

Cuban Protests and the American Reaction

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written by Dan La Botz | July 21, 2021



Which way for U.S.-Cuban relations. And which way for Cuba?

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As thousands took to the streets in unprecedented national demonstrations in Cuba on July 11 demanding “freedom,” everyone in Cuba and the United States recognized that we are at a critical moment.

The U.S. government has long tried to regain control of Cuba, which from 1898 to 1959 it held in a neocolonial relationship. The Cuban Revolution of 1959 freed the island from U.S. control and nationalized U.S. oil companies and plantations, and its leader Fidel Castro proclaimed the country would establish socialism. In the early 1960s he aligned Cuba with the Soviet Union, which provided economic support, so Cuba became a central issue in the Cold War. The U.S. CIA organized an invasion of Cuba in 1961, and in 1962 Washington became involved in a struggle with the Soviet Union to remove missiles it had placed in Cuba, a conflict that threatened worldwide nuclear war. While the missiles were removed, the U.S. tightened its embargo on trade with Cuba that over decades became more restrictive.

The fall of the Soviet Union led in 1991 to a deep economic crisis. Cuba’s government responded by encouraging Spanish investment in hotels, Canadian mining, French development of oil, and billions in other European ventures. Periodically Castro opened markets for Cuban farmers’ products, but failed to carry out a systematic agricultural reform to provide more food. While Cuba had excellent educational and health systems, the standard of living otherwise remained low and democratic rights non-existent. The COVID pandemic, however, led in 2021 to a breakdown of the health system, a lack of medications, and a deepening of the economic crisis. All of this led to July 11.

In the United States—though everyone said they supported “the Cuban people”—responses fell into three categories: Those who wanted to reestablish capitalism in Cuba and U.S. domination, those who supported the Cuban Communist government, and those who called for an end to the U.S.

embargo but also for democracy in Cuba.

Former Republican President Donald Trump—no friend of protest in his own country—declared, “I stand with the Cuban people 100% in their fight for freedom.” The Cuban-American community in Miami and across the country organized demonstrations supporting the Cuban protests, with many calling for the overthrow of the Communist government. Some called for U.S. intervention.

At the other extreme, some Americans on the left rallied to support the Cuban Communist government against the protestors. The Democratic Socialist of America’s International Committee issued this statement: “DSA stands with the Cuban people and their Revolution [that is, with the government] in this moment of unrest. End the blockade.” DSA’s support for the Cuban government comes after its recent demonstration of support for Nicolás Maduro’s government in Venezuela.

President Joe Biden, who has been reasserting U.S. power, declared his support for the Cuban protests: “The United States calls on the Cuban regime to hear their people and serve their needs at this vital moment rather than enriching themselves.” He also called Cuba a “failed state” and Communism a “failed system,” but did not support calls for U.S. intervention. He did not, however, lift Trump’s enhancements to the embargo or permit remittances to Cuba.

Alexandra Ocasio Cortez, leading spokesperson for the American left, stated, “I outright reject the Biden administration’s defense of the embargo. It is never acceptable for us to use cruelty as a point of leverage against everyday people.” But she also condemned Cuban President Díaz-Canel for his repression, saying, “We stand in solidarity with the Cuban people and condemn the suppression of the media, speech and protest.” I agree with her.