

Platismo Lives - Barack Obama in Cuba: the first visit by a United States president to the island since 1928

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President Obama visits Cuba tomorrow, where he will draw the ire of a Cuban right that has long curried favor with Washington.

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Barack Obama's arrival in Cuba tomorrow will mark the first visit by a United States president to the island since Calvin Coolidge went in 1928. His trip follows the reopening of diplomatic relations with Cuba on December 17, 2014 and various other steps taken to normalize relations — a welcome change after decades of hostility towards the Cuban government that include an ongoing economic blockade, sponsored invasions, and terrorist attacks.

So far, everything seems to indicate a warm reception for Obama from most Cubans. Many of them will welcome him for taking the first steps towards righting the wrongs of past US foreign policy towards Cuba. But he is likely to be received with reservations, if not outright hostility, by pro-US right-wing dissidents on the island who have misgivings about the attempt at reconciliation with the Cuban government.

The politics of this right wing — both on the island and abroad — that has long curried the favor of Washington elites is rooted in a perspective called "Platismo." The origin of the term goes back to 1901, when the first constituent assembly of the island was forced to accept an amendment to the Cuban constitution authored by US senator Orville Platt giving the United States the legal right to intervene in the country's internal affairs [1].

For the next thirty-three years, the United States, with the explicit support of many Cuban Platista politicians, availed itself of this license repeatedly, influencing policy under the threat of military occupation — a threat it carried out on several occasions.

The Platt Amendment was repealed in 1934, in the aftermath of the revolution that overthrew dictator Gerardo Machado, but the US government maintained much of its influence over the country. Platistas, too, continued to support American involvement in the island.

At the time, the most widespread form of Platismo was rooted in a political and economic fatalism that assumed that nothing could ever change in Cuba without the acquiescence of the United States.

Platistas of this stripe did not necessarily view this as a good thing, but they took it to be the inescapable destiny of a small country next to an imperial giant.

Platismo cut through the entire class hierarchy of pre-revolutionary Cuba. There was a soft version widely held among the popular classes, and the harder one championed by the upper class and a good part of the middle classes. Elite Platismo found cultural expression in a profound admiration for the “American way of life,” the consumption of American products, and visits to the United States.

The Platismo of this era inculcated an obsessive interest in US presidential elections because of their implications for Cuba, thus reinforcing the notion that the country’s future was more dependent on decisions made in Washington than those made in Havana. Cubans, even those of the upper classes, generally favored Democrats, because they were thought to be better for Cuba than Republicans (although it would be Democratic president Harry Truman who officially recognized Batista’s military coup, in March 1952).

Many Cuban politicians of the 1940s and 1950s, whether for or against Batista, covertly favored American intervention in Cuban affairs, and even secretly lobbied Washington to that end. State Department records show that Carlos Márquez-Sterling — a prominent politician who presided over the 1940 constitutional convention and participated as a loyal opposition candidate during Batista’s 1958 presidential run — recommended to the American embassy in Havana that the United States renew the sale of weapons to Batista, after having been defeated by the dictator in what Márquez-Sterling himself described as a fraudulent election.

After the 1959 Revolution

Even before Castro’s revolutionary government had declared itself Communist and allied itself with the Soviet Union, the right-wing-dominated opposition took an increasingly Platista direction. Their agitation culminated in the US-sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961 [2].

The US government’s long campaign to destabilize and destroy the Castro government was supported on the terms of Platismo by many Cubans, especially those who had emigrated after the revolution. As the Cold War came to an end in the late eighties and early nineties, Cuba became a secondary concern for Washington, but domestic political considerations owing to the influence of Cuban-American Platistas played a major role in the passing of laws like the 1992 Torricelli Act [3], and especially the 1996 Helms-Burton Act [4], both of which substantially reinforced, and made it more difficult to abolish, the economic blockade of Cuba.

The resumption of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States in December 2014 dealt a serious blow to the Cuban-American right. They also face an increasingly unfavorable situation in Florida as a new wave of migration brings Cubans to the state who do not share the class background or politics of those who left in the 1960s and their descendants, and whose priority is to help their relatives on the island rather than becoming involved in exile politics.

The Dissidents

In today’s Cuba, self-described dissidents are organized in small, nonviolent groups and individually they range from the hard right to moderate Christian Democrats and social democrats on the Left. A new left, critical current has also emerged, whose proponents do not call themselves dissidents, in part because of their fear of being associated with Miami and Washington.

Right-wing dissidents oppose the restoration of diplomatic relations with the United States and want the economic blockade to continue, while many dissidents to their left support the resumption of normal relations, though this support is often conditioned on the Cuban government granting political and economic concessions in return.

Most of these liberal dissidents do not oppose the blockade on principle (whether national self-determination or anti-imperialism), but because they see its effects to be counterproductive, or consider the whole strategy a failure. That is why these liberal and social-democratic dissidents have been likely to slide into Platismo, although generally of a milder variety than their right-wing counterparts. They see the US as a source of support that they can use and discard at their convenience and on their own terms.

Since the revolution, the United States has tried to channel Cuban Platismo into a variety of organizations, and in diverse ways. The anti-Castro terrorist organizations that accepted arms and funding from the US government did so on at least implicitly Platista grounds. Overt, public efforts to oppose the Cuban government have also been cast in the mold of Platismo.

Most recently, there were the hearings [5] conducted in February 2015 by Cuban-American Florida senator Marco Rubio (in his capacity as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations' western hemisphere subcommittee) to examine, and oppose, the deal struck by Presidents Obama and Raúl Castro.

Rubio's committee called dissident Cubans with a variety of political commitments to testify: from hard right-wingers like Berta Soler, leader of a faction of the Ladies in White [6], a group originally established by the relatives of political prisoners, and Rosa María Payá, of the Cuban Christian Liberation Movement; to moderates like Miriam Leiva and social democrat Manuel Cuesta Morúa, both of whom support the renewal of diplomatic relations.

Under the guise of Congress's right to oversee US foreign policy, committees such as Rubio's have acted as judge and jury over internal Cuban politics. By collaborating in attempts by US governmental institutions to endow Platismo with an official patina, dissident Cubans like these have helped to legitimize US intervention in Cuba's internal affairs. These appearances before US official bodies also discredit Cuban dissidents before the anti-imperialist, nationalist Cubans who are becoming more critical of their government.

US government agencies have also sought to establish secret ties with elements of the Cuban opposition. One case involved Elizardo Sánchez, a prominent social-democratic dissident, and Vladimiro Roca (son of Blas Roca, one of the leaders of the pre-revolutionary Communist Party of Cuba), a social democrat who has drifted to the right.

According to a 2006 cable [7] from the US Interests Section (USINT) distributed by WikiLeaks, both Sánchez and Roca met with Michael Parmly, the head of USINT, to request he reconsider the ban on access to the USINT's two Internet centers placed on ten Cubans who Sánchez and Roca claimed had been unfairly blacklisted, perhaps at the request of rival dissidents.

Although this particular cable does not clarify the nature of the working relationship between Roca, Sánchez, and the US diplomatic mission, it does show the willingness of some high-profile social-democratic dissidents to actively collaborate with the American government.

Most serious of all, of course, is the secret financing that the US government has provided to an undetermined number of Cuban opposition forces. At one time, Elizardo Sánchez himself declared that the receipt of direct financial assistance from the US government would harm the anti-Castro

dissidents, although he later changed his mind.

Those receiving such subsidies defend themselves by pointing to the undeniable fact that it is difficult to survive as an oppositionist in a country like Cuba. Besides extensive surveillance and outright repression, the government manages access to higher education, and, until recently, virtually all sources of employment.

It still directly controls around 75 percent of overall employment, and this figure is much higher in the professional and academic spheres in which dissidents are disproportionately employed.

Cuba's Response

It is not surprising that the Cuban government has seized the issue of both real and imagined American government aid to the dissidents as a favorite battering ram against the opposition. But faithful to its history, the Cuban government has responded to the challenge of a peaceful, nonviolent dissidence with police and administrative repression.

In 1999, the government approved the Law for the Protection of Cuban National Independence and the Economy, which, among other things, made it a crime to receive funds from hostile foreign forces, even if these funds were used to carry out entirely peaceful political activities, such as meetings or demonstrations, or to write newspaper articles for hostile organs such as Miami's *El Nuevo Herald*.

In 2003, seventy-five dissidents were sentenced to long prison terms for violating the law. Their imprisonment created a furor abroad [\[8\]](#), and invited criticism from even longtime supporters of the Cuban government, such as Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano and Nobel Prize-winning Portuguese novelist José Saramago.

A few of the dissidents were released in the subsequent years for health reasons, but fifty-two remained jailed until 2010, when a successful negotiation between Raúl Castro's government and the Catholic hierarchy set them free, with the great majority of them accepting a "voluntary" deportation (to Spain in most cases).

Even supposing that every one of the seventy-five had received material aid from the United States, their peaceful activities should not have been a criminal matter but a political one, subject to public debate. If all Cubans, including peaceful oppositionists, were entitled to freedom of the press, speech, and assembly, and if the resources to exercise those rights were granted on some proportionate and equitable basis, then, and only then, could a case be made for criminalizing the receipt of material aid from the US government. Unfortunately, the Cuban government does not allow the opposition, in any of its forms, access to the mass media.

Revolutionary Platismo?

Financial aid from the US government, and from formally non-governmental organizations financed by the state, such as Freedom House, has not only compromised the independence of opposition groups in Cuba, but has also likely diverted those groups away from organizing other Cubans and instead promoted practices such as making statements to the foreign press and expecting their monthly checks from the US.

An organizing approach aiming at self-sufficiency, even under the difficult circumstances that

prevail in the island, would give the dissidence a political independence and strength that they could not attain being reliant on foreign governments for their political and material survival. This is precisely what the Workers' Defence Committee (KOR), a left-leaning Polish opposition group that played a key role in preparing the ground for the eventual emergence of the Solidarity movement in 1980, did.

As told by Jan Josef Lipsky [9], one of its leaders, the group implemented an organizing model, which despite the widespread firings and imprisonment of its members by the government, was able to organize an alliance between activist workers and intellectuals as a prelude to the strike in the port of Gdansk that sparked the Solidarity movement in 1980.

The approach does not necessarily exclude the financial and political support of truly independent organizations abroad. Independent human rights organizations, like Amnesty International, have played an indispensable role in publicizing the human rights abuses of the Cuban government. The more that progressive unions, political groups, and religious organizations internationally support independent organizations in Cuba, the less that these Cuban groups will have to rely on support from imperialist institutions.

Cuban dissidents influenced by Platismo have argued that, in Cuba, the issue of national self-determination — or for that matter, the risk that their dependence on foreign government support poses to their own independence — is moot. Without democracy in Cuba, they argue, there is no possibility of national self-determination, and any objection to US government aid translates into an obstruction to the struggle for democracy in the island.

This is an obvious obfuscation of the issues at stake: historically, claims for the right to national self-determination have never been premised on internal democracy. For example, international public opinion, including on the Left, strongly protested the Italian fascist dictator Mussolini's imperialist attack on Ethiopia in the 1930s. This protest occurred despite the fact that at the time, Ethiopia was ruled by Emperor Haile Selassie, the head of a reactionary social and political system that featured, among other traits, old-fashioned slavery.

Another demagogic argument advanced (less frequently) by some dissidents is that the Cuban government itself is Platista because of the recent steps it has taken toward developing economic relations with the US in order to resolve the economic crisis at home. This position was explicitly articulated by social democrat Manuel Cuesta Morúa in an article titled "Revolutionary Platismo" that appeared in the well-known dissident publication *14 y Medio.com*.

Besides making the stunning assertion that the conflict between Castro's government and the United States was a "voluntary" choice made by the Cuban leadership, Morúa claims that because the current Cuban economic model "is only sustainable in relation to the US economy," it constitutes "the best kind of revolutionary Platismo."

This argument distorts Platismo to dimensions that render it meaningless. The objective economic force of the United States, as a representative of both domestic and international capital, has led many countries to grant political concessions that have infringed on their national sovereignty. But this has not yet happened in Cuba (although the possibility cannot be ruled out in the future, particularly after the "historic" generation of revolutionary leaders passes from the scene).

Of course, there are many objectionable features in the Cuban government's transactions with foreign capital. They lack transparency and there is no public discussion of their nature. Most of all, its labor practices, as the compulsory intermediary between Cuban workers and their foreign employers, are exploitative. Typically, it passed on to Cuban workers only a small fraction of what it

collects from these corporations under the heading of wages and salaries; denying the workers the right to organize independently to negotiate, either with the foreign capitalists, or with the government itself, their compensation and working conditions.

The Cuban People's Task

The struggle against the structures of the one-party state and for the political and economic democratization of Cuban society is endangered by dissidents who have embraced Platismo. It is, after all, an ideology that can only weaken Cuba's political sovereignty and threatens to return the island to a pre-revolutionary neocolonial status — a condition that was transcended even if at the unnecessary price of the establishment of a one-party state.

The commitment of many Platistas to the democracy they ostensibly defend has become even more questionable by their silence about or outright support for the US-backed coup attempted in Venezuela in 2002, and the one successfully executed in Honduras in 2009. In addition, the open Platismo of many dissidents has strategically harmed the anti-Castro cause by allowing the Cuban government to effectively portray its critics as servants of the United States to both national and international audiences.

Individuals and organizations persecuted by the Cuban government for peaceful political activity should be defended, even Platistas and those who advocate the restoration of the "free-market economy." The defense of democratic rights and civil liberties inside a system that rejects them is an obligation beyond fundamental political disagreements.

That is an altogether different issue from supporting Platistas politically. Platismo, in the end, undermines the possibility of national self-determination and democracy.

President Obama's visit is a step in the right direction of normalizing US relations with Cuba. That is why he deserves to be welcomed with a recognition of his efforts to correct some of the wrongs of the US's past foreign policies towards Cuba. But this recognition should not be confused with an undignified gratitude and even less with efforts to have him use the powers of the imperialist state over which he presides to press for the democratization of Cuba. That is a task for the Cuban people themselves, not Washington.

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P.S.

* Jacobin. 3.19.16:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/03/cuba-obama-platismo-blockade-castro/>

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Footnotes

- [1] <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/platt.htm>
- [2] See, available on ESSF (article 37481), [50 Years Later: Learning From The Bay Of Pigs - "The Brilliant Disaster"](#).
- [3] <https://www.congress.gov/bill/102nd-congress/house-bill/5323>
- [4] http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/latin_america-july-dec01-helms-burton_07-02/
- [5] <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/sen-marco-rubio-pushes-against-obamas-cuba-changes-hearing-n299431>
- [6] <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-28290793>
- [7] https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06HAVANA9102_a.html
- [8] <https://cpj.org/reports/2008/03/cuba-press-crackdown.php>
- [9] <https://searchworks.stanford.edu/view/1918498>