift the embargo. Amnesty International’s Marselha Goncalves Margerin argued: “Increased political dialogue, travel, and trade between the United States and Cuba is fundamental to advancing human rights.”

Tourists bring ideas as well as money. Private investment has a significant political impact. “If you want to create more space for debate, expanding the entrepreneurial class is one way,” argued Laverty.

“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. It is time to leave Americans free to deal with Cuba.

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