

U.S. - Cuba Normalization: Is Impasse Inevitable?

Archibald R. M. Ritter, FOCAL, Ottawa, and Emeritus Professor, Carleton University

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In a recent series of articles focusing on President Obama, “Comrade” Fidel Castro stated that Obama shared responsibility the “genocide” against the Palestinians. This outrageous accusation is not a helpful way to begin a dialogue with the United States aimed at U.S.-Cuba normalization. Is Fidel trying to sabotage any process of constructive dialogue before it starts – as he has done before? Fortunately, Fidel no longer speaks seriously for Cuba.

Raul Castro, more constructively, has stated that he is willing to enter into a “dialogue” with President Obama. However, he is insistent that there be no U.S. interference in domestic Cuban affairs, no “carrot and stick approach,” and no threat to Cuba’s sovereignty.

For his part, Obama in 2004 called for an end to the embargo. But last year during the election campaign, he referred to the embargo as an “important inducement for change” and proposed conditions for rapprochement: “If you take steps towards democracy, beginning with the release of political prisoners, we will take steps to begin normalizing relations.” (R. Cohon, “The End of the Revolution”, New York Times, 5/12/2008.) He also stated that he would lift the restrictions on remittance payments to Cuba and travel by Cuban-Americans and close the Guantanamo prison, but these are issues of a mainly US internal character.

So although there has been a “softening” of positions on both sides, an impasse appears probable, with President Obama requiring internal political changes that a Raul Castro Government will not accept and that successor governments may not accept for some time.

Basic political liberalization within Cuba would require not just the release of political prisoners but more fundamentally, an abolition of the monopoly role of the Communist Party of Cuba. The Party’s authority is enshrined in Article 5 of the Constitution which can only be amended with a 66.6% majority in the National Assembly which is controlled by the Party which in turn has been controlled by the President. Will the Party willingly terminate its own political monopoly? This is unlikely.

A continuing impasse would hurt both countries. Cuba would benefit greatly from normalization. It would acquire a major export market, though at present its exports are limited mainly by production constraints. It would obtain some lower cost imports from the U.S. (However, Cuba already imports large quantities of foodstuffs from the U.S. - \$US 650 million in 2008 versus \$CDN 85 million from Canada in 2007.) There would be a huge increase in tourism from the U.S.: pent-up demand for “curiosity

tourism” as well as convention, medical, family, cruise-ship, and “snow-bird” tourism. The ending of the external threat would permit further down-sizing of the armed forces and the shifting of resources to more productive uses. Increased inflows of foreign investment, technology, finance and entrepreneurship would occur. Ultimately, a major benefit could be the return of Guantanamo Bay. One hopes that changes within Cuba also would result in political democracy and human rights as articulated in the UN “Universal Declaration...,” plus a strong economy and improved living standards.

For the United States, normalization would end a 50-year policy failure. Its approach has damaged its relations with Latin America and the world, isolating the U.S. but not Cuba. The U.S. would gain from normal economic interaction. South Florida would become a major economic “hub” for U.S.-Cuba economic activity. Most important, American and Cuban citizens and families could co-exist normally.

At present, it appears that the Obama Administration will end the restrictions on Cuban American travel and remittances. The process might end at this stage. But Cuba could respond constructively, perhaps by ending the 10% tax on US dollar remittances and releasing all political prisoners. The US then might respond positively with “dialogue” leading to measures such as freeing travel to Cuba for all American citizens, closing Radio Marti, and freeing investment, financial and trade flows. Again, Cuba might terminate the process at this point with no authentic democratization.

The April 17, 2009 Summit of the Americas in Trinidad and Tobago is an ideal venue for the presentation by President Obama of a new U.S. approach towards reconciliation and normalization with Cuba. The “carrot and stick” plus “pre-conditions” approach would lead to an impasse. But a broader and deeper approach that ended the embargo, dropped the “Helms-Burton” bill, dropped the “terrorist state” designation, and supported Cuba’s return to organizations such as the OAS and the Inter-American Development Bank, among other measures will generate forces for change within Cuba that will in time be overwhelming.

Cuba’s “siege mentality” will dissipate when the U.S. stops “waving the big stick” and when there is no longer a credible external threat. The pretext for outlawing basic freedoms and democracy in Cuba will then disappear. The Communist Party undoubtedly will try to maintain its monopoly. However, the groups favoring the status quo within Cuba will lose support internationally as well as domestically. In time, the opposition forces demanding political and economic change will be overwhelming. The political status quo will be unsustainable. It will be a difficult process, but Cuba will find its way to democracy.