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The Bizarre Phenomenon of Cuba Policy to Suit Cuban-American Exiles Rather than Cubans in Cuba



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In the week following the outbreak of protests in Cuba on 11 July, a rapid flow of commentary flooded from the pages of corporate-owned media outlets and the screens of the major US “news” television stations. Predictably, this coverage has both promoted a potential US-led regime change effort and applied gross double standards to Cuba when compared to the US’s treatment of other countries in the region. The two things, of course, are intrinsically linked. If these reports applied their standards evenhandedly then they

would inevitably end up presenting regime change as a perfectly reasonable response to mass protests in other Latin American countries such as Colombia, Brazil, Honduras, and Chile. And this, of course, wouldn't do given that all these countries have right-wing US-aligned governments that loyally serve Washington's geostrategic interests and obediently follow its preferred neoliberal economic model.

Almost instinctively, many of these reports have paid particular attention to the taking to the streets of right-wing Cuban-American exiles in various US cities, and especially the Mecca of the exile diaspora, Miami. Apparently, these people's views on Cuba count for a great deal. So much so, that some publications have reported on how the Democrats are seizing on the protests as an opportunity to win back Cuban-American voters in Florida. These reports remind us that this formerly neck-and-neck swing state went for Trump in both the 2016 and 2020, in no small part due to his administration's toughened stance on Cuba and close relationship with Cuban-American hardliners like Marco Rubio. *Politico*, for example, tells its readers that Biden's Cuba policy going forward "could have a big political impact in a state where Democrats are reeling" and that "Florida Democrats see what many are calling a "golden opportunity.""

As with US intervention, this is presented in corporate media accounts as a perfectly natural and reasonable thing to do. But upon closer inspection, it becomes apparent that something is very seriously amiss. Because, in reality, predicating policy toward a foreign country based on the interests and political orientation of that country's immigrant community within the US, rather than those who actually live in that country, is a totally bizarre, not to mention destructive, *modus operandi*.

To illustrate this absurdity, consider how the two major US political parties interact with other Latin American immigrant groups. After all, who could image the Democratic Party, for instance, suggesting a policy of regime change in Colombia to remove the right-wing government of Iván Duque following the protests in that country earlier this year because many Colombians in the US took to the streets in shows of solidarity? Of course, this very notion is laughable. Yet the fact that the exact same suggestion, but with "Colombians in the US" replaced with "Cubans in the US," is somehow considered a perfectly legitimate electoral calculation. Clearly, basing policy on how to best court the votes of an immigrant community only happens when that community's priorities happen to align with US foreign policy goals.

To further illustrate the absurdity, image this dynamic happening in any other country in any other point in history. Imagine, for instance, if Argentinian political parties in the

1950s and '60s had suggested imposing sanctions on either of the states in Germany that emerged in the post-war era in order to court the substantial German-Argentine exile community of Nazi fugitives. This might on the surface seem like an extreme, unfair, and perhaps even ridiculous comparison. But consider that some of the major leaders of the Cuban-American exile community are in some cases from the very families that were politically close to the Batista government, which, in fact, had many characteristics of fascism. For one thing, it was a dictatorship that came to power via a military coup. It also operated secretive death squads that murdered and tortured political opponents and took bribes from the mafia in exchange for allowing it to monopolize large parts of Cuba's economy. So, the analogy is actually a perfectly fair one.

While Nazi fugitives largely minded their own business in Argentina, however, the leaders of the Cuban-American community have openly aligned themselves with figures who have engaged in violent destabilization against Cuba. Not least of these is Luis Posada Carriles, a CIA asset responsible for multiple violent acts, including the bombing of an aircraft full of Cuban civilians. Lincoln and Mario Díaz-Balart, two prominent Cuban-American exile hardliners from Florida who got elected to congress, even lobbied then-Panamanian President Mireya Moscoso for Posada Carriles' release from custody.

But leaving such comparisons aside, there is an even bigger contradiction at play that exposes the absurdity of the kowtowing to the wishes of Cuban-American exiles as well as their own support for US interventionism. And that is that Cubans living in the United States are not remotely representative of the Cuban people as whole, and most certainly not of the Cubans who still live in Cuba. In fact, the Cubans who leave the island are not only an unrepresentative sample, but a *self-selecting* sample. Because, at the risk of stating the bleeding obvious, those that leave are by definition those who didn't want to stay for some reason. And those reasons are often based on political disagreements. Many, for instance, have fallen afoul of the Cuban government for accepting the extensive financial and logistical support that Washington provides to help destabilize the country. So, expecting Cubans in the US to give a representative account of the Cuban government would be like travelling to Paris in the 1960s, talking exclusively to the city's US expatriate community of bohemians and so-called "draft dodgers," and expecting an account of the US government that's representative of most people in the US at the time.

Even further absurdity is exposed when you consider that many Cuban-Americans support the decades-long "embargo" (more accurately described as an economic blockade). This again illustrates the stunning contradiction of their political position. Because they

frequently invoke concerns about the suffering of people in Cuba when the policy that they support has been perhaps *the* biggest cause of suffering for those very same people. Similarly, Cuban-Americans who support the blockade claim that its imposition is predicated on human rights violations on the island. Yet the blockade has *itself* been recognized as a major human rights violation by regional institutions and mainstream human rights organizations. This contradiction shows how the Cuban-American supporters of US aggression against Cuba have no interest in improving the lives of the people on the island. Rather, they wish to punish those who stayed behind, and especially those who support the revolution. Given that this revolution has lasted 60 years in spite of constant US subversion suggests that those who support it are a significant, if not large majority.

In a further layer of irony, much of the “authoritarianism” on the island, which Cuban-American exiles also use as part of their propaganda arsenal, is actually explicable in large part in terms of the blockade and US interventionism more broadly. After all, a society that is under constant attack from a hostile and much more powerful foreign nation ends up inevitably becoming a society that sees itself as under siege. As international relations scholar Phillip Brenner notes in his book *Cuba Libre: A 500-Year Quest for Independence*, repression on the island “can be partly explained by the Cuban leaders’ tendency to perceive that their context is akin to the kind of extreme threat US leaders perceived after September 11, 2001, which also led to the denial of some civil liberties.” If anything, given the decades of hostility from the US, the wealthiest and most powerful country in the world, what is remarkable is not that Cuba is so “authoritarian” but that it remains such an open society in spite of this reality.

Some Cuban-American exiles even support direct military intervention into Cuba in order to “liberate” the island. And this support does not appear to be confined to a small fringe of the Cuban diaspora in the US. On July 18, for example, *The Miami Herald* reported on a rally organized by a group that it misspelled as “Inspire American,” which it describes as “an organization dedicated to promoting democracy in Cuba and ousting the current regime.” The *Herald* relayed how one of the event’s speakers, Rosa María Payá, called “for an “intervention” from the United States” to achieve that goal.

Such a reality exposes the absurdity of the claim made by such people to be “patriotic” Cubans. Because how can they be deeply patriotic when they support direct US military intervention into their own country? Whatever one thinks of the government, Cuba is nonetheless a sovereign nation. One of the central aspects of sovereignty is that changes to

a country's political and economic systems and constitutional set-up can only come from the people who themselves live there, not from the outside, and most certainly not imposed by a foreign power.

And to be clear, the US is not just any foreign power. It is a country that has a long and prolific record of supporting coups against governments it doesn't like, violently interfering in countries to promote regime change, rigging elections to favor its preferred party, and funding and training all manner of murderers, torturers and other human rights violators all over Latin America. Cuba itself has been at the receiving end of US imperial domination throughout much of its modern history and especially since the revolution. The US first occupied Cuba between 1898 and 1902 and then again between 1906 and 1909. The US Congress also passed the Platt Amendment in 1901 that committed the US to further military occupation unless Cuba met seven coercive conditions including restrictions on its financial system.

By cozying up to a state with a record like this, Cuban-American exiles are abetting an imperialist power that has caused untold misery to their fellow Cubans and fellow Latin Americans generally. Treason is not too strong a word for those who lend their support to a country with a record like that. And this record is not some distant relic, confined to a bygone era that has given way to a new one of US benevolence. Looking around Latin America today, the US continues to support coups such as that in Bolivia in 2019 and continues to prop up dictators such as Juan Orlando Hernandez in Honduras. Washington's continued hostility toward Cuba, meanwhile, includes channeling an estimated \$20 million per year through the US Agency for International Development (USAID) for "democracy promotion" programs (Washington shorthand for regime change), and, of course, the blockade, which has caused hundreds of billions of dollars in damage to Cuba's economy according to United Nations figures.

By supporting this hostile stance toward Cuba, right-wing Cuban-Americans have forfeited their right to have any say over its future. As Cuban-American journalist Sabrina Rodríguez put it, "I really wish more of the talk in DC about the situation in Cuba was about the Cuban people in Cuba and not Miami."

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