

## **President Obama in Cuba, Another Step for the Normalization of Relations: As the U.S. President Visits Havana**

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Since the White House's announcement of the normalization of bilateral relations with Cuba in December 2014, the Obama administration has been accelerating a widely acclaimed "new course on Cuba." On March 20, President Obama and the first lady began their historic visit to Cuba. This is the first time a sitting President and First Lady of the United States have visited Cuba in nearly 90 years.<sup>1</sup> The Obama administration initiated its milestone trip by deepening a series of bilateral ties between the two nations. On March 15, a further step towards the stabilization of relations was taken by the White House.

On March 15, the Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) and the Department of Commerce's Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) announced their intention of further reducing the sanctions against Cuba.<sup>2</sup> Some of these changes have taken place since this announcement. U.S. citizens are now allowed to, both individually and in groups, travel to Cuba as long as it is an educational activity with a full-time schedule under the auspices of a bona fide organization, and one for which records are kept. The purpose must be either to "enhance contact with the Cuban people, support civil society in Cuba, or promote the Cuban people's independence from Cuban authorities."<sup>3</sup> Despite this, it remains illegal for U.S. citizens to travel to Cuba solely for tourist purposes.<sup>4</sup>

This change makes it legal for the Cuban nationals temporarily living in the U.S. to open a bank account, receive salaries through it, and send funds back to Cuba. Cuban athletes, artists, performers, among others, are examples of Cuban nationals who have acquired funds due to authorized pursuits. The Cuban government will also be allowed to have its transactions go through the U.S. banking system.<sup>5</sup>

The [press release](#) that the Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA) published on February 25, 2015 revealed contrasting reactions by members of the Congress and Cuban authorities, as well as friends and foes of the nationals of the two countries. Members of

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<sup>1</sup> Chastain, Bill. "Rays, Obama Set for Cuba Visit on March 22." Major League Baseball. <http://m.mlb.com/news/article/165876704/rays-obama-set-for-cuba-visit-on-march-22>. Accessed March 21, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> "Commerce and Treasury Announce Significant Amendments to the Cuba Sanctions Regulations Ahead of President Obama's Historic Trip to Cuba." Department of Commerce. March 15, 2016. <https://www.commerce.gov/news/press-releases/2016/03/commerce-and-treasury-announce-significant-amendments-cuba-sanctions>. Accessed March 21, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Congress who have the authority to determine whether or not to lift the embargo insist on refusing to negotiate with the Castro regime, which shows no signs of abandoning its oppressive far-leftist structures. Republican presidential candidate Ted Cruz, who has a Cuban background, has denounced Obama's foreign policy on Cuba immediately and frequently.

Cuba, on the other hand, is welcoming this shift in U.S. policy toward the country and calls for further dialogue<sup>6</sup>, nevertheless unwilling to renounce its current political system in its entirety. On March 8, Cuba's official newspaper, *Granma*, reported in its website's editorial article about the government's welcoming stand in regard to U.S. president's visit. However, *Granma* underscored Cuba's unwillingness to renounce its system by quoting Raul Castro's rhetoric:

*"We will not renounce our ideals of independence and social justice, or surrender even a single one of our principles, or concede a millimeter in the defense of our national sovereignty. We will not allow ourselves to be pressured in regards to our internal affairs. We have won this sovereign right with great sacrifices and at the cost of great risks."*

Responding to this biting rhetoric, Raul Castro also expressed Cuba's interest in pressing the U.S. Congress to lift the U.S. embargo and in campaigning to return Guantanamo to Cuba, which would be another platform for pressing tensions over the visit. Washington would make a tragic mistake if it misinterprets Havana's interest in a thaw by demanding too much and too soon.

The changes, delivered and called for, reflect presidential intent, but not necessarily the eager consent of Congress, which is key for the progress of the present dialogue between the two nations. <sup>7</sup> Congress criticizes human rights violations in opposition to the normalization of relations. COHA wrote in a [statement](#) on July 29, 2015, if "a clean human rights record and American democratic values were the standard for normalized diplomatic relations with other countries, then the United States would be at a loss for friends in most regions of the world," including Bahrain, Egypt, Vietnam, and China, Saudi Arabia, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua and a host of other countries. The fact should not be disregarded that the population of Cuban-Americans, who traditionally oppose better relations between the U.S. and Cuba, is now diminishing in size. <sup>8</sup> Fifty-one percent of them rejoice in Obama's approach to Cuban relations, yet it is true that there are others who feel betrayed or neglected, especially among the older generations of exiles.<sup>9</sup>

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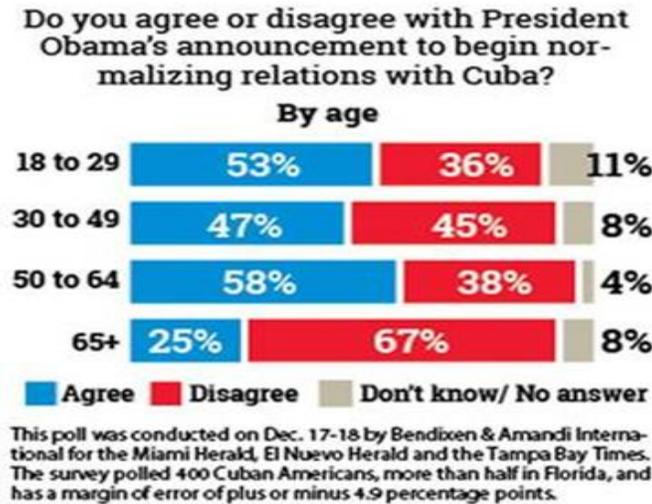
<sup>6</sup> Cores, Richard. "United States Embassy in Havana, Cuba: A Vital Step Toward a New Path of Engagement." COHA. July 29, 2015. <http://www.coha.org/united-states-embassy-in-havana-cuba-a-vital-step-toward-a-new-path-of-engagement/>. Accessed March 21, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> 智之, 川合. "米、キューバ経済制裁を一部解除 オバマ大統領の訪問控え." : 日本経済新聞. March 16, 2016. <http://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXLZO98488290W6A310C1FF2000/>. Accessed March 21, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> CAPUTO, MARC, and JOEY FLECHAS. "Poll: Cuban-Americans Split on Obama's Cuba Policy." *Miamiherald*. December 19, 2014. <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/miami-dade/article4701411.html>. Accessed March 21, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Whitefield, MIMI. "U.S.-Cuba Relations: Plenty to Work on in 2016." *Miamiherald*. January 6, 2016. <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/cuba/article53901410.html>. Accessed March 21, 2016.

A poll conducted by Bendixen and Amanti International showed the following:



Although garnering the approval of Congress is unlikely to happen imminently, with the majority of both branches of government occupied by Republicans opposed to the current U.S. agenda toward Cuba, the announcement of March 15 looks likely to improve people-to-people contact between the two nations.<sup>10</sup> This approach can play a significant role in creating mutual understanding to realize the normalization of relations between two countries. However, it is too soon to evaluate. *Granma* expressed its concern about the true outcome, stating: "Even though the current measure is a step towards a different relationship, we must wait to evaluate the true scope of these measures, given that three previous ones approved by the Obama administration were limited in terms of effectiveness".<sup>11</sup>

Total normalization is also challenging for the two neighboring countries, which have some profound differences to be reconciled: the U.S. desires to implement its brand of democracy and human rights in Cuba, would be exceedingly profound to Washington, whereas Cuba considers these areas to be internal matters and any intrusion into its domestic system to be a violation of its sovereignty.<sup>12</sup> Patient dialogue will be key. Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez gave President Obama notice that his speech scheduled to be delivered to Cuban people on the last day of his visit should not have the intent to circumvent the Cuban government by lobbying Cubans directly, lest it not be warmly received; its press conference took place on March 17, three days prior to the presidential visit.<sup>13</sup> The attitudes of the Cuban populous is not as cohesive. Although the average Cuban despises Castro, many take pride in the manner in which the regime has stood up to the White House. Washington easing tourism

<sup>10</sup> 智之, 川合. "米、キューバ経済制裁を一部解除 オバマ大統領の訪問控え." : 日本経済新聞. March 16, 2016. <http://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXLZO98488290W6A310C1FF2000/>. Accessed March 21, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> ACN. "Anuncian Nuevas Medidas Parciales Del Gobierno De Obama Hacia Cuba." *Granma*. March 15, 2016. <http://www.granma.cu/mundo/2016-03-15/anuncian-nuevas-medidas-parciales-del-gobierno-de-obama-hacia-cuba-15-03-2016-18-03-59>. Accessed March 21, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Cores, Richard. "United States Embassy in Havana, Cuba: A Vital Step Toward a New Path of Engagement." COHA. July 29, 2015. <http://www.coha.org/united-states-embassy-in-havana-cuba-a-vital-step-toward-a-new-path-of-engagement/>. Accessed March 21, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Granma. "Press Conference by Cuban Foreign Minister - Live." *Granma*. March 17, 2016. <http://en.granma.cu/cuba/2016-03-17/press-conference-by-cuban-foreign-minister-live>. Accessed March 21, 2016.

flights to Cuba and lifting the travel ban to Cuba is a win-win outcome for islanders, except for those without easy access to dollars. There is already no doubt that Cuba will soon come to dominate the Caribbean tourism industry, and the lifting of restrictions will render it no longer necessary for Cubans to make a difficult choices between Cuba and the U.S.

President Obama and his family arrived in Cuba on Sunday afternoon. On that day, he visited the cathedral to demonstrate his understanding of the importance of the Catholic Church's role in Cuban society. On Monday, he began the official program by meeting with former President Fidel Castro in the morning and attending an event about entrepreneurship and businesses between United States and Cuba. Today, he will give a speech to Cubans dwelling on the island as well as Cuban-Americans living in the United States. He will then interact with a number of Cuban groups by meeting civil society leaders and attending a Major League baseball game thereafter.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>"Press Call to Preview the President's Travel to Cuba and Argentina." The White House. March 16, 2016. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/03/16/press-call-preview-presidents-travel-cuba-and-argentina>. Accessed March 21, 2016.