
Embassies reopen, but what's next on the horizon for U.S., Cuba relations?

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History was made in Washington July 20. The diplomatic thaw between the United States and Cuba took a dramatic turn when, after 54 years Cuba raised its flag and officially reopened its U.S. embassy.

Dozens of U.S. and Cuban lawmakers gathered inside, while hundreds crowded the sidewalks in front of the building. The sidewalk celebration began early, before three Cuban soldiers marched to the flagpole and raised the very same flag which was taken down in 1961 when the U.S. sought to isolate the island nation and punish its new, revolutionary government led by then President Fidel Castro.

Joyous supporters, activists and artists, scholars and historians remained on the street into the evening celebrating the first step in the normalization of relations between the two countries.



President Barak Obama and Raul Castro

Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez led the delegation of more than two dozen officials from Havana, including Cuba's chief negotiator, Josefina Vidal, and former Parliament President Ricardo Alarcón.

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry will travel to Havana in August, raising the U.S. flag over the U.S. embassy there, although the embassy officially opened its doors on July 20. At the State Department, Cuba's flag was quietly raised without ceremony, joining the flags of more than 150 other countries which have diplomatic relations with the United States.

Cuban President Raúl Castro applauded the diplomatic renewal but called on President Obama to remove the ongoing U.S. trade and financial embargo with an executive order. "The revolutionary government has the willingness to advance in normalizing relations, convinced that both countries can cooperate and coexist in a civilized manner, for mutual benefit, beyond differences that we have and that we will have, and contribute to peace," President Castro said.

"We hope that the U.S. president continues to use his executive powers that he can use as president without congressional interference, to dismantle aspects of this policy that has damaged and caused hardship to our people."

U.S. lawmakers in attendance called for pressure on their colleagues to get Congress to lift the embargo. "This has been a long time coming. As you know, I've been doing this work since the '70s, and now we finally can see progress," Rep. Barbara Lee (D-Calif.) told *The Final Call*. "We've got a lot of work to do. We've got to lift the embargo and lift the travel ban, and that means members of Congress have to vote. And I hope the public will get to their members of Congress, tell them to get to the members who don't support this. Those members are living 54 years ago. This is 2015. Tell those members to support our efforts to lift the embargo and lift the travel ban.

"The public supports this, over 80 percent," Rep. Lee continued. "It's the members of Congress who are holding up progress. They may get it, but they need to hear from their constituents before they move on it."

"It's very significant—the United States accepting the reality, the reality being Cuba is there, Cuba is a sovereign country," Rep. Raul Grijalva (D-Ariz.), chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus told *The Final Call*. "We have diplomatic relations and economic treaties with countries that we fought wars with. To me, this is a realistic step, especially for this hemisphere, to be inclusive of all the nations and to finally give Cuba its due. It's endured. It has suffered, and now it's to the point that we open a bridge diplomatically, a strong bridge, and with it comes the embargo lifting, and with it will come other important decisions that have to happen.

In the 1960s, the U.S. managed to isolate Cuba from other countries in the region, but over the course of the last 20 years it is this country which has become more and more isolated from its neighbors. "One of the important pluses for the United States diplomatically is that we join the family of nations in this hemisphere," Rep. Grijalva continued.

"Our reputation has been hurt. Our relations with other countries have been hurt as a consequence of us isolating Cuba and having no relations at all. This I think helps us, and begins the process of making us part of the family."

"It's fabulous. It's a day we've been waiting for, for many years," Rep. Jose Serrano (D-N.Y.) told *The Final Call*. "We're just going to continue with the conversations. Everything is on the table. All is negotiable. But to see that flag flying there, it's a very emotional moment."

One delicate issue that activists fear may be up for negotiation is the status of U.S. exile Assata Shakur. "In 1977 I was convicted in a trial that can only be described as a legal lynching," Ms. Shakur said in an open letter to Pope John Paul II during his trip to Cuba. "In 1979 I was able to escape with the aid of some of my fellow comrades. Pacifica Radio's "Democracy Now!" broadcast her reading the letter in 1998.

"I saw this as a necessary step, not only because I was innocent of the charges against me, but because I knew that in the racist legal system in the United States I would receive no justice. I was also afraid that I would be murdered in prison. I later arrived in Cuba where I am currently living in exile as a political refugee."

Assata Shakur, a prominent figure in both the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army (BLA) was

convicted May 2, 1973, for killing a New Jersey state trooper during a shootout that left a BLA member dead. She was shot twice by police during the incident. Despite the insistence by U.S. officials, activist supporters of Cuba insist that Ms. Shakur's status is not negotiable.

"Well, from the standpoint of the Cuban government, they have made it very clear that there's no—the discussion about Assata, about her, is not on the table," actor, human rights activist Danny Glover told Democracy Now! "They made that very clear. I don't know what this country, the United States, will determine; determine what they'll do in terms of what happens to—in this situation.

"I'm not aware of anything that's happening in terms of the discussions, so I would be taking a leap to say anything about that. And I think it's important that we're very careful about what we say about her, as well, you know, at this particular point in time, because she's still in a dangerous situation, even though the Cuban government has taken every step to protect her livelihood and protect her. But it's still a very dangerous situation. So I'm not so sure what the dynamics are about that and what discussions, if any, are happening about that," Mr. Glover said.

Has U.S. Policy Toward Cuba Really Changed? Netfa Freeman is organizer for the Campaign for a Just Policy Towards Cuba for the Institute for Policy Studies, he raised that rhetorical question in a recent article which pointed to the many benefits this country would gain by following Cuba's example. An excerpt from the article was released by Washington's Institute for Public Accuracy.

"Many of the moves the Obama administration has made in terms of its Cuba policy are in lockstep with Bill Clinton's, as expressed in the recommendations of a 1999 task force report from the Council on Foreign Relations," according to Mr. Freeman. "The report asserted that 'no change in policy should have the primary effect of consolidating, or appearing to legitimize, the political status quo on the island.'

"While the Obama administration insists that it's just changing a U.S. policy that was 'not working,' it remains an essentially disrespectful position against Cuba. The United States could learn a lot from Cuba when it comes to disaster relief, education, and health care.

"More pointedly, Cuba projects a foreign policy of international solidarity around the world. As the U.S. supplies troops seen as military occupiers, Cuba sends—often to the same places the U.S. militarizes—doctors and teachers who provide crucial assistance, free of charge, to the countries they're in service of. Cuba does this with no strings attached, unlike the aid packages provided by U.S.-led international institutions like the IMF, World Bank, and even the United Nations.
