

## *Time to Tear Down Barriers to Progress for Every Cuban*

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An avalanche has been unleashed that's tearing down barriers between the United States and Cuba since both presidents cracked open the floodgates on the 17th of December. Letters from well-known figures from both political parties backed President Obama, calling for additional far-reaching decisions. As 2015 began, bills that had failed to pass in Congress to end the ban on Americans traveling to Cuba and to end the embargo were dusted off and updated. Agriculture business groups, tourism groups, and other sectors expanded lobbying efforts, such as Engage Cuba. Momentum has been sustained in the media through a proliferation of opinion articles, prepared to promote the use of executive action.

The race to Havana to be the first to be positioned to take advantage of and benefit from the opportunities created by the liberalization measures implemented by the Obama Administration included delegations of legislators, with the most notable of them led by the Democratic Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi, and state delegations with the Governor of New York, Andrew Cuomo, at the forefront. They also included businessmen at Havana's International Fair known as FIHAV and the novelty of some 120 tour operators participating at FITCUBA 2015 (tourism), as well as academics, scientists, and artists, which included Minnesota's Symphony Orchestra, symbolic for reenacting performances that took place in 1929 and 1930.

The first results came together between telecommunications companies ETECSA of Cuba and Domestic Telecom, Inc. (IDT) for the establishment of direct telephone communications; and there are a greater number of airports from which flights can now originate from the United States. Several ship-owning companies received permission from the Department of the Treasury to reestablish ferry service suspended since 1960, and cruise lines are also preparing. The governor of New York, along with a healthy group of businessmen, descended on Havana in a JetBlue airplane, which returned with an announcement that it would convert to regular flights from charter flights. It also took with it the therapeutic Cuban vaccine for lung cancer, CIMAVAX, which will begin to undergo clinical trials at the Roswell Park Institute, among other projects.

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It is known that the Cuban government monopolizes businesses, and it remains unknown how far they are willing to allow President Obama's opening measures to be implemented. Businesses are crashing up against the rigidity of the state's control and the limitations of the new foreign investment law, but it is worth exploring, grasping what is possible and establishing ties with the current leadership, and more importantly, with their likely successors who are probably already positioning themselves on the rungs of power, through these years in which the pyramid shifts. Politicians and business leaders from around the world have equally joined this marathon, from Federica Mogherini, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, to Francois Mitterand, the first president of France to visit Cuba in its entire history, together with his business leaders.

The number of visitors to Cuba in the first quarter of 2015 increased by 5% and grew in April by 14%, compared to the same periods the previous year, boosted as much by the expansion of the 12 general license categories allowed for Americans by President Obama, as by the novelty of getting to know the country before it changes through the influx of American tourism, or so it is said. They take with them pictures and picturesque memories of cruising in a vintage automobile, strolling the made up or destroyed streets of Old and Central Havana, seeing Cubans hanging from the buses or rushing to meet their daily needs, and who hide behind friendly smiles, jokes and music. Nonetheless, the potential of American tourism, once the United States allows the freedom to travel to Cuba, and the lack of state infrastructure combined with well-established foreign agencies has begun to benefit Cuban nationals by allowing 'cuentapropistas' to offer services little by little and rent out lodging in certain places. The company AIRBNB already set up shop in more than 1,000 individually-owned homes (three people with two beds, \$39 a night and other offers), which are advertised to Americans through pictures on the Internet.

Cuba is an ailing, old virgin that could turn prosperous maiden. Everything is destroyed and devalued, which is why new and productive investments are needed, along with infrastructure and communication technology. Currently the domestic market is significantly reduced due to the low purchasing power of the country's citizens, who heavily depend on remittances to make up for miserable salaries and pensions. The government expects that foreign investments under its strict control will resolve those problems, with a preference on the Special Development Zone in Mariel and in the areas of tourism, biotechnology, and in agriculture linked to industry.

For decades some of us Cubans have sought a change in American policy, based on the notion that isolation and confrontation served the Cuban government as an excuse to justify their failures and repression. The proactive policy initiated by President Obama in 2009 has benefitted the people through the flow of remittances that make it possible to deal with a challenging daily life and to open miniscule businesses; but primarily it has come through contact with Cuban-Americans and Americans who visit, and the experiences they themselves have when they travel to the United States.

Without a doubt, the Cuban government continues to have the same goal of maintaining and consolidating its absolute power, but the conditions have changed through the course of 56 years of an unchallenged mandate. Revolutionary enthusiasts from 1959-1989 have miserable pensions, and even members of the Communist Party await remittances from their children. A generation did without food and toys with the hope they could offer them to their children, who have then had to struggle for the CUC (convertible Cuban pesos to buy basic needs in government stores); grandchildren want to escape abroad, preferably to the United States, because they do not trust that any changes will come in the short term and do not see the possibility of building a present that will allow them to have a future in which their family prospers with their own home, other than the house where they have lived for several generations. A majority of Cubans happily embraced the change

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in relations with the United States, but as time goes by, hopes fade because no changes are perceived in the rhetoric and actions of their national leaders.

The president of Cuba has facilitated the reestablishment of relations and the opening of an American presence in order to overcome the crisis and get the economy moving, as a consequence of the collapse of Venezuela's economic grants and the inevitability of having to softly abandon de facto power to promote peaceful continuity. Raul Castro insists that he is in no hurry, but he is losing precious time that at his age and that of the historic leadership, including Fidel Castro, he does not have. In 2016 the Communist Party Congress will be held, where their heirs are to be elevated to continue through 2018, and when the president will likely watch over them from the shadows.

In the process of reestablishing diplomatic relations and opening embassies, the mobility and interaction of American diplomats in Cuba with the general population has yet to be entirely resolved. The Cuban government has wanted to impose limitations on the Obama Administration in its interactions with independent civil society, as it has been able to do with its counterparts from Europe and other countries, notably from Latin America, in order to make them invisible in collusion with the international community. Already for some time, American figures have preferred contact with and the opinions of individuals in tune with the Cuban government, in order to avoid hurting their interests in the island. Regrettably, those who behave that way leave their country at the mercy of the Cuban authorities, who accuse them of issuing orders to counterrevolutionaries and of paying them off as mercenaries. As such, they contribute to a denial of the rights of Cubans who want to express themselves and who seek to move Cuba forward, and to discredit them. That was the case when the Cuban president referred to independent journalists and their relations with the American embassy in early May as he sent off President Hollande at the airport. Without a doubt, Cuba's peaceful opposition must adapt itself to these new circumstances, with proposals for solutions to the problems the nation and its people face, and above all, continuing to elevate their prestige and the depth of their analysis.

President Obama took the bold and brave decision to drop the failed fifty-year-old policy, and toward the end of his second term is setting the foundation to keep the process of engagement moving forward under his eventual democratic successor, which coincides with Cuba's crucial years. Obama represents democratic values and human rights, fundamental to his country since its founding. It is not about delving into Cuba's internal issues, but about addressing a part of Cuba's civil society. The Cuban government engages with and supports Americans in the United States at international forums it deems opportune, as it does with other countries. Former President Jimmy Carter met with dissidents in May of 2002 and in April of 2011 in Havana between his meetings with Fidel Castro.

People labeled as counterrevolutionaries, in addition to being censored and repressed, don't have access to employment through the state, and the owners of private businesses, 'cuentapropistas,' and foreigners don't make jobs available for them out of fear of government reprisals. While many Communist Party militants receive remittances from their children and family, while many "counterrevolutionaries" don't have that option. Independent journalists cannot join official media, which is the only media.

As economist Oscar Espinosa Chepe wrote in August of 2010: "We agree with those who in the United States defend the opening toward Cuba and call on Cuban-Americans and other Americans to organize trips. Contact between the people will always make a positive mark. In any case it will take not only declaring a reconciliation, but building it. When visiting Cuba, those individuals who are conscious of national problems should not discriminate against members of civil society. They should take interest in the situation of the persecuted, marginalized and those still in jails because they defended the right to freedom within the country...It is good to write about and speak of reconciliation, but it is more important to practice it."

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The current process is unique. We need to adapt to new circumstances without exclusion, with the help of foreign participants in the Cuba Rush. Every Cuban should contribute to the rapprochement between Cuba and the United States, and to the opening of Cuba to the world, to achieve progress for every Cuban and above all for Cuba.



### **MIRIAM LEVIA**

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