

Editorial: End the failed Cuba trade, travel bans

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Thursday's violent arrest of peaceful protesters in Havana is consistent with the State Department's 2009 Human Rights Report on Cuba. Released this month, the report said the government has continued to deny citizens basic human rights and has committed "numerous and serious abuses." The communist country also has become a dynasty, with the passing of power from Fidel to Raul Castro.

For over half a century, the United States has embarked on a noble, if lonely, effort to convince Cuba to change its ways. The centerpiece of this policy is a unilateral trade embargo.

It hasn't worked, and it's time to end it.

Not, of course, as a reward to the Castros or their cronies. Rather, because it is punishing the very people we hope to help by propping up the government instead of tearing it down.

"The embargo serves one useful purpose, and that is for the Cuban government to use it as a way to explain its own domestic failures," said Ian Vasquez, the director of the Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity at the conservative Cato Institute.

Fully engaging with Cuba would rid the regime of its convenient scapegoat. Building a stronger link between the Cuban and American people and the two economies would be more effective in improving the lives of everyday Cubans. U.S. engagement with other countries with poor human-rights records, like China, has steadily, if slowly, improved the lives of most of their citizens.

A politically polarized Congress is highly unlikely to drop the embargo, despite the obvious economic and foreign-policy benefits.

But as an interim step, Congress should act quickly on bipartisan bills introduced by two Minnesota legislators to liberalize trade and travel. The House version is sponsored by Democratic Rep. Collin Peterson, who is also chairman of the Agriculture Committee. His Democratic colleague, Sen. Amy Klobuchar, introduced one of three Senate versions. Each bill would try to untie some of the red tape that snarls trade between the two nations, including the current rule that payments have to be made through third-party countries.

Removing restrictions on travel would greatly increase citizen contact. While more controversial than lifting the trade restrictions, it may be more effective in the ultimate goal of government reform, according to Ted Piccone, senior fellow and deputy director for foreign policy at the Brookings Institution. "It's the right thing to do, because we need to build trust between our two countries, and the best way to do that is to have direct people-to-people engagement," he said.

Travel and trade are interrelated in another way: More tourism would mean more revenue for Cuba to buy the agricultural products America could furnish, according to Gene Hugoson, the commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Agriculture. "I support open trade with everybody and anybody, including Cuba," Hugoson said.

The stakes for Minnesota are high, with some estimating that if the bills were to be passed, trade could increase at least 50 percent from 2008's \$52 million. But that's unlikely to happen unless Congress takes the sensible step and passes the Travel Restriction Reform and Export Enhancement Act. If the steps called for in the legislation are successful, they could increase momentum to drop the embargo altogether.

Lifting the embargo would not represent a victory for the Castros, or for communism. Instead, it represents a new strategy to achieve a familiar objective: ending the rule of a cruel, repressive regime.

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