



Cuba and Trump: the power of symbols

by Lorena Ruano

On Friday 16 June, President Trump announced a ‘reversal’ of the *détente* towards Cuba that Barack Obama had initiated, on the grounds that the human rights situation on the island has not improved. Despite the strong rhetoric of the announcement, the measures adopted do not amount to much in practical terms: a prohibition on doing business with firms linked to the Cuban military and some travel restrictions for non-Cuban Americans. This is unlikely to have visible effects on the ground for Cubans, who have been living under the US embargo for more than half a century. In fact this renewed antagonism is only likely to further legitimise the Castro regime, as human rights organisations have warned.

Rather, the announcement matters for the symbolism it carries, especially for the (ever-shrinking) sector of American public opinion who, like Senator Marco Rubio, still support a hard line against Havana. Symbols have always been particularly important when dealing with Cuba, a small and poor country that does not actually pose a real security threat to the US.

The normalisation of US-Cuban relations promoted by Obama also had its most potent effects in the symbolic sphere. It was aimed at setting a different tone that could, in time, lead to a more constructive relationship between (former) foes. In Obama’s own words, it was a ‘first step’. It did not constitute too radical a change in practical terms; it did not even come near lifting the historical embargo, or

returning Guantánamo to Cuban control. Obama removed some travel and business restrictions for American citizens in order to encourage people-to-people contact, re-opened the US embassy, and paid a historic visit to Havana in March 2016. Last January, just days before leaving office, he decreed the end of the so-called ‘wet foot, dry foot policy’, by which any Cuban found on US soil was entitled to apply for citizenship – if not caught at sea, crossing the Strait of Florida, in which case they were deported back. Cubans are now to be treated like any other migrants – a move welcomed by the Cuban authorities, but tough on those still planning to flee the island.

A symbolic reversal

Despite making the announcement in the Little Havana neighbourhood of Miami, surrounded by radical anti-Castro *émigrés*, Trump did not undo most of the normalisation measures, which had already yielded immediate and visible results. Removing them now would have entailed some costs for ordinary US and Cuban citizens who have benefited from them. Tourism has expanded rapidly: there was a 79% increase in visitors between 2015 and 2016, amounting to 285,000 of the 4 million tourists visiting Cuba every year.

Six US airlines have established 20 daily commercial flights to the island, four cruise companies have started shoring up their vessels at Cuban ports, and US companies like Marriott are administering

state-owned hotels. Airbnb has opened for business in Cuba and Google Play offers access to download most of its apps. By some estimates, restricting these new activities could have cost the US economy \$6.6 billion and more than 12,000 jobs. It is still unclear what will be the real impact of the new restrictions, as much will depend on how they will be implemented and how the phrase ‘enterprises that belong to the military’ is interpreted – since there is almost no private sector in Cuba and the state is run by the military. Trump did not reinstate the ‘wet foot, dry foot’ policy either, as it would backfire by immediately increasing migration.

A full reversal of the normalisation policies could have been politically costly too: according to a 2016 Pew Centre survey, 75% of Americans approved Obama’s actions. Even among Cuban *émigrés* in Florida, things had started to change in recent years. Those who advocated a hard line are now getting older and becoming a minority, while the new generation is more interested in sending remittances to help family members left behind in the island. Still, Florida voted for Trump last November, and its governor – a Republican who is very critical of the *détente* – had already started making life difficult for those Florida ports from which vessels headed to Cuba were departing. Irrespective of what Cuban-Americans think (they are clearly divided), this is the latest example of President Trump taking a foreign policy decision just to be seen undoing whatever his predecessor did.

Critics of the normalisation promoted by Obama argued that it did not improve the human rights situation on the island, and that it was a gift to the Castro regime without anything given in return. The truth is that, since 2014, the US had managed to discreetly extract cooperation from the Cuban authorities in the areas of money laundering, human and drug trafficking, and port and airport security. That cooperation is compromised now, as it was built upon confidence which, in turn, depends on symbols and gestures.

Preparing for a post-Castro Cuba?

On human rights, decades of hostility had not advanced the prospect of regime change either, so Obama decided to adopt a more pragmatic strategy: perhaps engagement could work where confrontation had failed. Even if his *détente* did not promote democratisation as such, at least it positioned the US more favourably for the moment when it occurred. This calculation was also behind the EU’s negotiation of a Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement (PDCA) with Cuba which started in

2014, with the agreement eventually signed on 16 December 2016. The EU was able to lift the Common Position that prevented it from cooperating with Cuba precisely because of the change in atmosphere prompted by Obama. And this is why, even if the US returns to a hostile attitude, it is probably in the EU’s best interest to continue with its policy of engagement. After Venezuela, the EU is Cuba’s most important trade partner and investor, so it will have considerable influence if and when change occurs.

There is a sense that change in Cuba is inevitably coming. Venezuela, in the throes of a profound crisis, is no longer subsidising the regime, and Raúl Castro, now 84, has already announced the handing over of power to a new generation of leaders next year. The death of his brother, Fidel, the historic leader of the revolution and the staunchest enemy of any rapprochement to the US, last November, confirmed that the day of reckoning is approaching fast. Presumably, this change will unfold with maximum caution and minimum speed on the part of the Cuban authorities, who do not want to lose control of the process. They fear a Soviet Union-type of collapse, and a massive takeover by Miami *émigrés*.

Having a working relationship with the Cuban government is also important because of its reverberations at the regional level, where symbolism is again powerful. For Latin America and the Caribbean, historically weary of US hostility towards Cuba, the recent announcement by Trump is yet another affront that revives centuries-old anti-American sentiment. Moreover, Havana’s cooperation is indispensable to address the deepening Venezuelan crisis, just as it was for agreeing peace in Colombia

Keep calm and carry on

For the EU, whose decision to repeal its Common Position on Cuba was warmly welcomed across Latin America, this is yet again an opportunity to present itself as an alternative force on the international scene, a moderating influence, and a reasonable partner. And that is just what Latin America will probably be looking for at the upcoming bi-regional EU-CELAC summit in San Salvador next October.

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