



## **Why Cuba's removal from US terror list was years overdue**

**President Obama announced Tuesday that he will remove Cuba from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism. That move may say more about change in Latin America than it does about change in Cuba.**

**By Howard LaFranchi**

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WASHINGTON — There was no surprise in President Obama's announcement Tuesday that he will remove Cuba from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism.

Mr. Obama's decision in December to seek a full normalization of relations with Cuba virtually guaranteed that he would move to rescind a designation that places a number of financial and diplomatic restrictions on US interaction with Cuba.

But beyond that political reason for the move was the simple reality, in the eyes of many Latin America and US foreign policy experts, that Cuba had no place being on the list and hasn't acted in a manner justifying the 1982 designation for decades.

"The best reason for removing Cuba from the state sponsor of terrorism list may be because Cuba does not appear to be a state sponsor of terrorism," says Christopher Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute in Washington.

"The change should have occurred years ago," he adds.

Cuba's removal from the terrorism list – to become official 45 days from Obama's notification of Congress Tuesday of his decision – says as much or perhaps even more about change in Latin America than it does about change in Cuba.

The designation dates from the cold war era, when Cuba was still promoting leftist regimes and some lingering guerrilla movements across the region – and seeking to undermine the right-wing

regimes (or, in the case of Nicaragua, the counterrevolutionaries) the United States supported. But today, democratic systems and elections resulting in governments alternating between left-wing and right-wing political parties are the rule from Mexico to Chile.

And in the case of South America's last active guerrilla movement – the FARC in Colombia – the Cuban government is hosting peace talks between the guerrillas and the Colombian government that could wrap up this year with a formal end of Colombia's more than 50-year conflict.

That would highlight Cuba more as a peacemaker than as a sponsor of terrorism.

Congress will review Obama's decision over the 45 days allotted and has the option of passing a joint resolution of disapproval if it chooses, but the president is authorized to override congressional action concerning a country's removal from the list. Certainly a lively discussion will ensue, with Sen. Marco Rubio, a Republican presidential candidate, promising to move against Cuba's removal.

Dropping Cuba from the US state sponsor of terrorism list – only three countries, Iran, Sudan, and Syria, will remain on it – will make it easier for Cuba to secure loans with international development institutions like the World Bank. It is also expected to pave the way to the US and Cuba establishing embassies in each other's capitals.

What it may not do is usher in some of the political openness and expansion of rights in Cuba that some supporters of Obama's decision appear to be expecting.

Calling Obama's decision "a logical step," US Rep. Elliot Engel (D) of New York said in a statement that "the ball is now in the Cuban government's court to respond by allowing for greater political pluralism, guaranteeing freedom of speech, and ensuring that each and every Cuban political prisoner is freed."

It is true that the Cuban government has long used what it considers to be acts of aggression by its big menacing neighbor – especially the five-decade-old economic embargo, but also the terrorism designation – to justify its tight control of Cubans' lives and their political activities.

But removing the terrorist designation seems unlikely to have much internal impact – at least certainly not quickly.

In announcing Obama's decision, White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest said that the US "will continue to have differences with the Cuban government, but our concerns over a wide range of Cuba's policies and actions fall outside the criteria that is relevant to whether to rescind Cuba's designation as a State Sponsor of Terrorism."

The Cuban government may very well turn that reasoning in its favor and say it agrees there is no connection between the removal of an unjustified designation by the US and how it conducts its affairs at home.