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Fidel's Propaganda Victory? European Union Removes Cuba Sanctions

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On June 19, 2008, over dinner in Brussels, the European Union's foreign ministers agreed to lift sanctions against Cuba. This decision closes an uncharacteristically confrontational chapter in EU-Cuban relations that began after the March 2003 Cuban crackdown on dissent that resulted in the arrest of 75 pro-democracy advocates, the cream of Cuba's nascent civil society. After a series of summary trials, each activist was consigned to Fidel Castro's tropical gulag for sentences of up to 28 years.

The EU, in a rare demonstration of displeasure with Cuba, objected to this ruthless and unwarranted suppression of peaceful dissent. While the response was far more symbolic than substantive, the EU froze high level visits to Cuba, denied Cuban officials participation in certain cultural activities and urged member states to invite dissidents to cocktail receptions at their embassies in Havana. However, trade, travel and investment between the EU and Cuba were not disrupted.

The March 2003 Cuban crackdown also outraged the Bush Administration, the U.S. Congress and the American people. In response to Cuba's actions, the United States imposed tougher restrictions on travel and remittances to Cuba and created the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba.

Although it appeared the U.S. and its European allies shared similar views regarding the repressive nature of Cuban communism, the EU's decision to terminate its sanctions against Cuba demonstrates otherwise. Despite the crumbling of European resolve, the United States must maintain its princi-

pled stand, both in word and deed, against the oppressive Cuban regime.

The EU Has Second Thoughts. The EU retreat began in 2005, when, without any appreciable improvement of Cuban human rights, it nullified its 2003 actions and suspended its modest sanctions. Nonetheless, the Castro regime continued to bridle over the mere existence of "sanctions," denouncing them as "unjust interference" in Cuba's internal affairs.

Spain, under the leadership of Socialist Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero and Foreign Minister Miguel Moratinos, adopted a particularly apologetic, anti-U.S. stance towards Cuba, pressing the EU to remove the sanctions altogether. In the prevailing view of Madrid, Cuba should be treated no differently than Chile, Costa Rica or Peru; although political prisoners remain in Cuban jails, senior Cuban officials should feel welcomed at EU receptions.

Unfortunately for the dissidents languishing in Cuban dungeons, Spain's attitude has proven infectious, resulting in the end of sanctions. In place of these sanctions, the European Union states it will pursue wide-ranging, if ill-defined, dialogue with

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communist leaders. According to EU foreign ministers, the proposed discussions will urge the release of political prisoners, seek meetings with “representatives of civil society and the democratic opposition” and recommend freedom of expression and access to the Internet. This dialogue will, so the EU promises, be established on a “reciprocal, unconditional, non-discriminatory and results-oriented basis” and be reviewed in June 2009.

EU Rewards Cosmetic Changes. Since Raúl Castro assumed legal control on February 24, 2008, the Cuban government has slightly loosened some of its most onerous restrictions on consumer goods. For instance, by engineering a new cash-and-carry form of communism, Raúl’s regime allows Cubans with hard currency to purchase computers, cell phones and DVDs. Citizens—if they possess the cash—are now able to holiday at resort hotels in Cuba and have improved chances of owning property. Without disclosing a master strategy, Cuban officials say they want to concentrate on encouraging private incentives in agriculture, where Cuba’s production remains abysmal. Other measures seek to create what Havana spinmasters are calling a new “meritocracy” with incentives for productivity.

Despite the above-noted cosmetic changes, Raúl’s political views remain in synch with Fidel’s. The regime has demonstrated no positive movement on human rights reform. Of the original 75 political prisoners detained during the 2003 crackdown, approximately 55 remain incarcerated. And escape from imprisonment carries a heavy price; most of those let out were removed for medical reasons stemming primarily from inhumane treatment.

Even as the Cuban regime offers superficial reforms, government suppression of genuine freedom continues. For instance, on April 21, 2008, a minuscule protest by a dozen wives and relatives of the political prisoners, *Las Damas de Blanco* or Ladies in White, ended in a police sweep and fierce denunciations of the women by Cuban authorities as U.S. “agents.”

Additionally, Cuba’s independent-minded blogger, Yoani Sanchez, a voice of the new generation disillusioned with the restrictions on life in contemporary Cuba, was denied an exit visa to travel to

Spain to receive the Ortega y Gasset Prize for Journalism. The refusal was accompanied by a tirade from Fidel Castro against the Spanish “neo-colonial” media and “metropolitan mentality” of certain Europeans, that is, any critics of the regime.

Comfortable with Castro. The EU was never truly serious about defending human rights or democracy in Cuba. A handful of members of the “New Europe”—the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland in particular—valiantly stood beside the Cuban people urging the EU to hold Cuba accountable for violations of human rights. Sadly familiar with life under the boot of Communism, these European nations offered both word and deed in support of jailed dissents and the silenced Cuban majority.

Old Europe, however, proved it is comfortable with Cuba’s aging, communist dictatorship. By preferring kind words and gentile gestures over forceful sanctions, the old democratic core of the EU only further legitimize a ruthlessly anti-democratic regime. Concerned primarily with the preservation of trade, investments and travel junkets, the EU prefers a live-and-let live, post-ideological arrangement with the Castro brothers. The EU’s interests guarantee that, in the words of one Cuban dissident, the “monologue” between Europe and Cuba will be conducted through communist interlocutors. In addition to providing a moral victory to a dying but defiant Fidel, such an approach assures that tyranny will continue to dictate the pace of economic and political change in Cuba.

Wither the U.S.? The EU has elected to engage Cuba through unconditional dialogue regardless of substantive improvement in Cuban human rights. From its awkward phraseology designed not to offend to its surrender of even the slightest pretense of moral criticism, the EU stakes its position on a rose-colored vision of political change in Cuba. Such a position attributes a spirit of open-mindedness and reciprocity that appears altogether absent in Cuba’s leadership.

Ultimately, the end of EU sanctions will have little effect on the Cuban economy. Thanks largely to President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, Canada, China and the Spanish, Cuba’s economy remains moribund, but capable of survival. As Fidel Castro

responded, the end of sanctions will not have “absolutely any economic consequences.”

Yet, the repercussions of the EU’s actions cannot be measured by economic considerations alone. Democracy and human liberty advance or retreat on a case-by-case basis. The precedence set by the EU will certainly not go unnoticed by the rising autocracies of Russia and China or by brutal tyrannies clinging to power in Burma, Sudan, Zimbabwe and elsewhere. The EU’s willingness to do business with tyrants strengthens the hand of other leaders trampling democratic and human rights. Even the nations of the Americas, committed to their citizen’s right to democracy as specified by the Democratic Charter of the Organization of American States, applauded the EU’s decision.

Unfortunately, the EU’s reversal will further the international isolation of the U.S.’s principled commitment to genuine democratic change in Cuba. Fear of such global disapproval, even as a price for defending human rights, creates additional pres-

ures for American political leaders to imitate their EU counterparts and propose negotiations without conditions and the lifting of economic sanctions without a commitment to reciprocal change.

A Cuba policy that offers unconditional negotiations with the Castro regime or the removal of sanctions and controls without positive actions on the part of the Cuban government to release political prisoners and initiate a serious dialogue with Cuba’s civil society and its fledgling democratic opposition would represent a step back from fundamental U.S. human rights commitments worldwide. Therefore, despite the EU’s recent actions, the U.S. must maintain its commitment to a free Cuba, even when such a commitment demands the continuation of internationally unpopular sanctions.

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