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COMMENTARY

As the Trump Team Takes Over, Cuba's Bargaining Position Hits Rock Bottom

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In the troubled history of U.S.-Cuba relations, changes in U.S. administrations have provided opportunities for détente. On January 20, the Trump team will assume control and soon-to-be confirmed Secretary of State Marco Rubio, a son of Cuban refugees, will weigh the value of bilateral talks. Cuba apparently desires a new relationship — as its centrally-planned economy fails and living conditions deteriorate, the government says its problems can only be solved by the U.S. lifting its economic embargo.

The key stumbling block is Cuba's human rights record. In July 2021, desperate Cubans took to the streets to protest inhumane living conditions and a lack of freedom. The government clamped down, locking up hundreds and sentencing many to long prison terms. Today, at least 1,300 political prisoners, among 100,000 other prisoners, suffer overcrowding, hunger, and poor health.

The government also persecutes independent churches. My organization, Outreach Aid to the Americas (OAA), supports this downtrodden segment of Cuban civil society that is regulated and repressed by the government's Office of Religious Affairs. In 2023, OAA surveyed 56 independent faith leaders — 52 said they are repressed, and nine had been forced to migrate. Many persecuted faith leaders are among the jailed political prisoners.

In mid-2024, the Observatory for Cuban Human Rights found that 89% live in extreme poverty — making Cuba one of the poorest countries in the world. Its energy grid is in collapse and Cubans have endured a recent series of island-wide blackouts. Cuba's health system is in shambles after the government siphoned off doctors and other health professionals to generate revenues through overseas missions described by the U.N. as "modern day slavery." A set of weak economic reforms have failed. Tourists are choosing not to visit Cuba in the face of these conditions — one recent visitor who underwent surgery described the hospital as "a horror movie set."

Because Cubans cannot raise their voices, many choose to flee. Since 2020, at least 1,100 have drowned making the crossing by boat and raft to Florida. Since 2022, more than a million have crossed U.S. borders or entered under the Humanitarian Parole program, and likely hundreds of thousands have gone to Central and South America, Spain, and Russia. The exodus totals 10% of Cuba's population. The U.S. has tried to deport 42,000, but the Cuban government refuses to receive them.

Cuba's finger pointing at U.S. policy may be diverting attention from systemic corruption. According to Miami Herald journalist Nora Gámez Torres, the Cuban military's conglomerate, GAESA — a network of hotels, stores, telecommunications, and banks — diverts public funds for the benefit of the political and military elite. Leaked GAESA records shows it secretly holds billions of U.S. dollars in cash and assets, while the country blames the U.S. embargo on its inability to import $339 million of medicines needed annually. GAESA assets and finances — supplemented by loans from yet-undisclosed foreign sources — are held outside government accounting and not made public.

President Joe Biden announced that there will be no Cuba policy change before the Trump team takes over. Cuba thus stays on State Department lists of countries not cooperating on counterterrorism and trafficking in persons, and those abusing religious freedom. As such, Cuba's government has fumbled a four-year opportunity to patch up relations.

Given its glaring human rights and governance record, Cuba has a short window to prove to the new U.S. administration that it is serious about constructive reform. Some starting points would be the release of 1,300 political prisoners, cooperation on U.S. deportations, transparency on GAESA and overseas medical missions, disbanding the Office of Religious Affairs, and allowing international monitoring of Cuba humanitarian conditions.

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