

US provocations and Castroite repression

Washington steps up attack on Cuba over dissident trials

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In the wake of a repressive crackdown by the regime of Fidel Castro, the Bush administration is reportedly considering drastic new measures against Cuba. These would include the cutting off of remittances sent by Cuban-Americans to family members on the island and the halting of direct charter flights used principally by US-based Cuban émigrés to visit their homeland. Both sanctions are aimed at tightening the four-decade-old blockade against the Caribbean nation, while increasing economic and emotional hardships for Cubans on both sides of the Florida Straits.

Washington's international campaign to isolate Cuba on the grounds of human rights violations is without question a spectacle of unbridled hypocrisy. The same US government that is holding more than 600 prisoners—including children—without charges at Guantanamo Bay Naval Base condemns Cuba for sentencing 75 US-backed dissidents to jail terms in summary trials. George Bush, who as governor of Texas ordered the execution of 152 individuals and is responsible just in the past month for the slaughter of thousands of Iraqi civilians, expressed shock and outrage at Cuba's execution of three hijackers—the first such state killings in three years—who seized a Cuban ferry and threatened to kill its passengers.

That the United Nations Human Rights Commission chose to pass a mealy-mouthed resolution urging Cuba to admit a human rights inspector, while passing over in silence the US military's savaging of Iraq and the existence of the concentration camp in Guantanamo, is a measure of cowardice of the world's governments—and, in particular, those of the European Union—in the face of US intimidation.

There is no question that Washington has played a pivotal role in provoking the actions of the Cuban regime, and is exploiting them in a calculated fashion to prepare new aggression against the embattled Caribbean nation.

Contempt for the Bush administration's posturing as a champion of human rights and support for Cuba's right to defend itself against US aggression do not, however, translate into a justification for the draconian actions of Fidel Castro's regime.

Socialists oppose capital punishment in the United States and must reject its use in Cuba as well. Summary one-day trials that result either in executions or sentences of up to 28 years in prison are a mockery of fundamental democratic rights, no matter who the defendant is or what government is responsible for the prosecution.

The resort to these methods is a manifestation of a deep internal crisis within the Castro regime. This crisis is the outcome both of US pressure and political decisions taken by Cuba's ruling party since it came to power in 1959 with the overthrow of the US-backed dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista.

The Bush administration was installed in the White House in 2000 in no small part because of the decisive support of the right-wing Cuban exile community in Florida, which helped halt the ballot count in that state.

Bush brought into the government a large number of Cuban-born right-wingers, led by Otto Reich [See "Bush nominee linked to Latin American terrorism"], who was placed in charge of the administration's Latin American policy.

The Bush administration sent to Havana a new chief of the US Interests Section, James Cason, with a mandate to foment opposition to the Cuban government. The US diplomat first used the offices of the US Interests Section to hold meetings of dissidents and then last month brought these individuals to his residence for a conference. He has officiated at the founding of opposition groups in Cuba and issued public statements denouncing the Castro regime, while hailing its opponents as the country's "future leaders."

Cason has acknowledged that his aim is to bring the various dissident groups together in a single unified opposition party, and that he regularly meets with the Cuban American National Foundation and other exile groups that have been implicated in terrorist plots against Cuba to discuss this project.

Meanwhile, the Bush administration's public declaration of a policy of "preemptive war," combined with unfounded accusations last year by the State Department's third-highest official, John Bolton, that Cuba has a biological warfare program [See "Is the US planning a war against Cuba?"], has led to justifiable fears in Havana that US policy toward Cuba is turning towards open military aggression. In the wake of the Iraq war, the question inevitably arises of whether Cuba will be one of the next targets of "regime change" via military aggression.

The US Ambassador to the Dominican Republic recently posed precisely that question. "I think what is happening in Iraq is going to send a very positive signal and is a very good example for Cuba," Ambassador Hans Hertell told the Dominican media. He added that the war in the Middle East was only the beginning of a "liberating crusade that will cover the entire world, including Cuba." Similar statements were made by Jeb Bush, the president's brother and governor of Florida.

The extraordinarily provocative campaign led by Cason in relation to the Cuba dissidents seems to have been calculated to elicit just the reaction that Castro provided.

Wayne Smith, a veteran US diplomat who in 1982 quit as the head of the US Interests Section in Havana over disagreements with the Reagan administration's Cuba policy, has suggested in articles published in recent weeks that, with the executions and jailings in Cuba, the Bush administration essentially got the reaction it wanted.

"The Bush Administration was uncomfortable with signs of greater tolerance on Castro's part, for that simply encouraged those in the United States who wanted to ease travel controls and begin dismantling the embargo," Smith wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* April 7. "New initiatives along those lines were expected in the Congress this spring. What to do to

head them off?

“What the Administration did is clear enough. It ordered the chief of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana to begin a series of high-profile and provocative meetings with dissidents, even holding seminars in his own residence and passing out equipment of various kinds to them. He even held press conferences after some of the meetings. The administration knew that such ‘bull-in-the-china-shop’ tactics would provoke a Cuban reaction—hopefully an overreaction.”

In particular, the Bush administration was anxious to undermine the growing sentiment among farm-state Republicans, reflecting the interests of US agribusiness, for tearing down restrictions on trade with Cuba. The internecine conflict between these elements and the rabidly anti-Castro exiles, who form a key base of Republican support, posed political problems for the administration as it approaches an election year. Congressional supporters of legislation to lift trade sanctions now acknowledge that this proposal is dead in the water.

A veteran of more than four decades of US attacks, assassination attempts and provocations, it hardly seems likely, however, that Castro simply fell unwittingly into Bush’s trap. The decision to carry out the executions and send 75 people to prison was undoubtedly just as politically calculated as the US provocations.

Washington has made no credible attempt to refute detailed evidence made public by the Cuban government that at least many of those it tried and convicted were wholly sustained in their anti-government activities by US government funds.

The trials were not open to the press and the evidence released by the Cuban government did not cover all of the defendants. It may be that among the 75 who were tried there are political opponents of the Castro regime who were not on the US payroll or acting as its agents. However, the proofs submitted by the Cuban government make clear that the axis of the so-called dissident movement has been the US State Department, the CIA and the US Interests Section in Havana.

Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque presented a wealth of evidence to the foreign press at a conference held earlier this month in Havana. The breadth of this material was due in no small part to the fact that the Cuban government had heavily infiltrated the dissident groups.

Eight undercover agents came forward for the trials, some of whom had worked with US-financed dissident organizations for a decade. A number of other agents are believed still to be operating within these groups, and the Cuban foreign minister claimed that his government has far more information on US covert activities among the dissidents that it has not made public.

Pérez Roque’s presentation of the evidence against those tried for subversion was founded both on the political record of US aggression against Cuba and a detailed analysis of the flow of money from Washington to the pockets of the self-described human rights activists and independent journalists.

“We consider, and the prosecutors consider, and the people of Cuba consider that someone who receives money from a foreign power, supports the blockade, helps to spread biased information to justify the blockade ... is committing actions in the service of a foreign power, and therefore, our laws should serve us to defend ourselves from such conduct,” he said.

The foreign minister cited congressional testimony confirming that the US Agency for International Development (AID) has spent some \$22 million since 1997 to carry out provisions of the Helms-Burton Act mandating financial support for opponents of the Castro regime in Cuba. Still more money for political destabilization efforts is provided through covert channels by the CIA.

Much of the AID money was funneled through so-called non-governmental organizations (NGOs), many of them run by anti-Castro Cuban exiles, according to figures cited by Pérez Roque. The Center for a

Free Cuba received \$2.3 million; Internal Dissidence Working Group, \$250,000; Freedom House, more than \$1.3 million; Dissidence Support Group, \$1.2 million; Cubanet, an Internet web site, \$800,000; and Institute for Democracy in Cuba, \$1 million.

Also among those channeling funds for subversion is the American Center for International Labor Solidarity (ACILS), a CIA front run by the AFL-CIO bureaucracy. ACILS, which played a role in backing the abortive coup staged a year ago against the Venezuelan government of Hugo Chávez, received \$168,575 for a project to discourage foreign investment in Cuba.

The National Policy Association, an outfit that includes on its board both union bureaucrats like AFL-CIO President John Sweeney and UNITE President Jay Mazur, and CEOs like Frank Carlucci, chairman of the Carlyle Group and formerly of the CIA and Pentagon, received three times as much for the same purpose.

Cuban prosecutors were able to produce expenditure records and receipts for some of this money, establishing a paper trail from the US government to the dissidents. In addition to monthly salaries, the money went to buy everything from computers to televisions, household furniture and sets of pots and pans. In some cases, these goods were passed on to others as a means of buying support.

Among the receipts were those signed by Osvaldo Alfonso Valdés of the group “Todos Unidos,” as well as letters to him from Carlos Alberto Montaner confirming the sending and receipt of hundreds of dollars in monthly payments. Montaner, an extreme right-wing journalist based in Madrid, is widely suspected of working as a covert agent of the CIA.

In a statement to the court, Alfonso Valdés admitted that “in our opposition work we could have been used by the officials of the Interests Section” and that the dissidents knew that “the resources that came to us for our labors originated in funds approved by the government of that country.” He also acknowledged meeting with an official of USAID who had come to verify that the money was reaching him and others and to discuss the most secure means of transferring the funds.

The Cuban foreign minister also established that publications circulated by the opposition groups were either printed in the offices of the Interests Section itself, as in the case of *Revista de Cuba*, or published outside with money provided by the US government and then shipped into Cuba via diplomatic pouch, as in the case of the magazine *El Disidente*.

“That is why when they try to say that these are non-governmental organizations, I always clarify that they are governmental since they belong to the government of the United States and act in its service,” said Pérez Roque.

What can one say about Cuban writers or political activists who support themselves with funds from the US government? They are not really dissidents, but rather conformists—people who have aligned themselves with what they see as the winning side. In a country whose entire national culture has been defined by the struggle against US domination, such figures can hardly claim to represent any form of liberation.

There have, however, been real dissidents in Cuba. In the early 1960s, the Cuban Trotskyists advanced a socialist program based upon the independent mobilization of the working class as the only means of defending the Cuban revolution against imperialism. In their case, there was no evidence of ties to any outside powers. Nonetheless, the Castro regime jailed them, confiscated their publications and destroyed their printing press.

There is no question that the activities of Cason and the US funding of the dissidents represent a gross violation of Cuba’s sovereignty and interference in its internal affairs by an administration that is committed to the overthrow of the Cuban government.

That being said, however, in and of themselves the dissident groups would appear to pose little real threat to the Castro regime. The fact that several of the Cuban undercover security agents rose to the top leadership

of these organizations is a measure of the groups' political weakness and dependence upon the US government.

The principal association of "independent journalists," it emerged, was headed by two Cuban security agents. Cason was forced to acknowledge that one of them had served as the principal organizer of the meeting held in his residence. Likewise, the president of the "Pro Human Rights Party of Cuba" was a member of the Cuban security forces. It is hardly likely that undercover security agents would rise to the very top of any movement with a broad base of support.

What, then, was the urgency requiring the convening of one-day trials and shipping the lot of these dissidents off to prison for lengthy terms? If the idea was to fire a shot across Washington's bow, warning it in advance of Cuba's determination to resist military aggression, it would seem more appropriate to send the provocateur Cason packing. He, however, remains firmly ensconced in the US Interests Section in Havana.

As for the execution of the three hijackers, the use of capital punishment in this case is not only unjustifiable from the standpoint of the nature of the crime (none of the passengers were hurt), it is hardly likely to deter other poor and desperate people seeking to emigrate for what are generally economic rather than political reasons. Defenders of these executions have taken to calling the hijackers "terrorists" or even suggesting that they were US agents, in an attempt to justify the state killings.

No doubt, the US has played a role in provoking hijackings—there have been seven in the space of that many months—by refusing to issue visas promised as part of an immigration agreement signed under the Clinton administration. Barely 700 have been issued in the last six months, when the annual quota is supposed to be 20,000. But the Castro regime itself has used emigration—the Mariel boatlift of 1980 as well as the epidemic of "rafters" in the mid-1990s—as a means of venting social pressures at home and exerting political pressure on Washington.

The message that was sent with these draconian acts of repression is in all likelihood aimed not so much at Washington, the isolated dissident groups in Cuba or potential hijackers, but at elements within Castro's own regime. After more than 40 years in power, political and economic contradictions underlying this regime have deepened immensely.

The Cuban revolution did not bring about socialism or a workers state on the island. Political power fell into the hands of a guerrilla army led by Castro and based in the Cuban nationalist petty bourgeoisie. While its initial program was of a democratic and national reformist character, the Castroite movement was pushed to take more sweeping measures by both the demands of the Cuban masses and the intransigent US opposition to any amelioration of social conditions at the expense of private profit and US corporate interests.

Castro's response was a series of state nationalizations, first of US-owned and then Cuban industries, together with a turn to the Soviet Union for aid. The alliance between the Castro regime and the Moscow Stalinist bureaucracy combined with the emulation of Castroite guerrillaism by left-wing forces in Latin America contributed to the disorientation of the workers movement throughout the continent and a series of catastrophic defeats, culminating in military dictatorships [See "Castroism and the politics of petty-bourgeois nationalism".]

The Kremlin bureaucracy's dissolution of the Soviet Union and adoption of capitalist restorationist policies spelled economic disaster for Cuba, which relied heavily on Soviet subsidies. The Soviet bloc was the market for 83 percent of Cuba's exports and a key supplier of subsidized oil.

The island nation has yet to recover from the consequences of the breakup of the USSR. Its economy remains in tatters. Last year exports fell from \$1.7 billion to \$1.4 billion, and are expected to register another decline this year. Before the demise of the Soviet Union, Cuban exports stood at \$5.4 billion.

The worldwide contraction of the tourist trade—the island's principal

source of income in recent years—has deepened the crisis. In 2002, Cuba recorded a 5 percent drop in the number of tourists visiting the island compared to the previous year. The rise in the price of imported oil has compounded problems.

The turn toward tourism and a dollar-based economy has led to a sharp social polarization within Cuba and a fraying of the social, health and educational conquests of the Cuban revolution.

With the Cuban leader approaching his seventy-seventh birthday, there is growing speculation about how much longer he can run the government and what the shape of succession will look like. Under these conditions, there is the real possibility that a section of the ruling elite itself could push for the full restoration of a free-market economy and rapprochement with Washington.

Thus the trials and executions may well be intended as a warning to elements within the Castro regime itself.

It would not be the first time that the Cuban leader has used the firing squad as a means of asserting his monolithic control. In 1989, Gen. Arnaldo Ochoa and three others were executed after being convicted in a summary court martial on trumped-up drug trafficking charges.

Ochoa joined the anti-Batista guerrillas as a teenager in 1958 and served for 30 years in the Cuban armed forces, from the battle against the CIA-sponsored invasion at the Bay of Pigs in 1961 through to the campaign against the South African and CIA-backed forces in Angola in the 1980s. He was the most popular commander in Cuba's Revolutionary Armed Forces and seen as a possible pole of attraction for oppositionists, under conditions in which the Moscow bureaucracy under Mikhail Gorbachev was moving toward capitalist restoration and distancing itself from Havana.

The message was clear: no questioning of Castro's leadership would be tolerated.

There is an element of tragedy in the present impasse confronting the Cuban revolution and the increasing hardship that 40 years of sanctions have imposed upon the Cuban people. This, however, does not alter the essentially bourgeois social character and authoritarian political nature of the Castro regime. On the contrary, the downward trajectory of the Cuban revolution is indissolubly bound up with these political facts.

Political decisions have consequences. Those who presented Castroism and Guevarist guerrilla warfare as a new strategy of revolutionary struggle, superseding the necessity to fight for the development of a conscious socialist leadership and the political independence of the working class, bear a heavy responsibility for the present crisis of revolutionary perspective, not only in Cuba, but throughout Latin America.

The defense of Cuba from US aggression is primarily a political, rather than a military question. The defeat of any US intervention depends upon the development of a new revolutionary perspective in opposition to the politics of bourgeois nationalism practiced by the Castro regime. It requires the mobilization of the working class—in Cuba itself, in the US and throughout Latin America—as an independent and internationally unified political force fighting for socialism. This is the perspective fought for by the Socialist Equality Party in the United States and its sister parties worldwide in the Fourth International.



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