

Salim Lamrani: "The economic sanctions are cruel because they affect the most vulnerable sectors of the Cuban population."

Voice of America

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[TV version]

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Voice of America: Let's go back a bit in history. There has already been more than half a century of diplomatic rupture between the United States and Cuba. Can you remind us of the key dates in the history of this blockade between the two countries?

Salim Lamrani: it is worth recalling that the dispute between the United States and Cuba can be traced back to the nineteenth century when the island was a primary objective of US foreign policy. The Founding Fathers had always seen Cuba as a natural appendage to be added to the American Union. Thomas Jefferson spoke of this as early as 1805. We are also aware of the "ripe fruit" theory of John Quincy Adams.

In the twentieth century, during the island's Republican period, the US supported the military dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista and opposed Fidel Castro's rise to power well before 1959. Allow me to quote Allen Dulles, then director the CIA who, in December of 1958, said: "We must prevent Castro's victory."

When Fidel Castro came to power in 1959, he immediately encountered the hostility of the United States, which early on had welcomed the dignitaries of the former regime and had immediately imposed economic sanctions against Cuba. Let me recall the lucid observation of former President John F. Kennedy who said the following: "We should have given a warmer welcome to Fidel Castro because it would have avoided many problems."

VOA: If we move forward a bit in time, we quickly come to the embargo. How did this come about?

SL: The United States first imposed economic sanctions on Cuba in 1960. It is important to remember that Washington's diplomatic rhetoric used to justify hostility toward Cuba has fluctuated over the years. In 1960, when Eisenhower imposed the first economic retaliatory measures, he evoked the process of expropriation and nationalization of US companies. Then in 1962, Kennedy used the alliance with the Soviet Union as justification for the imposition of total economic sanctions. In the 1970s and 1980s, the intervention of Cuba in Africa in support of independence movements was advanced as the reason. Since 1991 and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States justifies maintaining its hostile policy toward Cuba for reasons of democracy and human rights.

It is important to remember that this diplomatic rhetoric has shifted significantly over the years.

Recently, President Obama made a very clear statement on US policy. He realized it had been ineffective. It is obsolete because it is a relic of the Cold War.

VOA: Is Cuba still a communist bastion of the Cold War?

SL: Latin America has changed over the past half century. Cuba is obviously a different society with a political system and a model of society distinct from that of the United States. It should be recognized that there exists two completely different conceptions of democracy. The two presidents even pointed this out in their joint press conference.

I think Washington has come to understand the need to base its relations with Havana on the principles of reciprocity, entente cordiale and dialogue. The policy of hostility has failed.

Public opinion clearly demonstrates that a majority in the US now support a normalization of relations with Cuba. This goes beyond the cleavage that exists between the Democrats and the Republicans. Many states with a Republican majority, especially in the Midwest, want to have normal relations with Cuba for obvious economic reasons.

VOA: The embargo has not been lifted and, in terms of economics, it may take time. What will be the consequences for the island if the process promoted by Barack Obama does not achieve its goal?

SL: The economic sanctions constitute the main obstacle to the development of the country. They are unanimously condemned by the vast majority of the international community. In

October of 2015, for the 24th consecutive year, 191 of 193 countries, including the United States' most faithful allies, demanded that Washington change its policy and lift the sanctions. The reasons are obvious. The sanctions are anachronistic because they date back to the Cold War. They are cruel because they affect the most vulnerable categories of the Cuban people, not the leaders. Finally, they are ineffective to the extent that the initial goal of overthrowing the Cuban Revolution has clearly failed.

The outcome of this policy is instructive: Rather than isolating Cuba internationally, these sanctions have instead isolated the United States.

President Obama has adopted constructive measures concerning the easing of some restrictions. Unfortunately however, the sanctions are still in force. It is true that Congress remains an obstacle, but I think that this is marginal. The President of the United States, as chief executive, has the power required to dismantle 90% of these sanctions without Congressional approval. There are very few sections where he is precluded from taking action.

VOA: Do you agree that Barack Obama has made an historic change, even if the future of Cuba still raises many questions?

SL: Undeniably. President Obama has ended a historical anomaly, restoring the link with the Cuban people. He has rebuilt the bridge that had been broken in 1959. I believe he will make history as the president who adopted the most constructive approach to resolving a dispute dating back more than half a century. If there is one thing Barack Obama's presidency will be remembered for, it will be the process of normalization of relations with Cuba.

Translated from the French by Larry R. Oberg.

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