



## Now let's end the embargo on Cuba

Ian Vasquez • | December 26, 2014

When President Obama announced that the United States would normalize diplomatic relations with Cuba and loosen its trade embargo on the country, he became the first sitting president to acknowledge the obvious failure of this decades-long policy. The sanctions have done nothing to improve human rights, promote democracy, spur economic reform, or dislodge the Castro dictatorship.

A new approach could hardly do worse and will probably do better at increasing the freedoms of Cubans. Yet critics claim that Obama has rewarded and bestowed legitimacy on an intransigent regime, and worse, has thrown it a lifeline at a time when Venezuela's growing economic crisis makes it an increasingly unreliable source of patronage.

If so, it is a criticism of U.S. policy toward any number of countries around the world — from China and Russia to Egypt and Vietnam — whose unsavory regimes violate human rights but with whom the United States maintains diplomatic and trade relations. Are we really to believe that everyone would be better off with U.S. embargoes on much of the world?

The more sophisticated critics point out that unlike in China, Cuba's communist government has undertaken no meaningful economic reforms and thus does not merit trade relations, which can only strengthen the Castros. Yet the lack of economic reforms in Cuba is precisely why we should not expect that eliminating the embargo will lead to booming trade.

Until and unless Cuba changes the backward economic policies that have impoverished it, commercial opportunities will be limited. The fear among some conservatives that allowing trade with Cuba will somehow save communism from its inherent flaws betrays a surprising faith in that system. Lifting the embargo will instead clarify that the Castros' repressive policies, not U.S. policies, are the source of Cuban misery.

It is true that any increased economic engagement with the United States would increase the regime's revenues. But again, short of meaningful reform, those revenues will be limited. More economic engagement would likely also create constituencies in favor of further reform, and the greater opportunities for getting rich, even within the government system, would be corrosive of Cuban socialism.

Restoring Americans' rights to travel to the island has the most potential to increase Cubans' freedoms. A full lifting of the travel sanctions would put hundreds of thousands and perhaps up to a million Americans per year in direct contact with ordinary Cubans in an economy where the self-employed are growing in number.

A rise in tourism would expand those businesses and the informal economy, thus giving Cubans increased independence from the state. Cubans thus would also establish ties to Americans, creating opportunities to genuinely strengthen civil society. The fact that the United States has both an unrivaled tradition of civil society and, as the Hudson Institute has documented, Americans are among the most internationally philanthropic people in the world, could make a difference so far unseen in Cuba.

Obama, however, has only partially eased sanctions. It is up to Congress to fully lift the embargo, which Cuban leader Raul Castro continues to blame for Cuba's suffering. Unlike in the past, when Cuba has said it wanted to improve relations only to sabotage the relationship on the various occasions when that possibility grew, Castro's willingness to re-engage with the United States represents a significant change.

As Cuban dissident Yoani Sanchez observed, under "Fidel Castro we would have never even reached an outline of an agreement of this nature. Because the Cuban system is supported by — as one of its main pillars — the existence of a permanent rival. David can't live without Goliath and the ideological apparatus has depended too long on this dispute."

So Sanchez may be right in describing the agreement between the United States and Cuba as on balance a "political defeat" for the Castro regime. But we should be under no illusion about Castro's goal to maintain control over the Cuban population and to do as little reform as possible to achieve that end. With or without sanctions, that's the regime's goal. Fully ending the embargo is a strategy more likely to increase freedom and to discourage the delusion that the United States can determine Cuba's fate.

*Ian Vasquez is director of the Cato Institute's Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity.*