



ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Obama and US Democracy Promotion in Cuba: New Strategies, Old Goals?

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Abstract: *The promotion of democracy in Cuba has been, especially after the Cold War, a distinguishing feature of US foreign policy towards Havana. This article analyzes the evolution in US democracy promotion in Cuba, especially after the latest openings to Cuba (December 2014). Regarding the promotion of democracy on the island, the so-called 'abandonment of democracy' in US foreign policy never took place, and this implies a renovated effort to foster regime change – or at least a regime evolution – in Cuba. Obama resisted the virulent and invasive rhetoric of the 'Bush doctrine', and introduced some changes in US-Cuba state-to-state relations, while giving a strong relevance to the 'people-to-people's diplomacy' and 'public diplomacy', still perceived as tools to foster a political change on the island.*

Keywords: Obama; United States; Cuba; Democracy Promotion; Embargo; Public Diplomacy.

US foreign policy towards Cuba, and its evolution under Obama, represents an interesting case study for assessing changes and continuities in the field of democracy promotion. This is because a relevant component of US foreign policy towards the socialist island, especially after the Cold War, has been built around the need to promote democracy and oust the Revolution.¹ Moreover, even though US-Cuba relations were far from being appeased before George W. Bush's terms, the 'war on terrorism' created the basis for further clashes with Cuba, such as with the 'red' countries

of the Western Hemisphere.² As happened in other contexts, Obama in Cuba faced the need to regenerate democracy promotion, cleansing it of Bush's excess and virulence.

This paper presents a review of US democracy promotion strategy in Cuba under Obama. Despite the genuine efforts by his administration to restore both the American image in Cuba and US-Cuba bilateral relations, the US has remained committed to democracy promotion on the island and to shaping future post-Castro scenarios. In other words, under Obama regime change is still a priority for Washington. However, despite the prosecution of this 'state policy' of fostering a democratic transition on the island, the nature of American strategy has also been changing. In order to illustrate this, I will introduce Obama's position on democracy promotion and Cuba, and then present the main features of his policy of engagement of both the Cuban government—conducted through efforts to normalize bilateral relations—and the Cuban people.

In this paper, then, I will show how Obama, while resisting the rhetoric of the 'Bush doctrine' and introducing relevant changes in US-Cuba state-to-state relations, American forms of diplomacy, both 'people-to-people' and 'public', are still perceived as tools to foster a political change on the island. This means that Obama's foreign policy over Cuba does not appear to represent an 'abandonment of democracy' but on the contrary it represents a more diversified—and less invasive—strategy within the realm of US democracy promotion. These changes are highly compatible with Obama's position on the role of the United States in Western efforts to promote democracy worldwide. However, despite being somewhat less invasive, this issue is still a cornerstone of Washington's relations with Havana, and the ideological divide remains a critical a component of enduring tension.

US DEMOCRACY PROMOTION: ASSESSING OBAMA'S POSITION

The election of Barack Obama in late 2008 stirred the expectations of American public opinion, and human rights activists and NGOs, especially regarding the redefinition of US foreign policy.³ The Bush presidency raised several important questions on the role and the backlash of its 'liberal agenda'. Bush's grand strategy was revealed to be a coercive instrument for promoting (or 'exporting') democracy worldwide (a sort of 'democracy enforcing' foreign policy), which led to the counter-reaction of non-democratic or

partially democratic countries.⁴ The highly unilateral (or exclusive) formulation of the 'Bush doctrine',⁵ especially in its connection between democracy promotion and US security and defense strategy, generated some negative reaction among Washington's global allies too.⁶ When Obama took office, a reorientation of policy was needed, as the term 'democracy promotion' had become associated with the failure (and cost) of the Iraqi and Afghan wars.⁷

Obama's foreign policy, within the frame of democracy promotion, has been subjected to critique for its apparent 'abandonment of democracy'⁸ and of democracy promotion as an 'ethical' cornerstone of US foreign policy.⁹ Yet other studies suggest that Obama never intended to give up a commitment to democracy worldwide: the agenda has been reformulated in line with US interests abroad, but this has not represented a total retreat.¹⁰

The interdependence of the contemporary post-Cold War international system has been constraining: the components of US strategy in exporting democracy, and supporting it in foreign countries, have clashed with other—economic and geopolitical—interests.¹¹ In December 2007, a Congressional Research Service report for Congress suggested careful evaluation of the costs of promoting democracy according to different scenarios: after Iraq, it became evident that democracy promotion was not a low-cost foreign policy or a win-win strategy, but it could actually jeopardize vital US interests abroad.¹²

As Carothers predicted soon after the 2008 election, Obama opted for a mix of neo-Wilsonism and Realism.¹³ The result has been a more pragmatic and case-by-case approach to foreign policy issues.¹⁴ While declining to commit the US to an iconic 'grand strategy',¹⁵ he certainly has retreated from Bush's legacy in terms of virulent pro-democratic rhetoric in foreign policy discourse. Particularly in his historic speech in Cairo, Obama associated democracy promotion, not with the will of the US to make decisions for others, but as a potential way to improve American relations with foreign countries and the image of the US abroad.¹⁶ As Dietrich and Witkowski pointed out, this was a major shift from Bush's idea of democracy promotion as part of the US security framework.¹⁷

From this perspective, democracy promotion under Obama has been revaluing Condoleezza Rice's 'transformational diplomacy',¹⁸ which had actually never been strongly supported by the Bush administration. Obama suggested that, to re-engage friends and foes in order to advance common interests on bilateral issues, soft

power should be used as leverage to obtain yet more leverage to promote democracy and the respect of human rights.¹⁹ In the meanwhile, democracy promotion has become associated with ‘dignity promotion’, a more neutral and vague concept in order to move away even further from Bush's legacy.²⁰

Even if Obama's approach to democracy promotion has been limited in certain respects to little more than a scaling down of tone, and it has also been entrapped in some local and global contingencies—the Green Movement protests in Iran, the ‘Arab Spring’, and the rise of the IS—which have illustrated the weakness of US engagement with non-friendly countries, it is undeniable that democracy promotion under Obama has changed.

OBAMA AND CUBA: THE SURVIVAL OF DEMOCRACY PROMOTION AS A CORNERSTONE OF US FOREIGN POLICY

Rebuilding the image of the US post-Iraq affected relations with Cuba too. The Bush administration had pushed for further isolation of—and intensification of the conflict with—Havana, with little democratic success. By contrast, during his electoral campaign Obama laid down his ‘new course’ of engagement, including a proposal to meet Raúl Castro with no preconditions.²¹ This approach was similar to US policy towards China and Iran during Obama's first years in office.²² On taking office, he rejoined the bilateral migration talks with Cuba, which had been abandoned in 2004. Moreover, relaxation on travel rules and remittances (in 2009 and 2011) for Cuban-Americans represented a consistent shift.²³ Indeed, at first glance, Obama seemed to accomplish a consistent policy of engagement with Havana: as some Cuban officials recognized, he scaled down the aggressive tone of Bush's foreign policy.²⁴ If during the Bush administration Cuba had been considered to be ‘beyond the axis of evil’²⁵ and potentially linked to international Islamic terrorism, Obama never reversed his policy of moderate opening, even after Panamanian authorities discovered Cuban arms directed to North Korea in the summer of 2013.²⁶

A decisive and historical step in the normalization of bilateral relations took place on December 17th, 2014. While Cuba and the US agreed to a prisoner swap to free Alan Gross, in exchange for three Cuban agents held in the US (the last three of the *Cincos*),²⁷ Obama probably made the most striking move since the 1970s. He publicly declared the complete failure of the embargo and opted for a new ‘creative’ strategy, aiming for the normalization of the state-

to-state relations.²⁸ Moreover, the US relaxed rules on family travel and remittances (December 2014), removed Cuba from the list of countries sponsoring international terrorism (May 2015), and Cuba took part to the Summit of the Americas in Panama (April 2015) with diplomatic relations then restored with the opening of the respective Embassies (July 2015). US policy towards Cuba has thus changed dramatically. Today, the countries are no longer enemies, but rather ‘neighbors’, as Secretary of State John Kerry recalled in his speech at the US Embassy in Havana.²⁹ This is remarkable: Cuba is now seen in Washington as a potential co-operator on several bilateral issues, from illegal migration to counter-terrorism.³⁰

Enduring Tensions: Whose Democracy?

However, despite these shifts, certain elements of conflict and confrontation remain. One of these is reflected in continuing US policy of democracy promotion on the island; another is found in the enduring ideological divide. For reasons of internal and electoral politics in the US—including strong pressure from the pro-embargo faction in Congress—the Cuban response to Obama’s new course has been somewhat cautious. Although the tone has softened, the aims of promoting democracy and regime change were never abandoned at all.

As some scholars have noted, the ideological divide between Cuba and the US has continued to play a dramatic role in shaping American attitudes towards the socialist island.³¹ The survival of such a political and ideological conflict lays in the fact that, as for the term ‘normalization’, Cuba and the US do not share a common definition and practice for ‘democracy’. Arguably, Cuba exhibits a radical, socialist form of democracy, which, in the realm of its single-party rule and state-controlled socialist economy, has its own forms of political representation.³²

Moreover, the backlash of the ‘Special Period in peacetime’ of the early 1990s, pushed the Cuban government to expand social and civil participation in state institutions, even if within the context of the state-sponsored Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). However, this definition and practice of radical democracy is generally not accepted among liberal Western democracy promoters and policy makers.³³ They widely assume—and the Cuban case substantiates this—that ‘democracy for export’ is simply their own form of liberal and capitalistic democracy: a

Schumpeterian-Dahlian competitive elite selection mechanism,³⁴ or what Robinson called 'polyarchy'.³⁵ In sum, democracy promoters do not favor unfamiliar democratic experiments: in their eyes, the Zapatista or other radical forms of democratic representation could not be considered models of democracy to be pursued.³⁶ US democracy promotion in Cuba has remained faithfully committed to regime change and a transition to liberal democratic rule, and there is seen to be something of an equivalence between democracy promotion and regime change.³⁷

As Obama himself signaled in 2009, the promotion of democracy in Cuba is still considered a component of US national interest in the region.³⁸ During his first term, Obama never permanently adhered to an engagement with Cuba without regards to its political regime. In his own words, the US is not 'interested in talking [with Cuba] just for the sake of talking'.³⁹ This approach was reiterated on other occasions during the last few years.⁴⁰ In summary, despite his rhetoric over the 'new course' with the island, Obama still interprets relations with Cuba through the lens of democracy promotion and regime change.

During Obama's first year in office, the Summit of the Organization of American States (OAS) in Honduras probably summarized best the survival of this 'hegemonic discourse'. The General Assembly of the Organization passed a Resolution in which it declared the veto on Cuba's readmission as having ceased, but, as Hillary Clinton recorded in her autobiography, the US put great pressure on Latin American countries to connect this to respect of the Democratic Charter of 2001.⁴¹ In the final version of the Resolution, the US position was accepted: Cuba would have needed to make the first step (asking to join), and it could have been admitted only after a 'democratic test' according to the Charter.⁴² In other words, the end of Cuban hemispheric isolation (in place since 1962) was tightly connected to democratization and respect for human rights. Obviously, Havana never accepted what it considered an external interference in its domestic jurisdiction.⁴³

After having inherited a difficult situation in bilateral relations, Obama surely succeeded in preserving (with few improvements) the *status quo*, limiting the US 'war of words' with the Cuban government, while avoiding any major unilateral concession to Castro. In fact, despite not offering a plan for Cuba's transition—as did Bush—Obama remained firmly grounded to the legal framework of the Helms-Burton Act, which, since 1996, has been codifying the US duty to promote democracy on the island.⁴⁴

Institutional Constraints to Normalization

The very survival of the connection between economic sanctions and democracy promotion represents one of the main constraints to the normalization of relations. This term—normalization—has actually always had a different meaning in Cuba to the United States.⁴⁵ Even under Obama, it has still been interpreted by Washington according to Title II of the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity (LIBERTAD) Act: an ‘ideal type’ situation in which Cuba would be a stable and durable liberal-democracy (with the characteristics codified by Title II) and the US would act accordingly, removing sanctions and re-establishing diplomatic and trade links.

Furthermore, the presence of an embargo imposed through a law of Congress further inhibited engagement. The President could do little more than remove Bush's restriction on travel and remittances—which fell outside the Act—but he could do nothing substantial in removing trade sanctions. Something similar happened to Clinton in the 1990s: as the former president later confessed, he was always against the embargo—due to its evident failure in promoting democracy and destabilizing the Castro government—but he had to support it while in office due to political and electoral calculations.⁴⁶ Even Hillary Clinton confessed that she had suggested that Obama relax sanctions before leaving the Department of State.⁴⁷

Since 2009, the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC),⁴⁸ has been sanctioning non US-based corporations, using the extraterritorial provisions of the Cuban Assets Control Regulations: several foreign corporations were hit by OFAC's penalties.⁴⁹ Generally, the sanctioned foreign companies have decided to negotiate a plea bargain with the Treasury and to pay the fees imposed as they are interested in maintaining a business-friendly environment in the US. However, the extensive application of the transnational provisions of the CACR implied an economic backlash for Cuba, as foreign companies had to weigh up the benefits of investing in the island against the risk of being fined in the US. For example, the Dutch bank *ING* decided to suspend its activities in Cuba after being fined with a record sanction of \$619 million in June 2012.⁵⁰

During Obama's presidency, these restrictions were responsible for the temporary closure of Cuban consular services in

Washington DC from November 2013 to February 2014.⁵¹ This was because the American bank that was handling the Cuban Interest Section's business in the US started to revise its customer policy in order to comply with the CACR sanctions.⁵² Even though the Obama administration showed its will to find a solution to that stalemate,⁵³ the problem was far from being completely resolved, as the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Relations (MINREX) announced in December 2014.⁵⁴ It took until early 2015 for the Cuba Section to find a bank to handle its accounts. This 'consular crisis', started in November 2013, and refocused the US-Cuba relations debate over economic sanctions. This explains why Havana played the relaxation of travel rules and remittances down, as the US never accomplished any fundamental changes to its embargo policy.⁵⁵

The schizophrenic evolution of (extraterritorial) sanctions even obstructed the relaxation of travel rules: some travel companies were fined for transferring money to the island through the US, limiting the possibility for non-Cuban visitors to reach the island. In June 2013, the *American Express Travel Related Services Company*, was fined \$5 million, while in May 2014 the sanctions hit the Argentine company *Decolar.com Inc.* At the United Nations General Assembly in July 2014, Cuba lamented that such sanctions could threaten the relaxation of bilateral relations with the US and they represented a U-turn in Obama's policy of reconciliation.⁵⁶

Obama Pushes Back

At the same time, despite these imperfections, Obama resisted allowing the nascent changes to deteriorate. George W. Bush—especially after the crackdown on Cuban dissidents in spring 2003 that was known as 'Black Spring'⁵⁷—had used restrictions on travel rules and remittances to punish Cuba.⁵⁸ By contrast, Obama studiously resisted the efforts of Congress to reinstall the 2004 sanctions, threatening to veto any law that could revert his Cuba policy.⁵⁹ Even after Alan Gross's sentence, he never used the regulations on travel and remittances as leverage to punish the island. From this perspective, state-to-state relations under Obama *were* different to those under Bush. He has pushed back against the pro-embargo faction in Congress, even as this group has advocated delaying reform until after Cuba's complete democratization.⁶⁰

At times, the Obama administration has been hampered in terms of sponsoring changes to the embargo legislation.⁶¹ Yet the President, especially in his first year in office and then since

December 2014, has used his executive power to crush some limitations: e.g. the further relaxation on travel and remittances and Cuba's removal from State Department's list of countries sponsoring international terrorism. After the tentative opening of December 2014, Obama seemed conscious of the fact that existing legislation—meaning the Helms-Burton Act—has clearly limited his power to engage the Cuban government and further improve bilateral relations. Consequently, he pushed Congress to work on a series of legal modifications.⁶²

What did these changes imply for US democracy promotion on the island? Obama has used improvements in relations to foster a kind of 'transitional diplomacy' with Havana. This process is a 'liberal deal' of sorts: by expanding economic and diplomatic contacts with the island, the US could advance its interests in Cuba.⁶³ As Obama admitted in late 2014, the isolation of the Cuban regime has not worked, or has not brought democracy to the island. On the contrary, Obama has been hoping that, by offering Castro some 'carrots' and avoiding the potential backlash on those activities—as happened in 2003 with the 'Black Spring'—would contribute to advance the Cuban democratic cause. Rather than an aggressive stance, the US has latterly taken a more diplomatic approach, by trying to 'raise those differences directly, as [...] on issues related to democracy and human rights'.⁶⁴ Moreover, Obama believes that the Cuban government could be seduced by Washington's offers of economic and political cooperation so that it would avoid endangering the relationship with any new crackdown on dissidence.

Meanwhile, the recent re-establishment of official high-level diplomatic relations offers the US new forums in which to raise the democratic and human rights questions, by talking directly—and therefore more effectively—to the Cubans. This in turn places Havana in a delicate position:

...it will find it harder – according to the US administration – to treat contacts with the U.S. government and with international NGOs as criminal when Cubans see their own leaders engaging in diplomatic relations with us.⁶⁵

However, this is not a complete abandonment of the aim of fostering a democratic change on the island. As Obama recalled: 'It would be unrealistic for me to map out exactly where Cuba will be. But change is going to come to Cuba. It has to'.⁶⁶

Overall, this represents a discernible change in strategy, from

isolation to engagement. Obviously, while Obama's opening has won approval from much of American and Cuban-American public opinion, the ideological divide is still a divisive issue in US-Cuba relations. While the US hopes that engagement will bring political change on the island, there is no assurance that Cuba will react differently to how it has in the past to US interference in its domestic political affairs. As Raúl Castro has stated, Cuba would like to have an open relationship with the US, but without any interference in its internal affairs and its political system: its socialist state and the principles of the Revolution are, therefore, non-negotiable.⁶⁷ The US has used the US Section of Interest in Havana (USINT) to communicate with dissidents and to help them organize, particularly so during Bush's terms. The new US Embassy in Havana could do the same—something the Cuban Foreign Minister has conceded—while expanding the scope and the tools used to foster a democratic transition on the island.⁶⁸

In sum, contradictions between the preferences of the actors involved continue to shape the enduring confrontation between Washington and Havana, even within the framework of the quasi-normal relations obtained by the re-establishment of diplomacy. For Cuba, stopping US funding for democracy promotion programs—including repealing the commercial embargo and returning Guantánamo naval base—is a primary precondition to fully normalize the relationship.⁶⁹

LESS USAID, MORE 'CITIZEN DIPLOMACY': OLD WINE IN NEW BOTTLES?

Another important instrument in US democracy promotion in Cuba has been, since the early 1990s, the extensive communication to the Cuban people and the empowerment of independent civil society, something substantially implemented under President Clinton.⁷⁰ Subsequently, reports of the CAFC during Bush's time in office stated that reaching out to the people and eliminating the information blockade was a complementary strategy to the economic and diplomatic isolation of the government.⁷¹ This promotion of civil society in non-democratic countries is not exclusive to US-Cuba relations: it figures in the broader Western strategy of democracy promotion worldwide.⁷² Yet what Ishkanian has called the 'genetically engineered civil society', which is obtained through 'the injection of external funding (the growth hormones)'⁷³, such as the 'orthodoxy of the civil society',⁷⁴

underpinned by a strong connections between the promotion of civil society and democratization, became an important component of US foreign policy towards Cuba.

Public Diplomacy in Cuba

These efforts were conducted through local and international NGOs, but also via so-called 'public diplomacy'. This term has different meanings and applications—especially in light of the diffusion of new media and social networks— and it lacks a solid theoretical framework.⁷⁵ It could be defined, following Joseph Nye, as an instrument of soft power,⁷⁶ which in turn implies 'the exchange of people and ideas to build lasting relationships and receptivity to a nation's culture, values, and policies'.⁷⁷ In general, a state could be interested in delivering a certain message to another state's citizens.⁷⁸ In the American case, such public diplomacy became not only functional to 'export' the ideas of American exceptionalism, but also to serve its interests abroad.⁷⁹ Even with unsteady application, public diplomacy was frequently used as a complementary anti-terrorism strategy after 9/11.⁸⁰

Such public diplomacy was deployed as a conscious element of US foreign policy discourse towards Cuba in order to foster a peaceful transition via the promotion—or 'liberation'—of Cuban civil society. This encompassed primarily the so-called 'state-sponsored programs', in which federal agencies were the only actors validated to reach out to foreign public opinion.⁸¹ In the Cuban case, *Radio and Television Martí* (based on the previous experience of *Radio Free Europe*), and the USAID (United States Agency of International Development) programs can be included in this definition. In short, the state participates actively in the funding and formulation of these programs.⁸²

However, the development of international travel and communication technologies has gradually disrupted the state monopoly on the tools of public diplomacy: this in turn facilitated new methods of advancing one state's interest among foreign public opinion via free—rather than mediated—contacts between their citizens. This is the essence of 'citizen diplomacy': ordinary citizens may have the right, the responsibility, or the will to contribute to their country's foreign policy, becoming diplomatic agents themselves, or what Mueller called 'citizen diplomats'.⁸³ At the large-scale level, this new form of 'public diplomacy' resonates with the idea of 'global civil society', the globalized version of

national civil society⁸⁴ or a ‘platform inhabited by activists (or post-Marxists), NGOs and neoliberals, as well as national and religious groups, where they argue about, campaign for (or against), negotiate about, or lobby for the arrangements that shape global developments’.⁸⁵

In the case of Cuba, ‘citizen diplomacy’ can be associated with diaspora and family contacts, as well as academic and cultural exchanges. These are forms of people-to-people contacts in which the state is responsible for their strategic steering, but it represents more the guarantor for these contacts to happen. In other words, in Cuba—like elsewhere in the world—the US government could give American universities the right to activate exchange programs, but it can neither oblige them to do so, nor give a political agenda to their research or teaching activities abroad. The discourse over business’s role in ‘public diplomacy’ is similar.⁸⁶ As Waller has noted, the diplomatic direction of private commercial and state action abroad could be lacking of coordination or even be in conflict.⁸⁷ Overall, these new forms of diplomacy have come to be associated with the promotion of democracy worldwide: Kaldor, for example, views people-to-people transnational contacts as a way to civilize and democratize globalization and its transnational economic and political processes.⁸⁸

Under Obama, US democracy promotion strategy in Cuba has gradually been reconfigured towards citizen—as opposed to purely public—diplomacy. Citizen diplomacy has been considered a novel instrument to advance the empowerment of Cuban civil society and the transitional process. In recent years, the two main components of American public diplomacy in Cuba, *Radio and Television Martí* (RTM) and the USAID projects on the island, have been highly criticized by federal agencies and congressional services for their lack of transparency in the management of funds and resources, their ineffectiveness and inefficiency.⁸⁹

Obama’s New Directions in Public Diplomacy

Yet the Obama administration never completely abandoned public diplomacy in Cuba. For example, the US administration and Congress never dramatically reduced the funding allocated for democracy promotion in Cuba through USAID programs and RTM.⁹⁰ According to the last report of the Office of the Inspector General, the Office of Cuba Broadcasting still continues to be

engaged in an aggressive campaign to distribute weekly its

television programming content via broadcast, Internet, and even hand-to-hand, via digital video disks (DVD) and flash drives.⁹¹

Moreover, Congress decided to suspend (but not eliminate) the expensive transmissions of RTM from *AeroMartí*, an aircraft constantly flying over international waters.⁹² During the fiscal year 2014, the US administration canceled the funds for USAID programs in Cuba, and they were redistributed to other federal agencies such as the Department of Human Rights and Labor, the National Endowment for Democracy and the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs.⁹³ The USAID-financed NGOs, with whom projects will expire in September 2015—e.g. *Grupo de Apoyo a la Democracia*, International Republican Institute and New America Foundation—will probably not be supported again by the Agency and, except for different provisions of the Consolidated Appropriation Act for 2015, USAID will end their grants and operational plans in Cuba after almost twenty years.⁹⁴ This seems to be more a ‘reallocation’ of funds rather than a fundamental break in—or decisive evolution of—US strategy in Cuba.⁹⁵

Regarding ‘public diplomacy’, the main innovation under Obama is greater ‘technologization’, and the construction of new media infrastructures to help the Cuban people communicate with each other. A declassified document, dated August 2008, revealed that USAID's new strategy

is not telling Cubans how or why they need a democratic transition, but rather, the Agency wants to provide the technology and means for communicating the spark which could benefit the population.⁹⁶

Projects such as (the aborted) *Zunzuneo*⁹⁷ and (the currently running) *Piramideo*⁹⁸ revealed the attention of US democracy promotion agencies to the construction of such infrastructures: under Obama, some US corporations received million dollar contracts to run such activities.⁹⁹ As Wylie and Glidden pointed out, this new direction was modeled on the experience of the Arab Spring, which had shown the—albeit probably overestimated—connection between internet diffusion, the ‘blogosphere’, and the breakdown of authoritarian rule.¹⁰⁰ In the recent debate over Cuban civil society and its boost after Raúl's succession, the role of the Cuban blogosphere—as an alternative public forum to the mass organizations sponsored by the Cuban government—has been analyzed with growing interest.¹⁰¹ This has occurred along with renewed interest in the broader evolution of civil society.¹⁰²

These factors together have re-shaped the previously unidirectional forms of communication with the Cuban people (i.e. RTM → the Cuban people). This shift represented a new strategy for empowering independent civil society, offering its members new forums for social action.¹⁰³ In 2010, the US eliminated the restrictions on the sale of internet and multimedia technologies to the island.¹⁰⁴ This happened after the US Interest Section in Havana had suggested Washington move away from long-time dissidents and instead support the blogosphere's rising stars, such as Yoani Sánchez.¹⁰⁵ In late 2014, *Associated Press* revealed USAID's strategy of reaching out the Cuban youth through hip-hop music culture.¹⁰⁶ In other words, this 2.0 revolution—or, better, reform—in US democracy promotion implied the renewal of the leadership of the dissident movement too.

Developments in Citizen and Cultural Diplomacy

A more significant change actually happened in the realm of citizen diplomacy, which had been sidelined during Bush's two terms. As stated above, Obama inaugurated (in 2009 and 2011, and then in late 2014) the relaxation of travel and remittance rules. Even if some hard-liners in Congress were critical, this strategy was consistent with existing patterns of democracy promotion. First of all, according to Obama himself,

measures that decrease dependency of the Cuban people on the Castro regime and that promote contacts between Cuban-Americans and their relatives in Cuba are means to encourage positive change in Cuba.¹⁰⁷

In other words, remittances and family travel were conceived as potential instruments to foster a transition to democracy rather than create the basis for an engagement with the Cuban government.

The same is true of academic and cultural exchanges. Unlike Bush, who cracked down on university and academic programs,¹⁰⁸ the new administration tried to increase them with the intent of using transnational public opinion to create public opposition to the Cuban government and break the information blockade. This approach was similar to Clinton's 'Track two', as the pretension to use cultural diplomacy to foster regime change has been deeply rooted in US Cuba policy.¹⁰⁹

Within the realm of citizen diplomacy, Obama hoped to give

new impetus to democracy promotion. It is difficult to evaluate its success at present: issues such as academic exchange have always progressed in fits and starts.¹¹⁰ However, some important theoretical problems have emerged, in particular regarding the connections between international linkages and democratization. There exists a body of academic literature on the effects of remittances in the transition process towards democratic rule, but this has been mainly limited to 'transitional' countries.¹¹¹ Yet some scholars have pointed out that, to be effective, external remittances should meet some important prerequisites: the relative importance of remittances to the economy of the country; the inclination of the diaspora to influence the political process in the homeland; and the presence of a strong economic connection between the diaspora and the homeland.¹¹²

Moreover, the ability of the recipients to access alternative sources of public goods—which are not controlled by their governments—and their will to invest the economic surplus derived from access to remittances in political participation, also matter.¹¹³ In the Cuban case, remittances seemed to have a mixed impact on both the political system and civil society, as

both state and society may share an interest in remittances, but each may seek to maximize the amount they attain for their own use (...) Remittances may fuel divisions within each.¹¹⁴

Moreover, recipients seemed to use them to meet basic economic or food needs, rather than for cultural or political activities on the island.¹¹⁵ However, in the last few years, thanks to the relaxation on travel and remittances, the amount of dollars reaching the island peaked and Cuba has been invaded by an unprecedented influx of hard currency that, according to Washington, could contribute to push for more economic reforms.¹¹⁶

Cultural diplomacy presents some similar problems. Burgess, for example, wonders 'whether long-distance involvement by migrants in electoral politics, issue advocacy, or transnational coproduction is good or bad for democracy'.¹¹⁷ Even in the Cuban case, diasporic contacts may certainly be effective in promoting democratization in the presence of particular circumstances.¹¹⁸ It is true that, especially under Raúl Castro and Obama, the two communities have made progress in (re)establishing some form of relations,¹¹⁹ while the 'monolithic' and hard-liner Cuban-American community of Florida has been showing signs of reconciliation with the homeland, mainly interpreted as a growing favor for familiar

contacts.¹²⁰ Consequently, they have gradually shifted to support the Democrats and Obama's reforms.¹²¹

However, some relevant problems and sources of conflict have remained. First of all, as Domínguez recently argued, these contacts have been perceived by the Cuban-American community as the other side of the coin of US strategy of regime change on the island: this is to say that Cuban-Americans want to visit their relatives on the island and send them remittances, but this would probably not lead to greater tolerance for the existing Cuban government.¹²² Moreover, as we argued before, citizen diplomacy is not a uni-directional process of exchange: opening up transnational linkages with Cuba could also create channels for the Cuban government to communicate with American public opinion. In fact, Havana has showed interest in expanding those contacts to promote its image abroad.¹²³ As in the past, it has sought to create—or bolster—a solidarity and anti-embargo international network, thus earning itself greater international legitimacy.¹²⁴

Obama's citizen diplomacy towards Cuba was revealed at its best in his December 17th 2014 speech. The announced changes were presented as a striking modification of the American stance towards the Cuban people—'Today, the United States of America is changing its relationship with the people of Cuba'—and this term (instead of 'Cuba' or 'Cuban government') seems not accidental. Moreover, in the same speech, Obama called for the participation of representatives from Cuban civil society at the next Summit of the Americas in 2015, while he made clear that the US would 'continue to support civil society there'.¹²⁵ In other words, the main target for the US in the (updated) relations with Cuba is Cuban civil society and Obama's changes were presented as a way to 'further engage and empower the Cuban people', through the use of expanded channels of communication with the island, such as remittances and family travel.¹²⁶

From this perspective, people-to-people contacts with Cuban civil society can be viewed as instruments of democracy promotion (or democracy support). They could also present further difficulties in the realm of state-to-state relations: those contacts are not unequivocally a friendly embrace of two people severed by decades of division and isolation. A primary division relates to the definition of Cuban civil society: while the government recognizes the state-controlled NGOs—which are derived directly from the Cuban Communist Party's apparatus—as a component part, along with some independent non-political groups such as the Catholic

Church, Washington's definition of civil society is connected with the internal political opposition to the Cuban regime.¹²⁷ In other words, according to the US, empowering the Cuban people means providing more resources to the dissidents, a policy that Havana has vehemently criticized, even after December 2014. In Panama, at the Forum of Civil Society of the Summit of the Americas (April 2015), these two souls of the Cuban civil society clashed—even physically—thereby showing that this remains a highly contentious issue in US-Cuba relations even in Cuba, and conversation among Cubans and Cuban-Americans will not be straightforward.¹²⁸

CONCLUSION: A MORE DIVERSIFIED STRATEGY

Under Obama, US democracy promotion in Cuba has been characterized by both change and continuity. He has pursued a genuine change in foreign policy that, especially during his second term, has put an end to the isolation of the island and the denial of official contacts with Havana that had been in place since the early 1960s. This new course has undeniably led to friendlier relations between the two countries, which have found common ground for cooperation and engagement.

However, this has also neither implied a total retreat from existing forms of democracy promotion nor the irrelevance of Cuba's political future. Obama's pro-democracy rhetoric certainly scaled down the aggressive tone of Bush's democratic crusade, but, as the president highlighted in several documents, the need to 'export' democracy on the island remains a component of US foreign policy. Yet despite the survival of this primary goal, the methods envisaged to reach it have changed.

The Obama administration has been carefully using state-to-state relations—which flourished after the re-establishment of official diplomatic relations in July 2015—in order to communicate with the Cuban government after decades of isolation. This form of engagement, according to the President, could attenuate the impact of other tools of democracy promotion on the island. In other words, offering a 'carrot' to Havana—such as the relaxation on travel and remittances, the removal from the list of countries sponsoring international terrorism, etc.—should be seen as a tool to reduce Cuba's overreaction to more antagonistic US democracy programs, while simultaneously facilitating the opening of new channels of communication with Cuban officials to discuss issues of human rights and democracy. As Hillary Clinton wrote in 2010,

‘public diplomacy must start at the top’, and, in Cuba, Obama has been using these high-level contacts to improve the image of the US and advance its interests.¹²⁹

Moreover, Obama’s strategy of democracy promotion has been using two other important tools: public and citizen diplomacy. The former, which in Cuba means USAID programs (and similar) and *Radio and Television Martí*, was broadly used since the end of the Cold War as instrument of regime change. This survived under Obama too, with limited and ‘cosmetic’ changes. In terms of the latter, he also introduced a broader range of people-to-people’s contacts to reach out the Cuban people. In fact, unlike in the past, Obama expanded cultural, academic and familial contacts between the US and Cuba, in order to connect the two countries and spread US (democratic) values and principles. In sum, the three different ‘pillars’ of Obama’s strategy in Cuba—state-to-state relations, public diplomacy, and citizen diplomacy—are constituent parts of a ‘new course’ in democracy promotion in Cuba.

Despite these changes in the realm of strategy, the main question going forward is: will it work? This is a difficult question to answer, especially because democracy promotion itself embodies a range of structural and theoretical limits.¹³⁰ Even Obama refrains from enthusiastic proclamations or discourse regarding Cuba’s democratic future. As he revealed in early 2015, the policy of engagement and the new course with Cuba is a big test for US foreign policy, which still fundamentally wishes to see a liberal democratic government installed in Havana.¹³¹ Obviously, it is hard to know in advance if Obama’s strategy would work better—in these specific terms—than the mechanisms of regime change favored by his predecessors. What is relevant here is the fact that, even within the semi-normalized relations between the two countries, US democracy promotion is still playing a divisive and conflictual role. For example, it is hard to believe that the Cuban government would accept further invasive interference in its internal political affairs, as the ‘Gross affair’ has shown.

Moreover, the three pillars are interconnected and they can reinforce or jeopardize each other. The separate engagement of the Cuban government and the country’s independent civil society—or the dissidents—which is the trademark of US democracy promotion under Obama, could raise further tensions. On some occasions, the growth in official diplomatic contact between Havana and Washington actually saw the US seemingly put aside the relationship with internal opponents to the regime. For

example, human rights activists and dissidents were not invited to the official inauguration of the US Embassy in Havana, in order not to upset the Cuban authorities.¹³² Even in April 2015, at the Summit of the Americas, Obama and Raúl Castro met and shook hands despite the conflict between 'loyalists' and dissidents that had taken place at the Civil Society Forum in previous days. Meanwhile, the Cuban government still considers US projects of public diplomacy as illegal and they could easily endanger the process of normalization. These activities are conducted with no authorization from the Cuban government, which labels them as 'counter-revolutionary' projects to overthrow it.

The fact that, under Obama, US democracy promotion has survived, even with a different and more diversified strategy, implies that one of the main sources of conflict between the two countries—the ideological divide—is still alive. Obama's overtures to Cuba seem a genuine effort to normalize relations. However, the fact that Cuba is a socialist system with a state-controlled economy still matters to US foreign policymakers, with or without an Embassy in Havana.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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NOTES

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