

Obama: End The Embargo on Cuba Before Trump Presidency

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THE election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States, where he will be in office alongside Republican Party majorities in both houses of Congress, raises new threats to Cuba.

The Obama administration has not gone far enough with its Cuba policies: the blockade is still in place, Guantanamo Bay is still illegally occupied and US interference in Cuba continues. Nevertheless, the limited progress that has taken place, including the re-establishment of diplomatic relations, has been a welcome move in the right direction.

This progress is now under serious threat from a Trump administration.

This week Trump appointed the pro-blockade lobbyist Mauricio Claver-Carone to his transition team, which may give an insight into a change in direction of US Cuba policy.

Claver-Carone is the executive director of Cuba Democracy Advocates, “a non-partisan organisation dedicated to the promotion of a transition in Cuba towards human rights, democracy and the rule of law” and he also serves on the Board of Directors of the US-Cuba Democracy Political Action Committee (USCD PAC), which describes itself as “the largest, single foreign-policy political committee in the United States.”

USCD PAC spent \$600,000 in the most recent elections, with large donations going to pro-blockade, anti-Cuba candidates including Marco Rubio.

Claver-Carone is also editor of Capitol Hill Cubans, a blog largely dedicated to attacking President Barack Obama’s Cuba policies.

“In short, Obama’s new course for Cuba has made a bad situation worse,” he writes.

A strong supporter of the blockade, he writes how “sanctions are an important tool of leverage for democratic change, particularly in a post-Castro era.”

Despite the huge fines carried out by the US Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) towards companies for trading with Cuba due to blockade legislation — which have reached over \$14 billion under the Obama administration — Claver-Carone wrote last week how “companies [...] feel protected by the Obama administration’s current policy,” and in a sign of what to expect when Trump arrives in the White House, he wrote: “That will change in 65 days.”

Florida Republican Mario Diaz-Balart, who in the House of Representatives has called for the

reversal of Obama's Cuba policies, has suggested that a change in direction will happen quickly. "All of these things that the president has done as unilateral concessions to the Castro regime, the days are numbered to all of those," he said. "I expect it to happen pronto."

Just days before the election, Mike Pence, Trump's running mate and new vice president-elect said: "Well let me make you a promise: When Donald Trump is president of the United States, we will repeal Obama's executive orders on Cuba."

"We will support continuing the embargo until real political and religious freedoms are a reality for all the people of Cuba. Donald Trump will stand with freedom-loving Cubans in the fight against communist oppression."

Trump was at one time supportive of improving relations, although he said he'd have got a "better deal" than Obama.

But he changed his line on Cuba when speaking to a Cuban-American crowd in Miami in October. He said: "All of the concessions that Barack Obama has granted the Castro regime were done through executive order, which means the next president can reverse them — and that is what I will do, unless the Castro regime meets our demands."

Recent months have shown how Trump can change his line on arguments from day to day and depending on the audience.

Without any experience in public office, the team Trump constructs around him may give an insight into his administration's Cuba policies and the appointment of Claver-Carone suggests Trump may stick to his Miami-crowd anti-Cuba line and reverse attempts towards normalisation. Many names that are being reported as candidates for high level positions are hard-line, staunch anti-Cuba politicians including John Bolton and Newt Gingrich.

Bolton accused Cuba of developing chemical weapons in 2002 when undersecretary of state for arms control and international security. And in recent months he said he'd "put them right back on the terrorism list."

Gingrich was speaker for the 1996 Helms-Burton blockade legislation and in 2011 called for a much more aggressive policy toward Cuba to bring about a "Cuban spring" and "usher in democracy." He said the US should use every "non-military tool" available against the island, including covert operations "exactly as Reagan did in eastern Europe."

The recent United Nations general assembly vote of 191 to 0 in favour (with the US and Israel abstaining) of ending the embargo demonstrates that international support for ending the US blockade and normalising relations with the island is at an all-time high.

But a Trump administration with many leading anti-Cuba figures, alongside an already hostile Republican-controlled Congress, clearly poses huge threats to Cuba.

The Cuban people have resisted over five decades of US aggression, US-backed invasion, terrorism, assassination attempts and subversion and will continue to resist and defend their independence and sovereignty.

In light of the new threats to Cuba, international solidarity is clearly now more important than ever.

The Cuba Solidarity Campaign calls on President Obama to use his executive powers to repeal those remaining parts of the blockade legislation which fall under his jurisdiction in his remaining time as president.

In the forthcoming months it is critical that we maintain pressure on the US government to continue on the path to normalise relations with Cuba and ultimately to end its 54-year blockade against the island and illegal occupation of Guantanamo Bay.

Ollie Hopkins is Cuba Solidarity Campaign campaigns officer. To hear more about the ongoing US blockade of Cuba and much more, come to the Latin America Conference on Saturday November 26, Congress House, London. For tickets and information: mstar.link/Adelante16

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