

The Backlash to U.S.-Cuba Normalization and the Misuse of Human Rights

**By Peter Bolton, Research Fellow
Council on Hemispheric Affairs**

In the bitter campaign to reverse the normalization of U.S.-Cuba relations that has been driving forward since December 2014, human rights have again entered center stage. Critics of President Obama's rapprochement with the Cuban government are "claiming vindication this week," according to yesterday's front-page article in *The Washington Time* titled "Cuba's Communists dig in despite Obama's outreach." The article claims that Communist Party hardliners are maneuvering to cement their grip on power once Raul Castro steps down from the country's presidency in 2018. This charge is based on news that the Cuban leader will nonetheless remain in his post as first secretary of the Communist Party and that fellow "old-line enforcer of party orthodoxy" Jose Ramon Machado will retain his post as the party's second-in-command. The article cites Ana Quintana, a Latin America and Western Hemisphere policy analyst at The Heritage Foundation and a former student trainee at the Defense Intelligence Agency,¹ who argues that, "by every indicator, in terms of progress, this was a sign of failure."²

Apparently for Quintana, this later development proves beyond a doubt that every last one of President Obama's overtures of the last two years, from reopening the Cuban Embassy to removing Cuba from the list of state sponsors of terrorism, "have only served to embolden the Cuban government." As a result of this policy of appeasement, "the Castro government's treatment of human rights and democracy activists has grown only more harsh." Yet, the *Times* hastens to add, not all is lost since Washington "does still hold one key bit of leverage – the continuing U.S. embargo on most direct trade with Cuba." In the final paragraph the article notes that Republicans in Congress won't accept an end to the embargo "without clear evidence that the government in Havana has taken steps to improve its record on human rights."³

The Cuban American Hardliner Faction

Leading this charge, of course, are members of congress from the Cuban-American exile hardline faction, who have made the isolation campaign against Cuba the centerpiece of their political careers. For these anti-Castro fanatics, even the slightest dent to the economic embargo or the most modest of moves to reestablish diplomatic relations represents a betrayal of the cause of ousting the Cuban government. The two major figures of this faction in the House of Representatives, Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart, both of whom represent South Florida districts with large Cuban exile populations, not only have

¹ <http://www.heritage.org/about/staff/q/ana-quintana#>

² "Red-led future for Cuba seen as 'failure' for Obama," Guy Taylor, *The Washington Times*, April 21, 2016.

³ *Ibid.*

been the embargo's fiercest advocates and staunchest defenders, but also in many cases led the legislative efforts that have maintained and expanded its reach. As would be expected, they have been putting all of their political might into pushing back against normalization, to which they have responded with a level of vitriol unmatched in American politics in recent memory. They are fighting aggressively to keep the embargo in place.

Like their ideological allies at the Heritage Foundation and *The Washington Times*, the exile hardliners frequently present concern for human rights as the moral foundation upon which their policies are built. In a statement this month in response to the State Department's release of the 2015 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for Cuba, Ros-Lehtinen said: "Despite concession after concession from this administration, human rights in Cuba are not improving and Obama has only cemented his legacy as dupe of the Castro regime."⁴ In statements made to the House floor on March 21 and March 22 in response to Obama's visit to the island, Ros-Lehtinen used the term "human rights" a total of eleven times.⁵ In a similar statement, Mario Diaz-Balart castigated the president for making a trip to "embrace a brutal, murderous dictator in yet another shameful capitulation."⁶ One would think from such statements that Cuba truly stands on a level all of its own when it comes to the violation of human rights. Yet as *The Atlantic* pointed out last year, the United States has diplomatic relations with all but three countries in the world.⁷ Either only these three countries have worse human rights records than Cuba, or else there is something seriously amiss about the exile faction's use of human rights arguments in defense of their hardline Cuba policies.

Hijacking Human Rights

The election of these politicians to congress in the late 1980s and early 1990s, far from being the beginning of efforts to use U.S. power to achieve regime change in Cuba, was in fact the culmination of a political project stretching back to the 1960s. Following the settlement in South Florida of Cubans who fled the 1959 Cuban revolution, a network soon formed with the explicit aim of overthrowing the Cuban government and returning the old guard to power. Made possible by the creation of a web of well-financed political organizations in Miami and Washington, the Cuba lobby emerged in the 1980s as a formidable force on Capitol Hill. Ros-Lehtinen, Diaz-Balart, and his brother, former congressman Lincoln Diaz-Balart, stood for congress to provide the movement with influence on the inside and soon became the lobby's major figureheads.

⁴ Obama's Legacy as Castro Regime Dupe Cemented as State Department Admits Cuba's Human Rights Record Has Not Improved, Says Ros-Lehtinen, Press Release, April 13, 2016, Office of Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Accessed April 21, 2016: <https://ros-lehtinen.house.gov/press-release/obama%E2%80%99s-legacy-castro-regime-dupe-cemented-state-department-admits-cuba%E2%80%99s-human-rights>

⁵ Ros-Lehtinen on House Floor: Obama Smiles in Front of Image of Murderer Che Guevara; Arrests of Pro-Democracy Leaders By Castro Regime Continue, Press Release, March 22, 2016, Office of Rep. Ileana Ros-Letinen, Accessed April 21, 2016: <https://ros-lehtinen.house.gov/press-release/ros-lehtinen-house-floor-obama-smiles-front-image-murderer-che-guevara-arrests-pro>

⁶ Diaz-Balart: Instead of Shaking Blood-Stained Hands of Cuban People's Oppressors, President Obama Should Meet With Courageous Pro-Democracy Activists, Press Release, March 19, 2016, Office of Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart, Accessed April 21, 2016: <https://mariodiazbalart.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/diaz-balart-instead-of-shaking-blood-stained-hands-of-cuban-peoples>

⁷ After Cuba: The Only 3 Countries That Have No Relations With the U.S., Matt Schiavenza, *The Atlantic*, July 1, 2015, Accessed April 21, 2016: <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/07/cuba-us-embassy-bhutan-relations/397523/>



But when they entered congress in the late 1980s and early 1990s, human rights discourse was not their primary instrument of choice. Rather, they employed the standard Reaganite anti-communism of the American right that had become fashionable in the McCarthy era and was still a potent tool in whipping up red scare. Indeed, Ros-Lehtinen gave a nod to this earlier discourse in her March response to President Obama's visit by pointing to a poster of Reagan's "tear down this wall" moment, which she contrasted scathingly with Obama's "spirit of openness" with the Cuban government.⁸ But with the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, this tactic had lost its force and the Cuban-American exiles were left without their main ideological weapon. With this gaping hole in their propaganda arsenal, the emerging discourse of human rights provided a convenient tool. With increasingly fire and brimstone-type rhetoric, the exiles began using the language of human rights to portray Cuba as a rogue state unparalleled in its depravity and hence uniquely deserving of such aggressive treatment by the United States. Amongst these claims are the accusations that the Cuban government holds political prisoners, suppresses political dissent, restricts freedom of the press, lacks "free and fair" elections, and politicizes its health and education systems.

Certainly, such concerns should not be dismissed out of hand just because of who is raising them. But the contradictions emerge when one puts their use of human rights discourse in terms of their wider human rights and foreign policy political positions, not to mention the broader context of U.S. power in Latin America and around the world. A deeper investigation of the trajectory of their political careers shows that their concern for human rights apparently expands only as far as the Florida Straits. For while they seemingly have no shame in hijacking human rights themes in their justification of the embargo, they appear willing to completely overlook human rights abuses when they are committed by regimes that happen to be friendly to Washington's economic agenda for the region. To contrast their stance on Cuba with their stance toward other countries in the region and around the world, consider, for example, the case of political prisoners. Both Ros-Lehtinen and Diaz-Balart mentioned political prisoners in their denunciations of Obama's recent visit and frequently accuse the Cuban government of sending opponents to "gulags" purely for reasons of conscience. According to the so-called Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, there are 51 political prisoners in Cuba at the present time.⁹ To be sure, 51 political prisoners is 51 too many (assuming, that is, that this figure is even accurate). But it is interesting to compare the situation in Cuba with, say, Colombia, which has, according to some estimates, 5,000 political prisoners.¹⁰ In addition, Colombia is amongst the most dangerous countries in the world to be a trade unionist¹¹ or a journalist.¹²

⁸ Ros-Lehtinen on House Floor: Obama Smiles in Front of Image of Murderer Che Guevara; Arrests of Pro-Democracy Leaders By Castro Regime Continue, Press Release, March 22, 2016, Office of Rep. Ileana Ros-Letinen, Accessed April 21, 2016: <https://ros-lehtinen.house.gov/press-release/ros-lehtinen-house-floor-obama-smiles-front-image-murderer-che-guevara-arrests-pro>

⁹ <http://victimsofcommunism.org/cubas-forgotten-51-prisoners-of-conscience/>

¹⁰ British academics call for release of Colombian political prisoner, Dr Miguel Angel Beltran, Miguel Beltran, November 3, 2010, International Network in Solidarity with Colombia's Political Prisoners, Accessed March 31, 2016: <http://www.inspp.org/news/miguel-beltran/british-academics-call-for-release-of-colombian-political-prisoner-dr-miguel-angel-beltran>

¹¹ "Despite Labor Action Plan, Colombian Unionists Still Targeted for Death," Mike Hall, April 7, 2016, AFL-CIO NOW, Accessed March 31, 2016: <http://www.aflcio.org/Blog/Global-Action/Despite-Labor-Action-Plan-Colombian-Unionists-Still-Targeted-for-Death>



The situation in Honduras provides an even more interesting case in terms of the Cuban-American exiles' double standard. The murder of Berta Cáceres last month drew international media attention to the human rights situation in Honduras, particularly for the increasing violence against human rights and environmental activists. Since the 2009 U.S.-backed Honduran coup, which removed the democratically elected government of Manuel Zelaya, the Central American country has been sliding into an ever worsening human rights and security nightmare under the presidencies of Porfirio Lobo and Juan Orlando Hernández. According even to the U.S. State Department, human rights concerns in Honduras since 2012 have included unlawful and arbitrary killings by police and inhumane prison conditions.¹³

But not only have Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and Mario Diaz-Balart declined to weigh in about human rights violations that are routinely committed in these countries, they have voted in favor of laws and treaties that expand trade with them and strengthen their security forces. They don't seem to be concerned in the slightest that the United States has been on extremely friendly terms with both, even enlarging its military bases there and providing funding for their security forces (and thereby becoming complicit in their human rights abuses).¹⁴ Their own congressional voting records are instructive in this regard. Both of them along with Marco Rubio in the Senate voted in favor of the United States-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement Implementation Act¹⁵. The trade agreement expanded trade cooperation between the two countries and has furthered corporate power despite the myriad human rights concerns raised by critics including continued intimidation and targeted violence against Colombia's labor movement.¹⁶

Writing about the situation in Honduras in *The New York Times* in 2012, Dana Frank considers why the United States has been on such close terms with a government with such a record of brutality. In explaining this seeming contradiction, she points to the influence of none other than Ileana Ros-Lehtinen. She argues that the reason is in large part "because it has caved in to the Cuban-American constituency of Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, the Republican chairwoman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and her allies."¹⁷ Together, Frank argues, they "have been ferocious about Honduras as a first domino with which to push back against the line of center-left and leftist governments that have won elections in Latin

¹² "Colombia remains one of the most dangerous countries for journalists: Press freedom NGO," Hannah Mead, Colombia Reports, May 2, 2013, Accessed March 31, 2016: <http://colombiareports.com/colombia-is-one-of-the-most-dangerous-countries-for-journalists-flip/>

¹³ Honduras 2013 Human Rights Report, U.S. State Department, Accessed March 31, 2016: <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/220663.pdf>;

¹⁴ "US Offers Funds for Colombia to Train Security Forces in Region," Adam Isaacson, May 23, 2012, Honduras Weekly, Accessed March 31, 2016: <http://www.hondurasweekly.com/editorial/item/9898-us-offers-funds-for-colombia-to-train-security-forces-in-region>; "Congressional Democrats Voice Renewed Opposition to U.S. Security Assistance to Honduras – Will Kerry Finally Listen?," Alexander Main, 24 August 2015, The Americas Blog, Accessed August 24, 2015: <http://cepr.net/blogs/the-americas-blog/congressional-democrats-voice-renewed-opposition-to-u-s-security-assistance-to-honduras-will-kerry-finally-listen>

¹⁵ <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/votes/112-2011/s163>; <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/votes/112-2011/h781>

¹⁶ "The U.S.-Colombia FTA: Still a Bad Deal for Human Rights," The Huffington Post, Lisa Haugaard, December 4, 2011, Accessed April 4, 2016: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lisa-haugaard/the-uscolombia-fta-bad-deal_b_983780.html

¹⁷ "In Honduras, a Mess Made in the U.S.," Dana Frank, The New York Times, January 26, 2016, Accessed April 7, 2016: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/27/opinion/in-honduras-a-mess-helped-by-the-us.html>



America in the past 15 years.”¹⁸ She adds, “[w]ith its American air base, Honduras is also crucial to the United States’ military strategy in Latin America.”¹⁹ When Congress members sent a letter to Secretary of State John Kerry last year expressing concern regarding the Obama administration’s request to increase security funding to Honduras for fiscal year 2016, the signatures of Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and Mario Diaz-Balart were conspicuously absent.²⁰ One could go into their positions on Saudi Arabia and Israel, but highlighting their hypocrisy doesn’t even necessitate leaving the hemisphere. Clearly, human rights violations are only of interest to them when they strengthen the case for a preordained policy of using U.S. power to advance their political aims. When it comes human rights violations of countries friendly to U.S. interests, on the other hand, they are not only silent but brazen in their complicity.

Aside from this flagrant use of selective indignation, there are other contradictions that run even deeper. For instance, using human rights language in support of the embargo lacks even internal moral and logical consistency since the embargo has *itself* been a major human rights violation. A report from The Center for International Policy states that the combined U.S. policy toward the island has “created a situation of scarcity and uncertainty that has affected all aspects of Cuban society.”²¹ According to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, “the economic sanctions have an impact on the Cuban people’s human rights, and therefore urges that the embargo be lifted.”²² Though the exiles claim that the intended target of the embargo is the Cuban government, clearly the major victims have been ordinary Cubans. It is a strange tactic to punish the human rights violations of the Cuban government with a policy that violates the human rights of the people it is purported to help. This collective punishment aspect in particular has led to the United States’ increasing isolation in the world on this issue. The UN General Assembly has voted every year since 1992 to condemn the embargo on the grounds that it violates the Charter of the United Nations and International Law.²³ The resolutions invariably pass with all in favor besides a handful of votes against and abstentions.²⁴ Interestingly, even some of the “dissident” figures that are held up as heroes by the exile crowd (including U.S. media darling Yoni Sanchez), are against the embargo for this reason.²⁵

For a final *reductio ad absurdum*, one need only look so far as the human rights record of the United States itself to show the deep hypocrisy of singling out Cuba for criticism. Whereas the United States has instigated countless wars of aggression, conducted illegal drone strikes across the globe, funded dirty wars, and propped up dictators from Latin

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ <http://www.scribd.com/doc/275218388/Honduras-Letter-to-Sec-Kerry-August-19-2015>

²¹ “The politics of suffering: the impact of the U.S. embargo on the health of the Cuban people. Report of a fact-finding trip to Cuba, June 6-11, 1993.” <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/8150565>

²² Annual Report of the Inter-American Commission On Human Rights 2011, Chapter IV

²³ UN General Assembly, Resolution 63/7, Necessity of ending the economic, commercial and financial embargo imposed by the United States of America against Cuba, A/RES/63/7.

²⁴ The United States, Israel and Palau voted against the resolution; Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia abstained. See UN General Assembly, For seventeenth consecutive year, General Assembly overwhelmingly calls for end to United States economic, trade embargo against Cuba: <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2008/ga10772.doc.htm>

²⁵ “Dissident Cuban Blogger Welcomes Move to End Embargo,” Robert Mackey and Deborah Acosta, *The New York Times*, December 17, 2014, Accessed April 4, 2016: <http://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2014/12/17/dissident-cuban-blogger-welcomes-move-to-end-embargo/>



America to the Middle East, Cuba has not been directly involved in war with another country since the 19th Century aside from direct military intervention in Angola. It has rather been at the cutting edge of medical solidarity, sending doctors to in-need countries, in some cases as the United States simultaneously sends in troops. From the use of torture and rendition to airstrikes against civilian targets, the United States, on the other hand, has cemented its position as one of the worst human rights violators in the world today. The example of Guantanamo Bay, where people from across the world have been detained in brutalizing conditions for years without charge in a stark violation of habeas corpus, is a particularly cruel irony given its location on an occupied part of Cuban land.

Destabilizing the Region

Perhaps foreseeing the articulation of such arguments against their use of human rights, the Cuban exiles have developed some secondary justifications for sanctions against Cuba. For example, they sometimes invoke the claim that the Cuban government has “destabilized the region” and given aid and support to “terrorism.” In June of last year, Ros-Lehtinen even went so far as to accuse a State Department report of “whitewashing” Cuba’s involvement in terrorism, as if the United States would suddenly go soft on a country it has disproportionately targeted for half a century.²⁶

But again, their disgust for political violence seems to be highly selective. Ros-Lehtinen seems to take no issue, for instance, with the U.S. government’s covert funding of the Contras, the Nicaraguan insurgency group it armed in violation of international law, for its violent campaign against the Sardinista government. Though neither she nor any of the other Cuban-American exiles were in congress when the votes to fund the Contras took place, Ros-Lehtinen has hosted repeated meetings with former Contra militants, whose records would not be out of place at a murder incorporated alumni gathering, at her Miami office in order to discuss strategy.²⁷

When it comes to political violence against governments they don’t like, their moral outrage turns to enthusiastic encouragement. No clearer example exists than the case of political violence against Cuba itself. Ros-Lehtinen and the Diaz-Balarts have openly supported the notorious bombers Orlando Bosch and Luis Posada Carriles,²⁸ the latter of whom admitted to the 1997 Hotel Copacabana bombing in a taped 1998 interview with journalist Ann Louise Bardach²⁹ and according to declassified FBI files in effect admitted to the 1976 Cubana Flight 455 bombing.³⁰ Far from denouncing these people with the fervor with which she reserves for the Cuban government, Ros-Lehtinen rather made Bosch’s release from

²⁶ “State Department Whitewashing Terrorism Reports for Cuba and Iran, Says Ros-Lehtinen,” June 22, 2015, Office of Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, <https://ros-lehtinen.house.gov/press-release/state-department-whitewashing-terrorism-reports-cuba-and-iran-says-ros-lehtinen>

²⁷ Ortega’s return stirs ex-Contras in US, USA Today, February 9, 2008, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/2008-02-09-4010169167_x.htm

²⁸ Miami: USAID Contractor Sponsors Tribute to Terrorist Orlando Bosch, US Peace Council, Accessed April 7, 2016: <http://uspeacecouncil.org/?p=360>

²⁹ Ann Louise Bardach, *Without Fidel: Death Foretold in Miami, Havana and Washington*, (Scribner, 2009); “Former CIA Asset Luis Posada Goes to Trial,” The Nation, Peter Kornbluh, Accessed March 31, 2016: <http://www.thenation.com/article/former-cia-asset-luis-posada-goes-trial/>

³⁰ <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB153/>



prison a central pillar of her 1989 election campaign, describing him as a hero and patriot while raising money for his legal defense fund.³¹ In the early 2000s, Ros-Lehtinen and the Diaz-Balart brothers lobbied Panama's then-President Mireya Moscoso for the release of Posada Carriles following his capture by Cuban intelligence.³² Clearly, the Cuban exiles have no problem with political violence so long as it is in the service of their own political goals and the furtherance of U.S. geopolitical power.

Disobeying the Superpower in Its Own Backyard

Given their records when taken as whole, it is a somewhat suspect position that the exile faction is motivated by a deeply felt concern for human rights or a gut-churning disgust for political violence. But if these are mere shills for their justification of aggressive treatment of Cuba, what is it that might be motivating such an extreme anti-normalization posture? What makes Cuba so uniquely deserving of such disproportionately aggressive treatment? Answering these questions is possible only by examining why they have been able to string much of the U.S. political class along with them in their political project. As the late Institute for Policy Studies scholar Saul Landau put it in an interview with *Democracy Now!*: “What did Cuba do to us? Well, the answer I think is that they were disobedient in our hemisphere and they did not ask permission to take away property; they took it away, they nationalized property. And the Washington has never forgiven them.”³³

After coming to power in 1959, the government of Fidel Castro set out a different economic path for Cuba in which, he claimed, the country's wealth and technological capacity would be harnessed in service of the national interest. In doing so, he committed what for the United States was the ultimate sin: nationalizing U.S. corporations and other U.S.-owned assets. This affront to U.S. dominance also happened to threaten the economic status of the Cuban societal elite from which the exile hardliners are descended. Like in so much of Latin America, through the process of imperialism an internal social elite was cemented as loyal servants of U.S. economic interests. By challenging U.S. hegemony, Fidel Castro also inherently challenged the dominance of those in Cuban society who benefited from it. For the exile lobby it is this crime more than anything else in the world that is the beyond the pale of moral acceptability.

Up until now their vendetta has coincided with a sufficient degree of acquiescence from much of the U.S. political class and also with a vague unspoken understanding that Cuba should be punished for its effrontery in challenging U.S. power in Washington's “back yard.” The Cuban exiles have cynically seized on this coincidence in order to advance their own goals, namely a return of their expropriated property, and above all, a return to political and economic power in Cuba, which is their ultimate goal once regime change has been achieved. Their anger at Obama's overtures is based on their frustration that a U.S. president has decided that he is no longer willing to be strung along with a policy so anomalous to the

³¹ “Twilight of the Assassins,” *The Atlantic*, Ann Louis Bardach, November 2006, Accessed April 4, 2016:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/11/twilight-of-the-assassins/305291/>

³² *Ibid.*

³³ “Will the Real Terrorist Please Stand Up: Saul Landau on U.S.-Aided Anti-Castro Militants & the Cuban 5,” June 11, 2012, *Democracy Now!*, Accessed March 31, 2016:

http://www.democracynow.org/2012/6/11/will_the_real_terrorist_please_stand



United States' wider foreign policy standards and predicated on what boils down to little more than a half century-old grudge against the government of a poor Caribbean island nation held by a few fringe politicians from its exile hinterlands.

Their feigned concern for human rights and insincere proclamations of disgust for violence are simply facets of an antiquated selective indignation strategy that has long been used to develop propaganda in support of U.S. foreign policy. Far from being guiding moral principles throughout their political careers, they have served as convenient tools, used cynically to advance a political goal with far less noble motivations.

By Peter Bolton, Research Fellow at the Council on Hemispheric Affairs

