

Trump clamps down on US-Cuban travel and trade

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On June 16, President Donald Trump gave a speech in Miami's Little Havana neighborhood outlining his planned rollback of the loosening of travel and trade restrictions initiated under the Obama administration. Repeating his absurd claim that the deal to reopen diplomatic relations and allow US companies to operate on the island was "one-sided" and "terrible and misguided," the Trump administration is speaking not only for wealthy, right-wing Cuban exiles who were part of his base. American imperialism's most rapacious layers see a Cuban economic collapse on the horizon and an opportunity to take back their old property without having to give a cut to the Cuban leadership and their associates.

Despite claiming to be canceling the deal "effective immediately," at the end of the speech Trump signed a presidential directive that the Commerce and Treasury departments begin drawing up changes to the Obama administration's most recent regulations within 30 days. According to reports and administration officials, the two biggest changes would primarily impact individual travel to the island by US nationals as well as place more limits on business deals with entities owned by the Cuban military.

The biggest expected change in regard to travel is the elimination of the "people to people" individual educational travel license. Due to the Cuban embargo, Americans are not allowed to spend money in Cuba without a license from the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC). The Obama administration, as part of its rapprochement with the government of Raul Castro, created more categories of "general" licenses under which people could "self-certify," essentially by checking off a box at their airport departure gate.

With senior administration officials claiming that the individual people-to-people travel license was "ripe for

abuse," essentially allowing travel by individuals as long as they stated it was for educational purposes, the license will revert to being available only for group travel. It is also likely that there will be more strict enforcement of OFAC regulations on returning travelers, particularly those traveling individually, and requests for proof of activities and expenditures.

This may severely reduce travel to the island by non-Cuban American visitors, who numbered 285,000 in the first five months of 2017 alone, roughly the same number as visited in all of 2016. This represents about 7 percent of tourist travel to Cuba, with the majority of visitors coming from Europe, Canada, and other Latin American countries.

The other major change announced by Trump is a ban on financial transactions involving the Cuban military. The Cuban military controls significant portions of the economy through its Grupo de Administración Empresarial, S.A. (GAESA), including tourism, through its Gaviota and Habaguanex subsidiaries.

It is not entirely clear how broad these restrictions will be, as apparently current deals, such as Marriott's management of the Gaviota-owned Four Points Sheraton in Havana, will be allowed to continue. Airbnb will still be able to operate, though it's unclear how the new policies will curtail demand. Cruise ships and airlines will also be exempted.

Essentially, the largest US companies are being shielded from legal liability, with the burden being placed most directly on individual travelers, in a move that can only be seen as an attempt to put a chill on the individual travel market and discourage those who would like to visit the island that is less than 100 miles off the US mainland.

While these moves in themselves are likely to have little significant effect on the ruling layer of the Cuban government, they will negatively impact the increasing numbers of Cubans who are reliant on US tourism, from

the owners of Airbnbs to restaurant workers and owners to taxi drivers and hotel workers, among others. Officially, 535,000 Cubans, around 10 percent of the population, are “self-employed” and no longer work in state jobs, though possibly several hundred thousand are in the same category informally.

Trump’s speech at the Manuel Arttime Theater, named for a Cuban exile who worked closely with the CIA in anti-Castro plots including the Bay of Pigs invasion, was an event deliberately calculated to appeal to the extremely right-wing layer of Cuban-American exiles. Trump praised that group, which provided him over 300,000 votes in Miami-Dade County. Though he lost there to Hillary Clinton, Trump’s margin of victory statewide was only 112,911 votes, making this group an extremely important source of support for any Republican candidate.

Prominent Cuban-American Republican politicians, including Senator Marco Rubio and Congressman Mario Diaz-Balart, put aside any lingering differences with Trump to make the announcement, which is widely opposed by the vast majority of the American population as well as a wide variety of business groups, including the US Chamber of Commerce.

Trump’s claims, outlined in a presidential memo, that “[t]he Cuban people have long suffered under a Communist regime that suppresses their legitimate aspirations for freedom and prosperity and fails to respect their essential human dignity,” is laughable, coming from a US government that routinely engages in torture, assassination and jailing of its political enemies, and which has built up the infrastructure of a police state beyond the dreams of the regime in Havana.

Nevertheless, his policies reflect the view that the long-standing project of destabilizing Venezuela may soon bear fruit, which would include undermining its ability to subsidize the Cuban economy through its supply of cheap oil. Cuba previously received about 4 percent of Venezuela’s oil exports, but shipments were paused for an eight-month period which ended in May, according to Reuters reports that examined shipping documents.

There are significant worries within the Cuban regime that an end of Venezuelan support will mean a return of the “special period” of the 1990s, when the end of Soviet support led to widespread hunger and economic collapse. With Cubans having increased access to information and entertainment sources from around the world, as well as more contact with international visitors, there is a worry that any protests or widespread social anger would quickly overwhelm the regime’s means of control.

While the Cuban government’s official response to Trump’s announcement said that “[a]ny strategy aimed at changing Cuba’s political, economic and social systems, whether through pressure or coercion, or employing more subtle methods, will be doomed to failure,” it is by no means excluded that the regime is willing to make a deal.

Aside from demands to release political prisoners and open Cuba up to political and economic freedoms, Trump also demanded the return of American fugitives, specifically naming Joanne Chesimard, also known as Assata Shakur, who has been living in Cuba since 1984 after gaining political asylum there. A former member of the Black Panther Party and other black nationalist groups, Shakur escaped prison in 1979 following a conviction for a 1973 shootout on the New Jersey Turnpike during which a state trooper was killed.

The government in Havana has always displayed a quintessentially petty-bourgeois foreign policy, attempting to maneuver between the great powers to secure aid and its own continued rule. With its relationship with Venezuela looking unstable, the Castro government now faces the choice of caving to American demands or perhaps pivoting to Russia or China, which would only put it more directly in the crosshairs of American imperialism.

Notably, Russia sent its first shipment of oil to Cuba since the 1990s in May of this year. There have also been reports that Russia has spoken to Cuba about the possibility of reopening a military base on the island, opening up the possibility of a replay of events such as the Cuban missile crisis.

Against the attempt to artificially separate them, the fate of Cuban and American workers are indelibly linked. The fight to prevent the wholesale looting and exploitation of Cuba by American banks and corporations can only proceed through the development of the international socialist movement represented by the ICFI and the building of its national sections in Cuba and throughout the world.



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