The Alternative in Cuba

written by Samuel Farber | December 28, 2014

On December 17, 2014, Washington and Havana agreed to a path-breaking change in a relationship that, for more than fifty years, was characterized by the United States' efforts to overthrow the Cuban government, including the sponsorship of invasions, naval blockades, economic sabotage, assassination attempts, and terrorist attacks.

The new accord set free the remaining three members of the "Cuban Five" group held in U.S. prisons since 1998 and, in exchange, Cuba freed the American Alan Gross and Rolando Sarraf Trujillo, a previously unknown U.S. intelligence agent imprisoned on the island for almost twenty years, in addition to over fifty Cuban political prisoners. Far more consequential are the resumption of official diplomatic relations and the significant relaxation of travel restrictions and remittances to Cuba.

The agreement covers the political normalization but not the full economic normalization of relations: that would require Congress repealing the Helms-Burton Act, signed into law by President Clinton in 1996.

Past Failures

There were previous efforts to resume political and economic relations between the two countries since the United States broke ties in early 1961. The most important was undertaken by the Carter administration, which in pursuing an initiative originally undertaken by Nixon, renewed secret negotiations with the Cuban government in 1977, when the Cuban exile right-wing in South Florida was still a negligible political force.

The two countries made mutual concessions that included the establishment of diplomatic “interest sections” in Washington and Havana and the lifting of the ban on tourist travel to the island, a restriction later reinstated by Reagan in 1982. In the wake of the Carter-Castro negotiations, the Cuban leader released most political prisoners, of which about 1,000 left for the United States, and in 1979, Cuban-Americans were, for the first time, allowed to visit their relatives on the island.

Yet the reconciliation process came to a halt. While the presence of US troops throughout the world was taken for granted by Washington as an imperial entitlement, the deployment of Cuban forces in Africa became an obstacle to the normalization of relations. Many in the US blamed Castro’s foreign involvement as the decisive reason for the collapse of the talks both under Nixon and Carter. But there were other more important factors at work.

For one thing, the Carter administration was itself divided on the question. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance supported the resumption of normal relations with Cuba, while Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter’s powerful national security adviser, opposed the move. But it was domestic political developments in the US unrelated to Cuba, that ultimately stopped the process.

The American right was becoming agitated over the negotiations concerning the transfer of the Panama Canal back to the Panamanians. In September 1977, Carter suspended negotiations with Cuba until after the Canal treaties were ratified by the Senate.

The suspension turned out to be indefinite. Faced with attack over Panama, the Carter administration decided to shore up its right flank by adopting a tougher posture on Cuba, a stance that was shortly after reinforced by the victory of the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, and by the political weakening of the Carter administration as a result of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Iranian hostage crisis.

American Capitalists Approve

Why did Obama succeed where previous US administrations failed? More than anything else, the end of the Cold War, the departure of Cuban troops from Africa, and the less militant stance of Cuba in Latin America have, through the years, qualitatively downgraded the importance of Cuba in American foreign policy, as witnessed by the fact that practically all US government strategic studies in the last two decades don’t even mention the island.

At the same time, however, the American capitalist class, except for its most right-wing fringe, has come to support not only the reestablishment of diplomatic relations, but even more so the elimination of the economic blockade. This has been the position adopted by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers in the last several years, and also the general stance taken by the business press. Business columnists have been arguing, with more than a grain of truth, that massive American investment and trade with the island would “subvert” and eventually overcome the Communist economic system, as has been happening in China and Vietnam.

Moreover, after exemptions to the U.S. economic blockade allowing the export of agricultural goods and certain processed goods to Cuba were authorized by the Trade Sanctions Reform and Export Enhancement Act of 2000, firms such as Cargill, Archer Daniel Midland and Tyson Foods got involved in trade with Cuba. After the current December 17 agreement, other corporations, such as Caterpillar and Pepsico joined in supporting it. During the last several years, dozens of business people and politicians, particularly from the South, Midwest and Southwest have been visiting the island and discussing with the Cuban government future economic prospects especially if the blockade is repealed.

Reflecting the attitude of their business constituents, many Democratic and Republican politicians, such as Arizona Senator Jeff Flake, have been advocating political and economic relations with Cuba. It remains to be seen whether these forces will be strong enough to amend, if not repeal, the Helms-Burton Act and allow for a full normalization of economic, as well as political, relations with the island.

The Exile Community is Changing

As the Cuba issue lost importance after the end of the Cold War, and as major business sectors have begun to favor economic and political relations with the country, the right-wing leadership of the Cuban exile enclave in South Florida remains the only political force firmly defending the blockade. Its political clout was particularly important in a closely divided state like Florida, where Cuban-Americans account for around 5 percent of the electorate.

But the conservative exile generation of the sixties has been dying out and by now the growing majority of the Cubans residing in Florida came to the United States since the eighties. In contrast with the older exiles, many of these people regularly visit the island and are more concerned with the welfare of their Cuban relatives than with Cuban exile politics. It is no wonder then that public opinion polls have shown that a majority of the Cubans and Cuban-Americans residing in Florida favor a change in policy leading to full relations with the island.

Nevertheless, many of these people are not yet citizens and affluent, conservative Cubans still have great power over the media and political system. The three Florida representatives in Congress of Cuban origin are still right-wing Republicans strongly committed to the blockade.

And yet the fact that Barack Obama won 48 percent of the Cuban vote (and larger proportions among younger Cubans) in the 2012 elections is a clear indication of the political trends among Cuban-Americans away from right-wing positions on Cuba. Moreover, as the Cuban-American sociologist Alex Portes has indicated, the Cubans who have arrived since 1980 generally come from modest class backgrounds in the island and are hardly distinguishable from other Latin American immigrants in socio-economic terms. One wonders about the future of the Latin American “model minority.”

The Cuban Road to China

For its part, the Cuban government has been intent to find a way to resume diplomatic relations with the United States even though this may in the long run undermine its legitimacy as it won’t be able to blame the blockade for continuing political repression and economic woes.

Ever since Raúl Castro assumed power — informally in 2006 and formally in 2008 — he has been moving towards adopting the Sino-Vietnamese model, meaning a state-capitalism that retains the monopoly of political power through the Communist Party, and that controls the strategic sectors of the economy, such as banking, while sharing the rest with a domestic and foreign private sector. But this has been a contradictory road where the Cuban government has tried to “have its cake and eat it too,” accompanying every economic change with restrictions that limit their effectiveness.

Despite the rosy picture drawn by Castro sympathizers, such as Emily Morris in *New Left Review*, the results of the Cuban government’s new policies have been meager and unable to finally overcome the long economic crisis that has gripped the island since the Soviet Union’s collapse. The real wages of state employees, who still constitute the great majority of the labor force, had only reached, in 2013, 27 percent of their 1989 levels.

Since 2008, spending on education, health, social welfare and housing have diminished as a

proportion of the state budget and gross domestic product. Furthermore, for the last several years economic growth has been low (1.2 percent in 2014) and capital investment has been a meager 10 percent of the GDP compared with the average 20 percent for Latin America as a whole.

Not surprisingly, Marino Murillo, Cuba's Minister of the Economy, has said that the island needs at least 2 billion dollars a year in investment to achieve an economic takeoff. This is the key to Castro's willingness to resume relations with the United States, especially in the light of the serious political and economic problems that Venezuela (Cuba's principal ally) and Russia are currently facing along with the relative decline in growth of the Chinese economy.

Castro has nothing to lose, since even if the Helms-Burton law is not amended or repealed, the Cuban economy is bound to benefit by the liberalization of travel and remittances recently decreed by Obama. For the Cuban leader, any benefit he obtains from the agreement may be the lever he needs to vanquish the resistance in his own bureaucratic apparatus to the full implementation of the Sino-Vietnamese model in the island.

For his part, Obama must surely be conscious of the opportunity to reassert American political influence and its economic power in Cuba, aside from other real political benefits to be gained by this new agreement in Latin America and the rest of the Global South.

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Independently of the considerations that led the governments of Cuba and the United States to reach this agreement, it is a major gain for the Cuban people.

First, because it acknowledges that the imperial power of the US was not able to coerce the imposition of its socio-economic and political system, handing a victory for the principle of national self-determination. It is up to Cubans and Cubans alone to decide the destiny of their country. Second, because in practical terms, it can improve the standard of living of Cubans and help to liberalize, although not necessarily democratize, the conditions of their political oppression and economic exploitation, making it easier to organize and act to defend their interests in an autonomous fashion against both the state and the new capitalists.

This has been the case of China, where thousands of protests occur every year to protect the standard of living and rights of the mass of the population in spite of the persistence of the one-party state.

Contrary to what many liberals thought right after the Cuban Revolution, the issue was never whether the end of the blockade would lead the Castro brothers to become more democratic. That possibility was never and is not in the cards, except for those who believe that the establishment of Cuban Communism was merely a reaction to American imperialism instead of what Che Guevara admitted was half the outcome of imperialist constraint and half the outcome of the Cuban leaders' choice.

What is real is the likelihood that the end of the blockade will undermine the support for the Castro government thereby facilitating the resistance and political formulation of alternatives to its rule.

That Cuba will be free from the grasp of U.S. imperialism even if the economic blockade comes to an end is not likely. The more "normal" imperialist power broadly experienced in the Global South will replace the more coercive and criminal one of the blockade era, especially if a successful alliance develops between American capital and the native state capitalists of the emerging Sino-Vietnamese model, as it happened in China and Vietnam. Even at the purely political level, there are many conflicts that are clearly foreseeable, like, for example, one that was left unmentioned in the Obama-

Castro agreement involving the return of revolutionary exiles, such as Assata Shakur, to prison in the United States.

With the passing of the historic generation of revolutionary leaders within the next decade, a new political landscape will emerge where left-wing opposition political action may resurface and give strength to the nascent critical left in Cuba. Some may argue that since socialism of a democratic and revolutionary orientation is not likely to be on the immediate agenda, there is no point to put forward such a perspective. But it is this political vision advocating for the democratic self-management of Cuban society that can shape a compelling resistance to the economic liberalization that is likely to come to the island.

By invoking solidarity with the most vulnerable, and calling for class, racial and gender equality, a movement can build unity against both the old and the emerging oppression.

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