

Cuba: A Year Later, the Blockade Remains in Full Force

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This aggressive relic of the Cold War remains in force today, despite being condemned every year at the UN by the international community, even after Havana and Washington opened a new chapter in their bilateral relations December 17, 2014

The Apollo spacecraft landing on the moon, the lifting of the prohibition of alcohol in Mississippi and the end of racial segregation, are the stuff of history books in the United States. However, these three events all postdate the implementation of the economic, political and financial blockade against Cuba.

Many may wonder how it is possible that this relic of the Cold War remains in force today, despite being condemned every year at the UN by the vast majority of the international community, even after Havana and Washington opened a new chapter in their bilateral relations.

The economic damages are estimated at hundreds of billions of dollars, but the human cost of a policy designed to exhaust the Cuban people through hunger and desperation is almost impossible to calculate.

After more than half a century, the main U.S. authorities recognize that this policy has failed to achieve its objectives and it is time to “try something different.”

Experts, academics and politicians from both sides of the Florida Straits spoke to Granma regarding their visions on the future of the blockade and the possibility that its days may be numbered.

The Final Blow

Although the president has broad executive powers to change the application of the blockade, the U.S. Congress is the only body that can eliminate it completely, as the policy has been codified in law since 1996 through the Helms-Burton Act.

The current scenario in the U.S. legislature is tense, with the Republicans, who enjoy a majority in both Houses, strongly opposed to the Democratic executive.

“A policy of over half a century can not be removed at once, it would require an extraordinary consensus which is currently unthinkable in the U.S. Congress, particularly given the phenomenon of political polarization we are witnessing,” Carlos Akira de la Puente, professor and researcher at the Center for Hemispheric and United States Studies (CEHSEU) of the University of

Havana, told Granma.

Akira added that it is important to consider is that there are sectors within the Republican ranks that are in favor of removing the blockade, indicating a new approach within this party, traditionally opposed to a rapprochement with Cuba.

President Barack Obama himself acknowledged in a recent interview the growing bipartisan support for a change of policy toward Cuba, opening up the possibility for action by Congress.

U.S. lawyer Robert Muse, specializing in Cuba, recalls that within the U.S. political system, it is much harder to repeal legislation than to approve it. He cites as an example the ruling regarding the Havana Club trademark, which went through Congress as a draft budget bill consisting of hundreds of pages, yet over 20 years later remains in force despite violating international treaties and the attempts to render it ineffective.

“Indifference is the key characteristic of the Congress of the United States,” Muse notes.

Visiting Professor of the Center for Global Affairs of the New York University, Arturo López-Levy, highlights that a “significant blow” could dismantle the blockade completely due to the level of interconnection between the respective parts. “The embargo (blockade) is a half-sunken ship awaiting a torpedo to strike below the waterline.”

López-Levy particular emphasizes that the travel ban to Cuba for U.S. tourists remains in force and is a key component of the policy of aggression toward the island.

Dismantling Step by Step

There are currently several draft bills passing through the U.S. legislature aimed at dismantling aspects of the blockade. The level of support and chances of success vary according to each of these.

“The embargo (blockade) has many layers imposed over time in different laws. I believe some aspects will be lifted sooner than others. For example, the right to travel to Cuba, including as a tourist, could be reestablished before the complete removal of the embargo (blockade) as U.S. citizens have a constitutional right to travel,” U.S. Professor William M. LeoGrande, co-author of the book *Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations between Washington and Havana*, stated.

Equally, he assures that the ban on granting credit to Cuba in order to buy food could be lifted as there is strong support from the agricultural lobby.

“The draft bill which is closest to being approved by Congress is that which would allow travel to Cuba. Survey after survey demonstrate how strongly Americans reject this ban. The most recent indicates that 81% of both Democrats and Republicans are opposed,” James Williams, president of Engage Cuba, a bipartisan coalition that lobbies Washington for an end to the blockade, explained.

Cuban Professor and researcher Carlos Alzugaray notes that partial success in regards to travel and agricultural trade are more likely in the medium term as they respond to wide interests and could be argued for in terms of citizens' rights.

In a recent interview, former Congressman Bill Delahunt, a veteran supporter of rapprochement with Cuba, told Granma that the past can serve to learn lessons and open up holes in the blockade legislation.

He recalled that several decades ago, this issue was not up for discussion and remained dominated by the representatives from Florida, however, various visits by legislators from other states to Cuba and their meetings with Fidel, began to alter the panorama.

Delahunt maintains that the success of the rapprochement, both politically and economically, is key to victory. "If we have here the interests of American traders, they will become allies. They will be our lobbyists."

"The new stage in the process has had positive impacts on expectations regarding Cuba in the United States and the rest of the world and, of course, encourages interest in relations between the two countries in terms of trade and investment, which will have a progressively far-ranging reach due to the advantages of Cuba – geographic proximity, stability and security with a highly qualified workforce – to mention but a few aspects," CEHSEU Professor and researcher, Luis René Fernández, stressed.

"These forces interested in expanding their relations with Cuba must increase their pressure on Congress to open up this possibility," he added.

An Empty Shell

The president of the United States, using his executive powers, has the authority to issue licences that leave the majority of the sanctions against Cuba without practical effect.

To date, Obama has only used these powers to influence a minimal array of elements of the application of the blockade, mainly regarding remittances, the self-employed sector and telecommunications, leaving the bulk of the blockade in place.

Various analysts agree that the chosen sectors are motivated by obvious political interests.

The president has the prerogative to make viable substantial collaboration with Cuba in traditional areas of security, as well as on a new security, educational and health agenda, the use of the air space of both countries, direct travel to Cuba from multiple U.S. cities, environmental protection, the fight against crime and human and drug trafficking, López-Levy outlined.

Likewise, he noted that multilateral cooperation between the two countries is as important as bilateral cooperation. "The greater and more comprehensive the rapprochement between the two countries, the stronger the incentives to consolidate a new strategic U.S. policy toward Cuba."

However, some analysts note that the President could limit the reach of his executive actions, based on the political scenario. Obama himself has said that he would be "selective and cautious" in this sense.

A key area on which experts agree is that the President could concentrate on modifying aspects that hinder the application of the measures taken thus far.

“In his next decisions he should probably work to remove some of the restrictions that have been most visible in the bilateral negotiations, which could for example be associated to the use of the U.S. dollar, or the ban on granting loans to Cuban enterprises by U.S. banks,” Professor Luis René Fernández indicates.

He adds that the obstacles to monetary and financial relations, as well as investment, will also be among the most important elements on which the Obama administration could act before the end of his term.

The Time of Factor

The time factor is another key aspect of the process underway between Cuba and the United States, with Presidential elections on the horizon and just a little over a year left for Obama in the White House.

In addition, given that the changes in the policy toward Cuba have come from the executive, a president with a different position could reverse what has been done so far.

All analysts we spoke to agreed that the most important thing now is to advance and achieve concrete results.

Professor Luis René Fernández believes that the increase in exchanges and negotiations, while limited by the blockade, is contributing to speeding up the elimination of the policy, as these impact on the view of Cuba both within and outside of the United States.

“We must move forward and demonstrate that we are capable of negotiating and reaching agreement on everything that is in our interest,” Alzugaray stresses.

“While the challenges are great, the socioeconomic conditions of Cuba and the perfecting of its system are clearly being consolidated and progressing; and this is crucial to explaining the course of U.S. policy toward Cuba,” Professor Luis René concluded.

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