Raul Castro sought “political channel” to Washington

Patrick Martin
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The Castro regime in Cuba has made repeated efforts to seek accommodation with Washington since Barack Obama took office in January 2009, according to secret cables from the US interest section in Havana, made public by WikiLeaks.

The internal State Department communications reported in June 2009 that Fidel Castro was “obsessed” with the new US president, and five months later that Raul Castro, who succeeded his brother as day-to-day ruler four years ago, had approached the Spanish foreign minister seeking a “political channel” to Washington.

Fidel Castro, active behind the scenes but not in the daily leadership of the regime since his severe illness in June 2006, regarded the election of Obama as a potential turning point in US-Cuban relations, evidently sharing the illusion that the new president’s skin color was a token of “progressive” politics.

His “Reflections” column, regularly published in the Cuban Communist Party newspaper *Granma*, commented frequently on Obama’s policies, praising him as articulate and hard-working. His column of June 9, 2009 hailed Obama’s speech in Cairo on US relations with the Muslim world, and the US interest section in Havana took note.

“Fidel’s subsequent Reflection on 9 June will only add to speculation from our civil society and diplomatic contacts that Fidel is obsessed with President Obama,” said a cable sent that day to Washington. “Fidel mostly sympathized with [Obama]—in his own way—regarding the first section, which included the fact that the US is not at war with Islam, the Israel-Palestine issue, and Iran and nuclear weapons. “

The cable quoted Castro’s evaluation that “the current president’s main difficulty lies in the fact that the principles he is advocating contradict the policy the superpower has pursued for almost seven decades.” This estimate proved to be completely mistaken, as the Obama administration has continued the anti-Cuba policy of its predecessors, including a near-total embargo on US trade with the island country.

The cable cited Castro’s comment that Obama’s speech “would appear to be a public relations campaign carried out by the United States with the Muslim countries; in any case, this is better than threatening to destroy them with bombs.”

It then added that Castro’s column was the only report in the Cuban media on the Cairo event, and that this was not unusual. Fidel Castro “frequently provides the only snippets of President Obama’s speeches available to Cubans.”

Fidel’s role as Obama’s publicist was followed by a more direct overture to the US president by Raul Castro. The Cuban president approached the visiting Spanish foreign minister, Miguel Angel Moratinos, to ask him for assistance in establishing a “political channel” to the US government, “particularly the White House,” according to a cable of December 3, 2009, which followed a briefing by the Spanish ambassador to the US interest section in Havana.

“Only via such a ‘political channel’ would the GOC [government of Cuba] be able to make major moves toward meeting US concerns,” the cable said, citing the ambassador’s briefing.

By the end of the first year, the Castro brothers had evidently drawn some negative conclusions about the Obama administration, particularly after the role of the US government at the global conference on climate change, held in Copenhagen, Denmark during December 2009.

It is remarkable that it was Copenhagen, not the escalation of the war in Afghanistan or the failure to

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close the US detention camp at Guantanamo Bay, that so antagonized the Cuban leaders. This reflects the narrow nationalist concerns of Havana, which viewed the exclusion of Cuba, Bolivia and Venezuela from the closed-door talks in Copenhagen as an intolerable affront.

A cable from the US interest section in Havana on January 6, 2010, noted that after the failure of the climate conference, "Fidel wrote three straight Reflections devoted to attacking President Obama's participation in Copenhagen. Fidel called President Obama's conference remarks 'deceitful, demagogic and ambiguous.' In a January 3 Reflection, Fidel claimed 'the yanki president,' Barack Obama, and a group of the richest states on the planet, resolved to dismantle the binding commitments of Kyoto." This is in sharp contrast to his mid-September Reflection that one of President Obama's two positive features was his concern for climate change (concern for health care was the other)."

While the aging Fidel Castro entertained illusions in Obama, there was little self-delusion on the part of American imperialism, as demonstrated in an April 15, 2009 cable from US diplomat Jonathan Farrar that gave a devastating characterization of the US-backed "dissident" movement in Cuba, as well as the various right-wing exile groups in south Florida.

The cable declared: "we see very little evidence that the mainline dissident organizations have much resonance among ordinary Cubans. Informal polls we have carried out among visa and refugee applicants have shown virtually no awareness of dissident personalities or agendas. "

The dissidents were aging and out of touch, Farrar continued: "They have little contact with younger Cubans and, to the extent they have a message that is getting out, it does not appeal to that segment of society."

The opposition groups had to "stop spending so much energy trying to undercut one another. Despite claims that they represent 'thousands of Cubans,' we see little evidence of such support…"

"One political party organization told the COM [chief of mission] quite openly and frankly that it needed resources to pay salaries and presented him with a budget in the hope that USINT [US interest section] would be able to cover it," Farrar reported. "With seeking resources as a primary concern, the next most important pursuit seems to be to limit or marginalize the activities of erstwhile allies, thus preserving power and access to scarce resources."

There was also incessant infighting between opposition elements inside Cuba and the exile groups in Florida: "Even though much of their resources continues to come from exile groups, opposition members of all stripes complain that the intention of the exiles is to undercut local opposition groups so that they can move into power when the Castros leave. The islanders accuse Miami and Madrid-based exiles of trying to orchestrate their activities from afar, and of misrepresenting their views to policy makers in Washington."

Farrar concluded: "We will need to look elsewhere, including within the government itself, to spot the most likely successors to the Castro regime," adding that "we need to expand our contacts within Cuban society … as broadly as possible," including "within the middle ranks of the government itself."

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