

Whither Cuba-US Relations?

Interview with author Arnold August

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In [Part 1](#), author Arnold August discussed the relationship between anarchists and communists in revolutionary Cuba as well as the development of democracy in Cuba. In December, the Obama administration made an overture toward Cuba by releasing the last of the Cuban Five and signalling a change in the relationship. Some Cuba followers are skeptical of this apparent thaw in relations.¹ In the conclusion to the interview, August gives his take take.

KP: What is your take on the seeming rapprochement between the United States and Cuba?

AA: I was overjoyed to hear that the three Cuban Five who remained in U.S. prisons were released as part of a prisoner swap. On that aspect of the December 17, 2014 U.S.-Cuba agreements, I immediately wrote an [article](#). That was the easy part. Also relatively simple was a shout of victory: at long last, the unconditional establishment of diplomatic ties and embassies was assured for the first time since the U.S. had broken off diplomatic relations with Havana in 1961. In addition, Cuba is to be removed from the U.S. arbitrary list of countries sponsoring terrorism. These decisions represent a clear victory for Cuba. The policies that President Obama is to introduce as part of the common accord consists of encouraging and widely expanding business investments, commerce, tourism and family remittances to family in Cuba. Half a million self-employed Cuban individuals are targeted as among the main beneficiaries of some of these policies. These plans and many similar ones have been requested by Cuba along with the full lifting of the blockade, which is in the hands of the Congress and not Obama. These new policies can contribute toward the improved performance of the Cuban economy and thus to the economic and social well-being of the Cuban people. In addition, the potential success of these U.S. policies from the point of view of U.S. interests may act as a lever to force Congress to allow Obama or his 2016 successor to completely lift the blockade by repealing some or all of the features that require Congressional approval.

The new Obama policies are to flourish side by side with the U.S. democracy promotion programs that remain intact; their continuation is emphasized by the fact that, in his December 17 announcement, Obama mentioned “democracy” in relationship to Cuba four times and alluded to political freedom and human rights [several other times](#). This statement was accompanied by another document released by the White House that day that spelled out even further their plans for [democracy promotion in Cuba](#). In both these statements quoted above, the White House notes that the “Castros and the Communist Party still govern Cuba.” Taken together, these converging yet conflicting factors create a very complex situation for Cuba.

On that December 17, the situation caused me to think of the public statement Fidel Castro made to his followers on January 8, 1959, just eight days after the triumph of the Revolution: "This is a decisive moment in our history: The tyranny has been overthrown, there is immense joy. However, there is still much to be done. Let us not fool ourselves into believing that the future will be easy; perhaps everything [will be more difficult in the future](#)" (my translation). I realize that one cannot at all compare the January 1, 1959 victory with the one on December 17, 2014; in the same manner, the tenuous situation existing in 1959 and the early 1960s characterized by open U.S.-sponsored terrorist attacks and the Playa Girón invasion cannot be correlated to the post-December 17 situation as it is evolving so far.

However, I continue to follow events and reactions from all over the world and the full political spectrum from left to right. And I am thus forced to remember the statement by Fidel that initially and spontaneously sprung to mind on December 17, 2014. That day ushered in an "immense joy" in Cuba and among many people in the world, and rightly so, as David was finally rewarded after more than five decades of persistent and heroic struggle against Goliath. It is this "immense joy" that at times can camouflage the adversities that in principle are supposed to have been alleviated but that in fact contain the seeds of even more difficult challenges. I believe that the situation points to the notion that "everything will be more difficult in the future." Watersheds in the history of a country can be contradictory.

The U.S. has changed its tactics while the objective remains the same: to bring Cuba into the realm of the U.S.-defined and acceptable states characterized by being capitalist and thus ipso facto devoid of its sovereignty. The soul of the danger lies in illusions about Obama and the U.S. two-party system as a vehicle for changes in the long-term objective or strategy toward Cuba as part of the overall goal of U.S. foreign policy. Kim, you have written extensively on the trap of the lesser of two evils (the Democrats and the Republicans), such as in the [2007 policies on Iraq](#) and on [Obama in 2012](#). You and many of the *Dissident Voice* readers are thus aware of this problem. I deal with it extensively in my Obama case study. I bring the "lesser evilism," as you describe it, to its logical conclusion by taking a page out of *Black Agenda Report* (California). Obama is not only the lesser of two evils, but the most effective of two evils in applying the needs of the ruling circles (*Cuba*, 25-44).

Since December 17, I have communicated by telephone and email with some of my social science colleagues in Cuba to receive input from them as professionals well as from the grassroots, of which they are part. One of the most frequent reactions has consisted in proclaiming (somewhat warily) that "we have to keep our eyes open." This reflection is put forward in the sense that there is more than meets the eye in the U.S.'s vastly increased resumption of diplomatic and commercial penetration. One person referred to my analysis of Obama in my book, for the first time admitting to fully appreciating my point on the inner workings of democracy in the U.S., when she said that Obama is indeed the most dangerous of the alternatives.

These compliments aside, I would be amiss if I were not to share with readers a transparent examination of the following. Here I am talking about Obama not only not being the lesser of two evils, but the most effective of two evils, while he has just brokered a historic change with Raúl Castro in the latter's favour and for the best interests of Cuba. Was I wrong on this issue of the two evils? This is what I wrote in late fall of 2012, when I was putting the finishing touches on my book that was released in January 2013:

Obama's differences with past U.S. policies did not consist of opening up any meaningful change toward normalization of relations. His role, based on the illusions created regarding the two-party system, was to change the tactics because they had "failed to reach the same goal of regime change." (Cuba, 36)

At the time of writing in the fall of 2012, there was no indication that some steps toward normalization were in the works. The different factors started to converge only in 2013 to contribute toward normalization in U.S.-Cuba relations. So, in a technical sense, I was wrong, as there are very meaningful steps now taking place toward normalization. Did the U.S. change its *objectives* to one that fully recognizes Cuban self-determination? Did Obama adopt the change by openly acknowledging the Cuban government as defined by its own legitimate constitutional order as sanctified by the 1976 referendum that institutionalized the socio-cultural political system in Cuba? Did the U.S. carry out an explicit and abrupt halt in its democracy promotion programs?

The answer is no to all three questions. If the U.S. did this, then my error would have been fatal in the sense that doubt would be cast on this Chapter 2 of my book on democracy in the U.S. I would, of course, gleefully welcome such a change of orientation in the U.S. objective, but this is not what is unfolding. As long as Cuba develops as a socialist country with its own political system, there will be no explicit recognition of Cuba's constitutional order. U.S. imperialism remains U.S. imperialism. It does not soften on the long-term objective of world domination. On the contrary, the statements from the Obama administration indicate clearly that there is a change in *tactics*, as the old tactics, promoted by the Republicans and by the Democrats before him, *did not work*. Thus, normalization of relations is relative. Compared to the situation existing before December 17, 2014, the current context is a qualitatively different one in favour of Cuba. However, as the U.S. strives to use the democracy promotion lever, the quality of the normalization of relations remains in jeopardy. This is where the situation will be "more difficult in the future."

I cannot stress enough that the change is in tactics, not goals. At the same time, Raúl Castro and the Cuban government are absolutely right in striving to take advantage of this change in *tactics*, as they brilliantly did through the December 17 events. Here is what I wrote in my book about the U.S. wealthy few:

The elites clearly saw (better than the Cuban-American Republicans themselves) the need to renovate a series of tactics. The ruling circles believed that they would be more efficient in reaching the goals (in this case) regarding Cuba. The 2008 McCain-Palin Republican team and their Republican supporters from Miami did not obtain the elites' approval. They desperately needed new tactics and a new image to fix the Cuba policy, which was "not working." Herein resides the danger of being in any way blinded by U.S.-centric, preconceived notions that the U.S. two-party system can bring about change to improve relations with Cuba. At the same time, the Cuban government, for its part, is correct in attempting to introduce the possibilities of better relations with the U.S., a goal that the majority of the people in the U.S. desire. These contingencies, even if very remote, appear to a certain extent when these tactics change. For example, when Obama alters tactics, there may seem to be an opening in the eyes of U.S. public opinion, which Obama must take into account. (Cuba, 38)

This is what Raúl Castro and the government did when they saw some differences between the old tactics and the new ones. It would have been foolhardy not to take advantage of the

situation. In fact, the Cubans were the ones who had been proposing these changes all along. Relations are improving to the extent that the measures taken by both sides involve tactics and not long-range principles or strategy. The U.S. still wants to usher in change in Cuba that involves a different type of regime, but by doing it softly and smoothly, whereas before the use of force and chaos was never ruled out. For its part, Cuba has not given in one iota to its right to self-determination and sovereignty. This was reiterated by [Raúl Castro on December 17](#) and again on December 20, when he added that there is no possibility at all that the main means of production will ever be privatized, thus remaining [in the hands of the state](#).

Thus, both sides are encamped on their respective principles and long-term strategies. The complicated and more difficult future will be faced mainly by Cuba. Almost all the inroads go one way, from the U.S. into Cuba.

The first difficulty to be faced is the cultural intrusion by the expected large quantity of American visitors through the wide-ranging types of visits now allowed thanks to the Obama executive orders. I have always noticed in Cuba that there is a weak spot among not insignificant sections of the youth, intellectuals and artists in favour of U.S. culture and virtually all things “American.” This fatal attraction is bound to be amplified as the visitors carry out the Obama program of increased number of visitors whom he *hopes* will be the best ambassadors for the American way of life, as they, according to the U.S. president, “[represent America’s values](#).” Here we are not talking merely about tactics but rather about how a change in *tactics* is geared to bring about the *objective* of doing away with revolutionary Cuba as we know it today.

It is all about objectives and principles. The political basis of this cultural blindness in Cuba is the festering illusion that the U.S. two-party system ushered in a new era with Obama. In conversation with my Cuban colleagues, one jokingly asked (perhaps with some justified apprehension) whether the streets of Havana will be the scenes of people carrying placards of Obama. Argentinian political scientist Atilio Boron echoed this foreboding note when he declared, in reference to the U.S. change in tactics, that Latin America does not need another “Obamamania.” He concludes his outstanding article (which to date has been published only in Spanish) by saying that we cannot – as Che Guevara had declared – trust imperialism “[one single iota, not at all!](#)” And this is the path Raúl Castro is following; while being flexible on tactics, he and his government and the vast majority of people are not conceding one single iota to the U.S. on questions of principle. Based on my experience in Cuba, this orientation is being pursued by the vast majority of the Cuban people, who are politically conscious and cultivated. They will not fall for the American way of life and thus respond positively to the plans of the U.S. to turn back the clock on Cuban history. Notice that I say the “vast majority”; does this mean that a small minority has a penchant for the American way of life, including capitalism? Yes, and this is bound to increase under the new conditions and thus act as fertile ground among some youth, intellectuals and artists for the realization of the U.S. objective. This is a danger that can be thwarted only by the political action of the majority.

The second difficulty that I foresee is based on the Obama administration’s tactic to single out the 500,000 people involved in the burgeoning private business sector as an excellent target of capital through the U.S. government and businesses as well as Cuban-American families. The concern about growing inequality, indicated in one of your previous questions on that theme and in my corresponding response, has the potential to worsen with the 500,000 individuals (and growing) having an edge over others in the society.

What would putting the brakes on this potential for even further inequality depend on? I would say that this is where the need for enhanced participatory democracy comes in, as outlined in my answers to your earlier questions. These private businesses and small farmers are a source of new wealth being produced; however, the goal of the Cuban socialist system requires that part of this wealth be distributed and reinvested in basic services such as health, education and increased salaries for the state sector. This is so in order to continue being as faithful as possible to the Cuban ideal of equality. Simply put, the new wealth has to be spread around, mainly through taxes. Is this being carried out? According to Raúl Castro, this was already a challenge even before December 17, 2014, as he indicated [in a speech](#) on December 20, 2014:

... a series of steps have been taken to improve tax control against indiscipline and tax evasion by both juridical and natural persons.

In this regard, we should not only penalize those who fail to comply with their duties, since impunity would be an encouragement to the infringement of the legal norms in force. We have also considered it to be necessary to promote among all institutions, enterprises, cooperatives and self-employed workers a culture of civic behavior towards taxation as well as the view that taxes are the main formula to re-distribute national income in the interest of all citizens.

In the new situation of U.S.-Cuba relations, I would like to close with a note on an issue that has emerged in some sectors of the left in the U.S. and elsewhere. Assata Shakur [describes herself](#) as “a 20th-century escaped slave. Because of government [U.S.] persecution, I was left with no other choice than to flee from the political repression, racism and violence that dominate the U.S. government’s policy towards people of color. I am an ex-political prisoner, and I have been living in exile in Cuba since 1984.” Her cause has won [wide support](#). The U.S. wants to get her back from Cuba. What does Cuba say? The young Josefina Vidal Ferreiro, head of the Cuban foreign ministry’s United States desk, [stated](#):

Every nation has sovereign and legitimate rights to grant political asylum to people it considers to have been persecuted.... We’ve explained to the U.S. government in the past that there are some people living in Cuba to whom Cuba has legitimately granted political asylum.... We’ve reminded the U.S. government that in its country they’ve given shelter to dozens and dozens of Cuban citizens, some of them accused of horrible crimes, some accused of terrorism, murder and kidnapping, and in every case the US government has decided to welcome them.

If Cuba were capitulating to the U.S. as a result of the December 17 agreements, as some on the left would suggest, Cuba would not have taken this stand on Assata Shakur. David still stands up to Goliath, as Cuba has done since 1959. The statement by Josefina Vidal also serves to support my response to your very first question on Castrocentrism. Josefina Vidal, whom I have known since 1999 as a stalwart defender of Cuba’s sovereignty and independence, is one of the 115 or so members of the Communist Party of Cuba’s Central Committee. Cuba is far from being a one-man show; there has been a tradition of collective leadership in Cuba since the inception of the current struggle in the late 1950s and which has been further developed by Raúl Castro. The words of Josefina Vidal with regard to the Assata Shakur issue are proof of this collective leadership and the capacity of many individuals to think and act on their own to defend their country and its system in this new post-December 17 situation.

Arnold August, a Canadian journalist and lecturer, is the author of [Democracy in Cuba and the 1997-98 Elections](#) and, more recently, [Cuba and Its Neighbours: Democracy in Motion](#). Cuba's neighbours under consideration are the U.S., Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador. Arnold can be followed on Twitter [@Arnold_August](#).

Notes

1. See, e.g., author Ron Ridenour's "[US-Cuba Policy Change: Score 11-1, US Wins](#)," *Dissident Voice*, 20 December 2014. [[↔](#)]

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