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Cuba, the two blockades and more...

By Rodrigo Acuña

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I recently travelled to Havana, Cuba. I went there not as a political analyst or to practise journalism, but to get away from the difficulties of carrying out research in Caracas, Venezuela – one of Latin America's most overcrowded, violent and hostile cities, despite the efforts of its current administration to reduce poverty.

Once inside the island, I was quickly reminded that contemporary Cuba has two blockades. The first is the trade blockade imposed by the United States since 1960; the second is the policies the government has imposed, both to survive U.S. aggression and in its original pursuit of orthodox soviet socialism – i.e. complete state control of the economy.

Walk around Havana and the first blockade is evident. The capital of Cuba lacks paint, cement, lighting, plumbing, and just about everything else that is not produced in mass quantities inside the country. Washington not only restricts U.S. companies from selling goods to the Cuban state, it also penalises third parties which aim to trade with the island and, simultaneously, have other commercial dealings in the U.S.

Many Cubans have grown weary of hearing of "*el bloqueo*" (the blockade) from their political leaders as an excuse for all that is wrong in the country, despite its colossal and real impacts in allowing the island to develop.

Last October 27, the United Nations General Assembly voted 186-2 in favour of lifting the blockade. Only Israel supported the U.S. while the small Pacific nations of Palau, Micronesia and the Marshall Islands abstained. According to Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez, [the blockade has caused Cuba close to \\$ 1 trillion in economic damages in the last half a century](#).

Washington's actions against Cuba – which have only mildly improved under the Obama administration – of course have nothing to do with human rights, promoting democracy, or the fact that former leader Fidel Castro sided with the Soviet bloc during the Cold War.

At the core of the dispute is the United States self-appointed right to have puppet democracies or dictatorships in Latin America and the Caribbean (either is fine) while its own corporations pay few taxes, royalties or trade tariffs to local governments. And since the Cuban revolution defies Washington's self-appointed rights, the U.S. since 1959 has been committed to overthrowing the regime through just about any means, including terrorism.

At a National Security Council meeting held on January 14, 1960, State Department Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Roy Rubboton stated:

"The period from January to March might be characterized as the honeymoon period of the Castro government. In April a downward trend in US-Cuban relations had been evident. . . . In June we had reached the decision that it was not possible to achieve our objectives with Castro in power and had agreed to undertake the program referred to by Merchant. In July and August we had been busy drawing up a program to replace Castro."

The honeymoon period which Rubboton comments on is essentially three months in 1959. But even this is misleading. Once U.S.-backed dictator Fulgencio Batista and his cronies fled Havana, they left with 424 million dollars from the Republic's treasury leaving it almost bankrupt. Deposited in U.S. banks, Havana then asked Washington for the rendition and return of these funds – obviously to no avail since Batista's thugs were the very people the U.S. had once backed.

As with the Merchant program, other programs to destroy the Cuban political system have been in place since the 1960s. They included supporting Cuban-American mercenaries from Miami who would set off bombs in factories, hotels, trade ports, aeroplanes, burn-down sugar cane fields, murder teachers who were engaged in the country's literacy campaign, and even carry out acts of biological warfare. According to Cuban authorities these acts have left 3,478 civilians dead and 2,099 wounded.

Even after the Cold War ended, Washington has still supported (or turned a blind eye) to the actions of Cuban exiles in Miami. In 1997 close to a dozen bombs went off in Havana wounding 11 people and killing an Italian tourist. A year later, [in an interview with the *New York Times*](#), CIA-trained Luis Posada Carriles confessed to paying a Salvadorian mercenary to carry out the attacks.

Over a decade later, in December 2009, the *New York Times* noted that Alan Gross – a U.S. contractor – was [arrested for being part of a: "semicovert United States Agency for International Development program that has been supported for years by conservative Cuban-American exiles"](#). Charged with distributing satellite telephone equipment to dissidents, Gross was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment.

Add to all these actions the 634 botched assassination attempts against Fidel Castro – according to the retired head of Cuban counterintelligence Fabian Escalante – and it should become evident why the Cuban political system has a Spartan like mentality.

Many Cubans of course will not talk at length about the first blockade as they have little power to change U.S. policy. Their concerns are with "*el doble bloqueo*" (the double blockade) which refer to the economic and political restrictions within the island. While Raul Castro – in power since February 2008 – has [begun to liberalise the economy allowing small businesses to operate, taxes by the state](#), according to many of the Cubans I spoke to, seem too high.

For tourists who pay in Cuba's convertible currency – known as the CUC and pegged 1-1 with the U.S. dollar – a night out in Havana will be cheap matched with quality service. Eat at a restaurant with average Cubans though, paying in national currency, and your experience can at times be rather different. People employed in the hospitality industry are keen to work in places using CUC, but for those that do not their frustrations seem evident treating their fellow nationals as burdens, if not with open disdain.

The average monthly wage in the national currency (roughly \$US 20) does not suffice and forces Cubans to find other means to make ends meet. All too often this implicates stealing goods from the state and selling them in an illegal market.

Then there is the issue of racism which has deep historical roots in the Caribbean island.

During the first years of the revolution there were some genuine efforts to address discrimination towards Afro-Cubans. Presently though, this same drive does not seem to exist.

Arriving in Havana, an Afro-Cuban male at the airport had his bags pedantically checked by a rude customs officer. Expecting the same treatment as I was next in line, I was surprised to see the official simply walk off leaving his post unattended when it was my turn to have my luggage inspected.

In Havana's Museum of Rum you will find that the security guards are Afro-Cubans. However, look a little further, like at the people who take you on a tour throughout the museum, and you will notice that they are overwhelmingly Cubans of Spanish heritage. This is an image one runs into frequently in Cuba: most of the lower ranking jobs are staffed by Afro-Cubans while the more cushy ones go to whites.

Numerous Afro-Cubans are unhappy with the status quo, in particular young males who are regularly stopped by the police and unnecessarily asked for identification papers. Over ten years ago, when I first visited the island, I once saw Fidel Castro speak on television for over two hours to a graduation of young police officers. He informed them of the need to be firm in dealing with crime, but likewise, that Cuba's police force should not resemble those of most Latin American countries where corruption and extrajudicial killings are the norm.

Such public talks by Fidel Castro were common back then and, whether one agreed with his political philosophy or not, one had the sense that he was aware (and indeed attempting) to resolve the country's problems. In contrast, these days, other than the occasional handshake with a visiting foreign head of state, Raul Castro is almost completely absent from Cuban television.

Taking into consideration the reality of both blockades, it is also too simplistic to say that average Cubans are gripped between U.S. aggression and a one-party state. While dissidents like the [known blogger Yoani Sanchez](#) are [published by major corporate publications](#) outside Cuba (left-wing Colombian or Honduran bloggers are of course given no such dissemination), within the island they have next to no support.

On one occasion, I travelled with a group of Afro-Cuban rappers to a recording studio in the apartment of a

dissident rock group. Uninformed as to the meaning of the location I was in, I found it odd when an old man began to ask me several questions. Presumably one of the relatives of one of the young men from the rock group, his eyes widened when I told him I was of Chilean parents. "Ah yes... Chilean president Allende", he said. "He was a socialist, but a democratic type." "Yes", I replied, "and he was also overthrown in a violent U.S.-backed coup because he did not control the armed forces."

Looking around me after leaving the studio, which inside is covered with street art and some anti-government slogans, the thought crossed my mind that I might be approached by someone from a Committee for the Defence of the Revolution (CDRs), or maybe even the state security services. No such thing happened and the rappers I was with showed no signs of being even remotely edgy. Inside the studio their lyrics discussed their daily struggles but none of them were actively working against the government.

Walk through the streets of Havana and you [won't find secondary or tertiary students throwing stones battling police, or harshly criticising the government like their counterparts are currently doing in neoliberal Chile](#). The country's economic problems are on their minds, but a bottle of rum, a stroll through *el Malecon* or an outing in a nightclub will often suffice to placate discontent.

Programs on state television like *Deja Que Te Cuente* (Let Me Tell You), which [mock government bureaucrats and the inadequacies of the economy](#), also provide some type of a vent for popular criticisms of the system.

The latest issue of censorship in Cuba is in fact surprising. [It is not around a song or concert by Los Aldeanos](#) – a distinguished underground hip hop duo and perhaps the government's [harshest critics inside the country](#) –, or an article by Sanchez. Instead a song called *Chupi Chupi* by local reggaeton artist Osmani Garcia has upset some party stomachs. And what is Garcia's call to arms against the establishment? [A cheesy chauvinist video clip about oral sex](#).

Leaving Cuba on my way to the airport I was once again reminded of another part of the island, the one Western journalist often ignore completely in their hunt for an interview with dissidents.

Speaking to a cab driver he told me he recently bought his taxi and was making a fair living. When I told him I was returning to Venezuela, where two or three times a week young men will jump on my bus route and tell passengers they once use to "rob and shoot people", have now "reformed" themselves, and are only asking for a "small collaboration" because they "do not want to hurt anyone onboard", the cabbie shook his head and showed me his political stripes:

"My father was part of Fidel's personal security team. When the U.S. supported the military coup against Hugo Chavez in 2002, my father wept and I was truly sad."

Like this cab driver and his father, there are hundreds of thousands of Cubans who still feel some type of loyalty to the political system. Often they have worked in Third World countries as doctors, teachers or in the military. In Venezuela there are over 40,000 Cuban medical professionals [practising in miserable violent slums](#). While some of these professionals defect to the U.S., the overwhelming majority does not.

As we continued our journey exchanging views, I told this cabbie that despite the rundown aspect of Havana and many of Cuba's serious problems, I was still amazed with the tranquillity, safety and human warmth of the island's contemporary society.

I informed him that in Havana I did not see homeless children begging for food, or looking to pickpocket me like I have experienced in other cities in the Latin America. Neither are there violent armed gangs, enormous drug infested slums, or levels of police corruption where an officer of the law is only too happy to mug or execute someone for a few hundred dollars.

While Cuba these days certainly needs a little more capitalism, a shake-up of its ageing bureaucracy, and yes, more democracy, the crude one-party state capitalism which China has adopted, [at the cost of leaving 50 million Chinese homeless by developers](#), should not be embraced.

Furthermore, instead of being the objectives of a select dissident minority, which lacks "leadership and legitimacy" in Cuban civil society as [thoughtfully explained by Rafael Hernandez](#), the abolition of the current political system would have to be something most people on the island were actually presently striving to achieve through a mass popular movement.

The coming years of course will indicate what aspects of their system Cubans will decide to keep, modify, or abolish completely. As always, their belligerent and self-interested historical neighbour 90 miles away will keenly be following events.

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