

Why Cuba Won't Extradite Assata Shakur

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As negotiations continue between the governments of the United States and Cuba over the normalization of relations, the U.S. State Department has claimed Cuba is willing to discuss the extradition of political refugee Assata Shakur. While it may seem that Cuba would gladly make such a seemingly minor concession in return for the promise of normalized relations, this would greatly underestimate the Cuban government's commitment to upholding its principles. Shakur need not worry that Cuba will cave for expediency's sake and send her back to the country she escaped from after being harassed and persecuted for years.

According to [The Guardian](#), a State Department spokesman said Cuba had agreed to discuss fugitives, including Shakur, whose original name was Joanne Chesimard. She was granted political asylum by Cuba in 1984 after escaping from prison in New Jersey five years earlier.

Shakur was convicted in 1977 of first-degree murder in the death of New Jersey Trooper Werner Foerster. Her conviction came despite the [facts presented](#) at trial that her fingerprints were not on any weapon at the scene; her hands had no gun powder residue; and she was shot twice while her arms were raised, which paralyzed her right arm and would have made it impossible to fire a gun.

The murder charge followed years of allegations against Shakur of murder, kidnapping and bank robbery. Between 1973 and 1977 Shakur was brought to criminal trial seven times: three resulted in acquittals, three were dismissed without trial, and one was declared a mistrial. Authorities were desperately throwing any charges they could at Shakur without evidence to back them up, smearing her as a domestic terrorist in an attempt to discredit her political beliefs.

As they had with other groups like Communists, Puerto Rican nationalists, Native American activists and members of the anti-war movement, the FBI targeted Shakur and other members of the Black Panthers for their political affiliations as part of the illegal COINTELPRO surveillance campaign.

In 1979, a seven member delegation from the [United Nations Commission on Human Rights](#) visited Shakur in prison and reported that of the victims of COINTELPRO "who as political activists have been selectively targeted for provocation, false arrests, entrapment, fabrication of evidence, and spurious criminal prosecutions ... one of the worst cases is that of Assata Shakur, who spent over twenty months in solitary confinement in two separate men's prisons subject to conditions totally unbecoming any prisoner."

The UN delegation determined that "she has never on any occasion been punished for any infraction of prison rules which might in any way justify such cruel and unusual punishment."

In an [open letter to the Pope](#) in 1998, Shakur wrote: “I was captured in New Jersey in 1979 after being shot with both arms held in the air, and then shot again from the back. I was left on the ground to die, and when I did not, I was taken to a local hospital where I was threatened, beaten and tortured. In 1977 I was convicted in a trial that can only be described as a legal lynching.”

The State Department represented last week that Cuba was “open to talks” about revoking her refugee status and sending her back to the U.S.

“We see the re-establishment of diplomatic relations and the reopening of an embassy in Havana as the means by which we’ll be able, more effectively, to press the Cuban government on law enforcement issues such as fugitives. And Cuba has agreed to enter into a law-enforcement dialogue with the United States to resolve these cases,” said Jeff Rathke, a State Department spokesman.

The State Department may believe that if they can get Cuban officials to sit down at the table with them, they will simply be able to bully them into handing over Shakur, who was added to the [FBI’s Most Wanted Terrorists List](#) two years ago.

Even though President Obama has announced his intention to remove Cuba from the list of State Sponsors of Terrorism (which they had been added to in 1982 at the same time Iraq was removed), the economic war against Cuba remains firmly in place. The economic sanctions, condemned nearly unanimously as illegal in the United Nations for 23 straight years, are written into laws of Congress such as the Helms-Burton Act and the Cuban Democracy Act.

American officials may assume they can use the embargo, which has cost Cuba more than \$1 trillion, as leverage against Cuba to force them to extradite Shakur. Such thinking would be a foolish mistake.

While the Cuban government rightfully wishes for an immediate end to the embargo, there are principles they will not forsake to make it happen. For Cuba, the issue of refugees is a matter of sovereignty. After being a colony of Spain for hundreds of years, then a neo-colony of the United States for more than 60 years more, the value Cuba places on their sovereignty cannot be overstated. Revolutionary leaders such as Fidel and Raúl Castro were, and are, fervent nationalists.

In this context, one should view any demands that Cuba would perceive as an infringement on their sovereignty. The Guardian article states that Cuban officials did not return a call for comment, but Josephina Vidal, Cuba’s head of North American affairs, “recently ruled out any return of political refugees.”

Indeed, just five days after the December 17 announcement that the two countries intended to normalize relations, Vidal was asked specifically if returning fugitives would be on the table in negotiations.

Vidal told the [Associated Press](#) that “every nation has a sovereign and legitimate rights to grant political asylum to people it considers to have been persecuted... That’s a legitimate right.” She also said that this had been explained to the U.S. government in the past.

While its possible that this stance could have changed in the last four months, it would be a

dramatic break from the words and deeds of the Cuban government since the beginning of the revolution in 1959.

Raúl Castro told the National Assembly of People's Power in 2013 that while Cuba wants better relations with the U.S. they would not succumb to U.S. demands to change their economy.

"If we really want to move our bilateral relations forward, we'll have to learn to respect our differences. If not, we're ready to take another 55 years in the same situation," [he said](#).

The comments by Vidal and Castro could be interpreted as empty bluster, or as a way to save face while privately planning to sacrifice the principles they publicly profess. But a look at the actions of Cuban politicians and officials since the revolution show they have simply never operated this way.

Most notably, in 1974 Fidel Castro decided to send thousands of Cuban troops to Angola to protect the nascent revolutionary MPLA government from falling to the racist South African army. The South Africans had invaded Angola with a force of about 8,000 soldiers seeking to overthrow the MPLA and install a puppet government friendly to the apartheid regime.

Despite being in the midst of talks with the Ford administration about normalization of relations, Castro decided to carry out the fight against apartheid and for the liberation of Africans who had suffered centuries of colonial domination. Not getting involved in Angola may well have meant an end of the embargo and the omnipresent hostilities against Cuba. Regardless, Castro decided not to turn his back on Angola and leave the MPLA to suffer what would have been an inevitable defeat.

For 15 years, Cuba maintained a military presence in Angola to see their mission through to the end, despite the ire and hostility of successive American administrations. When Jimmy Carter assumed the Presidency he was open to relations with Cuba, but set a precondition of the removal of Cuban troops from Angola.

Historian Piero Gleijeses, author of two [comprehensive books](#) on the Cuban intervention in Southern Africa, wrote in an [open letter](#) to President Obama last year: "Castro refused to bow to Carter's demands, which meant that he sacrificed the possibility of normalization with the United States (and the lifting of the embargo) in order to protect Angola from the apartheid regime."

One could argue that economic conditions are considerably worse in Cuba today than they were 30 years ago, or that the right to grant asylum is not as important to Cuba as fighting apartheid was, so Cuba may not be as willing to directly defy Washington. Both arguments may be true, but in the 1970s and 80s Cuba had been badly victimized by a combination of economic warfare, subversion and [terrorism](#). These severely damaging hostilities may have ended with an agreement with the U.S., but Cuba refused to sacrifice its principles.

Then as now, Cuba would not be intimidated by threats, interference, subversion or sabotage by any country – especially the United States. People like Chris Christie, who [The Intercept](#) described as "visibly apoplectic" when talking about Shakur, will have to learn to live with the fact that you cannot always bully someone into surrendering their rights to get what you want.

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