

US-Cuba thaw: New Year & New Hopes

By Dr Bhaskar Balakrishnan

As Cuba celebrates on January 1 the 55th anniversary of the triumph of the Revolution which swept into power a new government led by the charismatic Fidel Castro, the deep freeze in relations with its giant neighbour shows signs of thawing at last. President Obama's December 17 announcement that diplomatic ties would be established, and some relief provided from the economic embargo against Cuba, brought cheer to both sides of the Florida straits, the 100 mile waters that separate the two countries. The full story of US-Cuba relations goes back to the 1890s, with many colourful and eventful chapters. Now the questions are — what will this opening lead to, and how it will impact the various stakeholders, and the region?



Obama's announcement marks a bold admission that the economic embargo against Cuba has failed to bring about a regime change. Rather, it has enabled the regime to crack down on dissent, sometimes unwisely promoted by agencies within the US, and exploit the image of a small country defending its hard-won sovereignty against a giant and powerful imperialistic neighbour. However, many in the US argue that Obama has snatched defeat from the jaws of victory and that the Cuban regime would have collapsed given a little more time. They argue that with the economic downturn and changes in Venezuela and Russia, Cuba's support base has shrunk and economic woes would have triggered a regime change.

The proponents of maintaining the hard line policy against Cuba include long-time Cuban American members of the US Congress, including some potential presidential candidates from both parties. The Republican Party, which has the majority in both US houses, has promised to stop Obama's efforts in Congress, by blocking the establishment of diplomatic relations, appointment of an envoy, and the removal of legislation on sanctions.



However, the president's actions seem to have wide support, including from the younger generation of Cuban-Americans, the broader Hispanic community, and among business, especially in many US states such as Texas and the Midwest where business with Cuba is seen as leading to economic benefits and new jobs. Polls indicate that the support for the hard-line policy is low. Republicans may have to consider carefully the cost of opposing normalisation, possible loss of votes of the Hispanic community, the fact the votes in Florida may not be decisive in future, and the opposition from the business community and even within their own ranks.

Obama's arguments have been clearly articulated in the announcement he made. Firstly, the objective of democratisation in Cuba and giving space to legitimate opposition remains the core of US policy. But sanctions do not help achieve this objective. Moreover, the moral underpinnings are weakened by the US maintaining diplomatic ties with other autocratic regimes such as China, North Korea and Vietnam. The effort to isolate Cuba has backfired and Latin American and Caribbean countries are united in including Cuba in any regional cooperation system. Unilateral US sanctions do not work, while other countries such as

Canada, the EU and Mexico pursue economic relations with Cuba. Attempts to internationalise the US sanctions through the US legislation end up irritating other partners of the US and lead to them criticising the US of violating international laws.



On the positive side, the lifting of the US economic sanctions will enable US business to compete within Cuba, including in important sectors such as hydrocarbons, agriculture, and tourism. Many US states will get benefits in terms of business growth and new jobs from exports. The US is already a leading exporter of agri-products to Cuba, despite the harsh trading conditions. Exploitation of hydrocarbons in the sea between US and Cuba will be possible, and the settlement of the US-Cuba maritime boundary would help this process. Cuba already cooperates with the US on ending uncontrolled migration and anti-narcotics; and this cooperation will strengthen.

Normal people-to-people contacts will enable the 2 million or so Cuban-Americans to interact more closely with their relatives in Cuba, visit more often, send them money, and invite them over. This may be far more effective in creating the demand for more democracy in Cuba. New political ideas cannot be blocked from reaching people's minds, and the Cuban regime has most to fear from this. Political change has been ruled out for now in Cuba, while economic reforms are being undertaken to give more space to private business, albeit the process is glacial. President Raul Castro is trying to model this on the experience of China. However, China has a different history and economic situation, and even in China there is growing demand for political change, defused only by pursuit of economic growth, crackdown on corruption, and reducing inequality, as a means for the regime to earn legitimacy.

Whether Cuba can keep change only to the economic level remains to be seen. The release of some political detainees in Cuba indicates that the regime is willing to show some flexibility to the US and Western concerns on human rights, which are often delicately handled by the Vatican. Any ill-advised effort by agencies in the US public or private to insert themselves into Cuba's nascent opposition will be a severe blow to prospects of normalisation. On the subject of artistic freedom, Fidel Castro had said famously: "within the Revolution, anything is possible, outside it nothing is". This indicates that the likely path to democratisation would start by encouraging plurality within the Communist Party. US policy-makers should understand this, and realize that Cuba has to evolve its own model of democracy whether it is a single or multiparty. So long as the system responds to the voice of the people, allows for diversity of opinions, and delivers on the promises it makes to them, it will retain their support. Is multiparty democracy the only form of democracy and is it exportable ?



As the Cuban regime enters the 56th year of its existence, it can be proud of some of its achievements. Health indicators are among the best in the region even better than the US. Cuba provides medical support and education to many countries that badly need it. HIV in Haiti, Ebola in West Africa, the earthquake in POK, are only a few cases where Cuban medical teams have distinguished themselves. Cuban biotechnology research has produced some important anti-cancer products that even the US would like to import, and products for biological control of mosquitoes and rats that carry diseases.

Cuba had achieved full literacy long ago, and is now assisting other countries to achieve full literacy through its innovative programs using radio. These include the Maoris in New Zealand, Venezuela, Central America, etc. In sports, this small island country has won 16 medals (5 of them gold) at the 2012 Olympics, and has

contributed significantly to India's performance in boxing. In the area of disaster management related to cyclones, Cuba's handling of such situations each year is exemplary. These are all areas where India can benefit from Cuba's experience.



In international relations Cuba punches far above its weight. 188 of 192 countries voted in support of the recent UN General Assembly resolution calling for an end to the US blockade against

Cuba. With its mixed population of European and African origin, Cuba has good relations with a large number of African and Latin and Caribbean states.

President Obama's announcement has received complete international support, which should encourage him and his supporters to move ahead. The US dropping its opposition to Cuba's integration into regional architecture of Latin America will help the entire region to move forward. Cuba and the US must move to constructive engagement from destructive hostility.

(Dr. Bhaskar Balakrishnan is a former Ambassador of India to Cuba)

