

Critical Questions on the US-Cuba Rapprochement

Written by Alessandro Badella

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ALESSANDRO BADELLA, JAN 27 2015

Barack Obama, in a speech on December 17, revealed a new US approach with Cuba. The US president announced the future opening of an embassy in Havana, the further relaxation of travel rules and remittances, and the will to cooperate on sensitive bilateral issues. This announcement stirred the interest of analysts and the general public, and it has been perceived as the end – or the beginning of the end – of a half-century relation of hostility, misunderstanding, and unilateral economic embargo. As I consider (Badella, 2014) democracy promotion as a key component of US “state policy” towards the island (at least since the end of the Cold War), it is necessary to interpret these (potential) changes in US policy towards Cuba through the lens of democracy promotion on the island. Obama’s “new course” generated some important questions regarding the future of US policy.

Is Obama’s change in Cuba policy an “abandonment of democracy”?

Obama’s democracy promotion worldwide, especially in his first year in office, has registered some important changes if compared to that of George W. Bush, particularly in its tone and aggressiveness. Even if those changes could not be considered a complete retreat from promoting democracy abroad (Bouchet, 2010; Carothers, 2013: 196-213; Bouchet, 2013), some scholars criticized the president for his “abandonment of democracy” (and of democracy promotion) and the lack of “ethic” in his foreign policy (Muravchick, 2009; Roth, 2010). In the Cuban case, during Obama’s terms, democracy promotion has survived a more pragmatic redefinition of its meanings and scope of action in US foreign policy: the support for human rights and democracy on the island has not disappeared from Obama’s agenda in the name of geopolitical or economic interests. In his “memorandum on Cuba” of April 2009, Obama stressed that “the promotion of democracy and human rights in Cuba is in the national interest of the United States” (White House, 2009). Moreover, the historical end of Cuba’s ban from the Organization of the American States, occurring in 2009, was highly related to the Cuban transition to democracy and the respect of human rights. In fact, the Organization of American States final resolution (OAS, 2009) limited the Cuban re-admission to the Organization to a “democratic test” based on the Democratic Charter of 2001. As Hillary Clinton (2014: 263) confessed in her autobiography, the US aggressively lobbied for this version of the resolution, linking the Cuban readmission to the respect of democratic and human rights principles.

Democracy promotion discourse in US policy is also significant in Obama’s Dec. 2014 speech. In Obama’s (2014a) words:

We will raise those differences directly – as we will continue to do on issues related to democracy and human rights in Cuba. But I believe that we can do more to support the Cuban people and promote our values through engagement. After all, these 50 years have shown that isolation has not worked. It’s time for a new approach.

Moreover, the White House (2014) fact sheet on Cuba, published the same day, stressed once more the US commitment to democracy promotion in Cuba:

A critical focus of our increased engagement will include continued strong support by the United States for improved human rights conditions and democratic reforms in Cuba. The promotion of democracy supports universal human rights by empowering civil society and a person’s right to speak freely, peacefully assemble, and associate, and by supporting the ability of people to freely determine their future. Our efforts are aimed at promoting the independence

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of the Cuban people so they do not need to rely on the Cuban state.

In this perspective, US strategy under Obama seems to experience changes and evolution, but democracy promotion in Cuba has remained a cornerstone of US policy towards the island. Despite this, later in December 2014 in the year-end press conference, Obama (2014b) expressed a potential abandonment of a “*democratization hic et nunc*” approach to the Cuban question, as he stated that “how societies change is country-specific, it’s culturally specific. It could happen fast; it could happen slower than I’d like; but it’s going to happen. And I think this change in policy is going to advance that”.

In other words, Obama is just refreshing the cornerstone of President Carter’s speech in Havana in 2002: a friendlier (or less aggressive) policy towards Cuba but always oriented towards the promotion of democracy on the island and, in the end, to welcome Cuba into the hemispheric community of democracies (Carter, 2002).

How will US democracy promotion in Cuba change?

This is probably the million dollar question, along with “Will Obama’s new policy succeed in fostering a democratic transition in Cuba?”, and it is hard to predict a medium or long-term outcome. However, Obama’s “new(est) course” with Cuba highlights a dramatic change in US strategy in democracy promotion in Cuba, despite the so called “abandonment of democracy” having never taken place. US strategy in Cuba, especially after the Cold War, has been limited to implementing the economic embargo (in 1992 and 1996) as leverage to obtain democratic reforms, and to avoid state-to-state contacts with the Cuban government, only with few exceptions (such as the migration talks). Unlike George W. Bush, Barack Obama, during his first term (in 2009 and 2011), expanded the so called people-to-people’s diplomacy (which had had limited application during Clinton’s presidency), through the opening of family travel and remittances. What Obama announced in December 2014 was just the implementation of such a policy, which is related to promoting the free flow of information on the island, and the empowerment of Cuban civil society. This was the aim of Obama’s policy in his “memorandum” on Cuba (White House, 2009):

Measures that decrease dependency of the Cuban people on the Castro regime and that promote contacts between Cuban-Americans and their relatives in Cuba are means to encourage positive change in Cuba.

This approach was repeated in Obama’s last speech on Cuba, in particular regarding the role of contacts with Cuban civil society (i.e. Obama opened with Cuban participation at the next Summit of the Americas in Panama, along with the participation of groups and associations from civil society), while the new regulations on travel and remittances are aimed to “more effectively empower the Cuban people” (White House, 2014). Moreover, in the last few years the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and other federal bureaus have been actively involved in creating web and technological platforms to get in touch with the Cuban people (Tracey Eaton’s blog, *Along the Malecón*, provides several well documented examples).

However, with his last move, Obama revealed the need not just to sustain a bottom-up approach in democracy promotion in Cuba, but also the importance of state-to-state contacts. In the last fifty years those contacts were never deeply explored and Obama is playing a “new” card with Cuba: persuading Castro to cooperate in opening up his country.

What does “normalization” mean?

After Obama took the presidency in late 2008, the term “normalization” entered the lexicon of US-Cuba relations. As a recent book (LeoGrande and Kornbluh, 2014) revealed, the normalization of the relationship with Cuba has been a sort of “secret dream” of US presidents since Kennedy’s times. But what does “normalizing the relationship with Cuba” really mean? The term “normal” is sometimes slippery and insidious. In fact, as Rafael Hernández (2012) discussed few years ago, the term seems to have a different meaning for each player involved. For Cuba, the term “normalization” means the end of the (still) running economic embargo and the complete removal of restrictions on trade, travel and diplomatic contact (and there is a comprehensible economic logic beyond that). In other words, it means working on issues of common interest without regards to the Cuban political system and the human rights

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issue. Raúl Castro stressed this point again in December 2014: Cuba is willing to open a new course with the US, but the principles of the Revolution and the socialist system, such as the largely state-controlled economy and the single-party rule, are untouchable and unquestionable (Castro, 2014). Even after recent US-Cuba talks, which approached the human rights issue, the state-sponsored *Cubadebate* published a strong invective against the American democracy promotion which it considered as a facade of its imperialism.

On the contrary, the US reveals a strong interest in democracy and human rights on the island. In fact, Obama's moves are directed to foster a democratic transition on the island and he expects to see some reciprocation to his openings: "For us to have the kind of normal relations we have with other countries, we've got to see significant changes from the Cuban government" (AFP, 2011). In fact, the future outcomes of US democracy promotion in Cuba and the evolution of the Cuban government regarding democracy and human rights are playing (and will play) a major role in future US moves. As said above, democracy promotion was not abandoned in Cuba, along with US interest in democratizing the island. As the "abandonment of democracy" never took place with Cuba, the US will continue to sponsor democracy promotion programs in Cuba, while criticizing the poor score in the respect of human rights and the lack of basic freedom. As the Department of State (2014) pointed out just after Obama's openings, "the Cuban government's lack of respect for these rights, as demonstrated by today's detentions, is inconsistent with hemispheric norms and commitments". Moreover, the pro-embargo Congressional faction, which Obama would defend his Cuba policy against, is defending the legacy of the Helms-Burton Act of 1996 as a tool to avoid any appeasement with a non-democratic Cuba. According to Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (2014) "The White House attempts to normalize relationships with Cuba without the approval of Congress may be in direct violation of Helms-Burton that specifically states that all political prisoners must be released and free and fair elections must be held before establishing a diplomatic relationship".

What will US Embassy in Havana do?

This is the first question that entered my mind after Obama's announcement last month. Of course, an embassy in Havana would be a great step in creating state-to-state contacts and for the purpose of restructuring bilateral relations. However, this fresh start is not a total assurance of success in improving relations with Havana. The US, since the 1970s, has had a semi-diplomatic office in Havana, the US Interest Section (the USINT or SINA). However, the USINT, in recent decades, was far from being an institution to appease relations with Cuba: the Section, especially during George W. Bush's terms, had publicly boasted contacts with prominent dissidents, and provoked the reaction of the Cuban government (such as the arrests of the "Black Spring" of 2003). In recent years, despite the Obama administration having scaled down the tone with Cuba, the role of the USINT has been highly related to the organization and coordination of internal opposition groups in Cuba, as proven by some Wikileaks cables. This is to say that, if the opening of an embassy in Havana is just the continuation of such a policy, there are no assurances that Cuba would not react angrily to a broad interference in its domestic affairs. In conclusion, the opening of official diplomatic relation with Cuba can create complex scenarios (for example, the embassy in Havana used as proxy for anti-Castrist propaganda and aids for the Cuban opposition), which are all related to US democracy promotion on the island and the respective reaction from the Cuban authorities.

What's next?

First of all, Obama is having the historical merit of shaking up the US watch-and-wait strategy by proposing something "creative" despite the limits imposed on the President by the current legislation on Cuba. US-Cuba relations are now at a crossroad and the future direction taken would probably depend on Cuba's future steps and Raúl Castro's reforms, especially in the realm of civic and political rights. The prisoners' swap with Cuba showed that the Cuban government could be a reliable partner in win-win bilateral issues, but it could be naive thinking that Obama's openings to Cuba were just a move to improve relations without expecting any reciprocation from Havana in terms of democracy and human rights. As said, the White House is not expecting a sudden and immediate change or democratization, but in case of a backlash on democracy promotion or a significant crackdown on dissidence (as happened in 2003) it would be hard for the current US administration to defend this appeasement with Castro. This new Cuba policy has obtained several acceptances among the Cuban-American community and some senior Republican Congresspeople, but the President must defend his policy in Congress (without having a majority) – and

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this would be an easier task if there would be positive signals from Cuba. It is true that the times of the “Black Spring” [1] are gone, but it is also true that Raúl Castro was the man who inaugurated, with an inflamed speech at the Political Bureau of the Cuban Communist Party in March 1996, the Cuban crackdown on local NGOs and civil society after the openings of the “special period in peacetime” in the early 1990s.

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[1] The so called "Black Spring" took place in March\April 2003, when the Cuban authorities arrested 75 independent journalists and activists, mainly related to the US Interest Section in Havana, according to the Cuban laws on counterrevolutionary activities (Bond, 2003). The dissidents were all released by May 2010.

About the author:

Alessandro Badella is a PhD candidate in Political Science ('Democracy and Human Rights') at the University of Genoa (Italy) with a project on US democracy promotion after the Cold War. He has several academic publications about US-Cuba relations after the Cold War and the role and the rational of US democracy promotion in Cuba. His website is <http://abadella.eu/>