

Migration policy, updating or readjustment?

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I. REASONS THAT LEAD THE PRESIDENT, GENERAL RAUL CASTRO, TO ANNOUNCE ON AUGUST 1, 2011, THE UPDATING OF THE CURRENT MIGRATION POLICY IN CUBA? REASONS AND PROPOSALS FOR A PATH TO IMPLEMENT THESE CHANGES.

The news about the updating of the migration policy by the Head of the Cuban Government during the closing of the National Assembly of the Popular Power, held last August 1st, surprised some, left others indifferent and a majority indicated their skepticism, not because they weren't interested in what he had to say, but because announcements of readjustments, updating, decentralization from Cuban leaders lack credibility. It is not a matter of prejudice, just experience.

Cuba is undergoing essential changes, but not because of the shy, ambiguous and contradictory measures described in the Guidelines of the VI Congress of the Communist Party, but due to the frustration, inefficiency, exhaustion and the absence of serious and credible proposals for a project, that from the beginning was foreign to our own identity and which has always responded first and foremost to the interests of the leader of the government, a reason why the people continue to oppose it. Maybe this is one of the reasons that motivated the announcement of the updating of the migratory policy.

The arguments by the President are naive and simple when he states that: "the majority of Cubans emigrate due to financial reasons." This is a reason that cannot be disputed and it is definitely part of the criteria of those who decide to emigrate, but there is a real reason that forces many Cubans to leave their families and friends, to abandon the land where they were born: lack of freedom to be and freedom to do in the Island, a situation caused by the blockage by their own government who prevents or limits their freedom to create, exercise or enjoy the most basic and elementary rights.

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Evidently there is motivation to improve living standards, but nobody likes to depend on others and everybody prefers to achieve that through their own efforts, and prefer to be able to achieve it without having to ask for permission from the government, party, institution or individual. The statement by the President ignores the fact that human beings, because of their very nature, are enterprising, creative and need to exercise their full potential while living in society. This is the only way they will feel fulfilled, regardless of having more or less success in this enterprise. But if the environment prevents the individual from realizing these goals, he will look toward other horizons, which does not imply alternate motives, unethical conducts or lack of love for his country, just the satisfaction of the right to be free and to enjoy that freedom.

All individuals are born with the inherit right to freedom and when this freedom is restricted or repressed, sooner or later, in any manner, they will rebel against anything that prevents them from enjoying that freedom. And with his capacity to transcend the individual will try to change the reality in which he has to live, seeking financial power, but more than anything, seeking his own personal power. Emigration is one of the options available, but we should not mistake the search for freedom (which is the same reason to leave the country) with the claim that it responds only to the temporary or circumstantial convenience that: “improving the standard of living is the main motivation for migration.”

Receiving a salary that allows one to live with dignity and enjoy free time, access to Internet, perhaps even a car, a computer or a company, are some of the economic and social rights that could and should be a motivation and legitimate aspiration for everyone. But individuals seek to reach these conditions in freedom and without restrictions, without having to choose between the alternatives of those who accept the reality, adapt to the regime or pretend to adapt, acting under different masks, or to oppose and pay the extremely high personal, family and social cost involved, that is to leave....simple and clear.

II. UPDATE OR READJUSTMENT?

The updating of a migration policy means the absence of any type of discriminations against those who wish to travel, or freely emigrate. It also means abolishing restrictions on travel based on ideological reasons such as religion, race or sex; it means eliminating all arbitrariness that currently prevents so many families from reuniting. It also means assuming or implementing the standard international mechanisms that regulate this right, and it also means updating technology, methods, formats and contents used in these matters by most advanced countries.

The modernization of the Cuban migration policy requires: elimination of the travel permit and its cost of 150 CUC, the inability of return for those who decide to emigrate, the confiscation of homes, cars, and motorcycles. It also requires changing the policy that demands that a minor and one of his parents must leave the country “definitely,” it does not require workers from different areas to wait for five years before leaving Cuba while waiting for permits; it means not having to pay 400 CUC for a medical exam when leaving to the US; means not requiring a letter of invitation and not charging 200 CUC for its certification before issuing the travel permit; it means not having to submit to interrogation at the offices of Immigration and Foreign Nationals, with questions such as if you know anybody opposed to the revolution; it means not having to pay 40 US dollars or Euros (depending if you travel to US or Europe) if you only leave temporarily and wish to maintain residence in Cuba; it means not having to pay 55 Euros to obtain a passport and for renewals every 6 years if you live in Cuba and more than 100 US dollars if you live abroad. It means not having to pay 20 CUC every two years to update it, and it also means not having to have to ask for permission to return to your own country.

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We can appreciate the extensive work before migration authorities, even if we might have omitted to include any other restrictions that should be changed or eliminated, in order to guarantee that the Cuban migration policy is updated, and what it is even more important, respect for the intrinsic rights of the individual.

Lets us reflect about some possible reasons that prompted the Cuban government to readjust the migration policy. Raul Castro spoke clearly at the closing of the Parliamentary session when making reference to the updating of the migration policy that: “we are working in reformulating and preparing a group of measures that will govern that area, in accordance with current conditions and those of the foreseeable future.” Then, we should ask, what does reformulation mean and what is the preparation of a group of regulatory measures? What is their scope? And if this initiative is due to a real desire for change and recognition and promotion of the right to emigrate, or only responds to current circumstances and those of the foreseeable future.

III. SOME REASONS THAT COULD HAVE MOTIVATED THE UPDATING OR READJUSTMENT OF THE CUBAN MIGRATION POLICY.

1 » High political cost: provide an image to the world and to all Cubans that the policies of control and repression are changing, while gaining time to remain in power.

In the XXI Century, which is marked by globalization and the increase of the interrelation between peoples and cultures, preventing travel to and from the country to individuals born in Cuba, is a tremendous injustice, bordering on scandal. It cannot even be justified as a noble or fair action directed to protect the sovereignty of the State or the loss of human talent, and has a very high cost for any country. The Cuban regime has not been exempted from it, because the totalitarian migration policy has become well know all over the world and the Cuban government has been forced to disclose this new migration policy publicly. Now we will wait and see if the migration policy is actually changed, or if some slight readjustments are incorporated, while trying to show to the world and to all Cubans an image that the situation of control and repression is changing and confirming once again that the main objective is to gain time to remain in power.

2 » Need to attract tourism and remittances from families and friends to residents in the Island.

Remittances are one of the main sources of income for the Cuban government and definitely for a country that produces nothing and where the state coffers are empty. These funds are a blessing and the government will continue to do whatever is needed to continue to attract them. Promoting tourism to Cubans residing abroad is also another way to generate valuable income, badly needed.

Knowing that families and friendships are placed higher than the interests of the party and ideological convictions, a tax of 20% was imposed in the past few years on the US dollar and 10% on Euros and other currencies. This arbitrary decision caused the amounts of remittances in foreign currencies to decrease significantly because it was difficult for senders to accept this theft without recourse. There is a mechanism with the so called Cadecas, where foreign currency (US dollar, pounds, Euros, or others) may be exchanged for convertible Pesos (CUC), and therefore ending up at the disposal of the central government. By readjusting migration policies the government will be benefited by the increase in funds.

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3 » Need for survival.

Change is vital for the survival of the government, but it will do so only in response to the circumstances, giving up only what is necessary, because it needs to maintain absolute power over the suffering of the Cuban people.

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Those who have lived the last decade in Cuba have been able to perceive many signs of the changes that have forced the government to make these type of changes, such as the “updating of the migration policy.” Even if these changes are not as fast, deep or profound as we would want them, they are undeniably necessary, and the government tries to slow them down with these types of initiatives.

The credibility of the government has been affected due to its poor administration and the lack of options to benefit society and to the fact that the gap between policy makers and the people continues to deepen. The government manipulates misery everywhere, which leads to the fight to satisfy vital needs before thinking about changing the unfair situations that they face. They know that man lives not by bread alone, but that he needs bread to survive, and they play with the weaknesses, shortages, and aspirations of Cubans indiscriminately and opportunistically, promoting the illusion that many have the possibility to travel freely or to emigrate, which offers the possibility of achieving in a short time what they have not been able to have in their whole lives in Cuba.

4 » Awareness that at this point the benefits are higher than the costs.

At this time, readjusting the migration policy will first and foremost benefit the Cuban government, because in a way it encourages the illusion in Cubans to be able to leave Cuba, and relieves the accumulated pressure of so much popular discontent. The possibility of travelling the world, even if the real changes of the majority of Cubans are very small, activates certain psychological buttons in their conscience and allows them to deviate from the real problems that they face day to day in their fight for survival.

The possibility that Cubans could travel freely would have long-term effects on the control that the government intends to maintain over its people, because it would offer Cubans the possibility of comparing the lifestyle in Cuba with the lifestyle in democratic countries, offering a higher degree of freedom. The government is aware that as long as they are able to maintain control, the migration policy could be updated again, provided the cost is higher than the benefits. It would not be the first time. They will create arguments, which may be the same used for the updating of the migration policy, but reversed. These arguments could be more or less: the exodus of human capital created by the “revolution” cannot be stopped in the face of the theft by more powerful nations, and therefore we are forced to reinstate the past migration policy. Another argument could be that since sovereignty has not been protected from the interventionist plans of the US government and its European allies, and sovereignty is in danger, we must restate the prior migration policy. They could also claim that the fact that some Cubans are leaving and returning to Cuba is generating increased social inequality, something that is against the equality principles of the revolution.

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5 » Call for investment of capital.

No country can afford the absence of foreign investment. Due to the enormous lack of credibility and insecurity generated by any type of investment in Cuba and its high risk, foreign capital flee but the government still needs them. The announcement about the updating of the migration policy, although it does not directly influence the decision to invest in Cuba, a virgin sector for many, at least arises some interest, because it is known that at any moment the Cuban market will eventually open, since the Island has a good geographical position, which was the main cause of the war between Spain and the United States at the end of the XIX Century.

There is an urgency to change Cuba’s migration policy, particularly because it would mean respect for those rights, and because traveling is a source of wealth and diversity for our culture, including the exchange of knowledge, the sharing of the best that each individual has to offer, and personal and social learning of spiritual and material knowledge common to all human beings. History has shown that countries that have

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opened up by exchanging ways of life they have progressed, while countries that are seriously isolated have a negative effects on the soul of the nation. We should not fear the exchange of Cubans with the rest of the world or consider it dangerous. If Cuban regime desired the development of our country and seriously intends to update its migration policy, it should allow free mobility to all Cubans, meaning freedom to communicate, free commercial relationships and encounters with different cultures and lifestyles. We should not be afraid to open up. Allowing Cubans to travel freely will result in benefits and strengthening for our nation.

Today more and more walls, frontiers and totalitarian powers are being brought down, because they isolate people and bring poverty to entire nations. The majority of countries only require passports, currency and visas from the country to be visited. Globally, dialogue between cultures has intensified and to prevent Cuba from being excluded from this process it is important for Cubans to have exchanges with other people, and that requires the elimination of “absurd prohibitions,” as the head of the government called them that prevent free travel.

Hopefully the updating of the migration policy will not be restricted, and the updating becomes a reality. We can hope that the government will not continue using migration conveniently as the escape valve while the opposition grows in the Island, or to receive remittances to remain afloat. What the government needs to take exclusively under consideration are the needs of its people and the respect for their rights. Cuba has paid, and is currently paying, a high cost due to the massive exodus that has damaged our history and has changed our country from a country which received immigrants, to a country that produces them. It has also damaged our present, because many see the possibility for personal development and the search for hope and happiness for the future in other countries, which has damaged our future because we lose some of the best Cubans. It is sad that after 52 years the migration policy will be “updated” but as the old saying goes: “Its never too late ...”

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IV. SOME ACTIONS THAT MUST BE IMPLEMENTED AT THE TIME OF THE “UPDATING” OF THE MIGRATION POLICY.

1 » Respect, apologize and heal the pain caused by the attacks on the freedom and human dignity produced by the migration policy. This is owed to Cubans for the tragedy created by the separation, uprooting, exile, dispersion. It is owed to Cubans who have waited 52 for the rectification of something that was wrong from the beginning.

2 » Recognize the truth, without pretences or hiding mistakes, not as revenge but to do justice and to close the chapter on a firm foundation of reconciliation with the past.

3 » In third place, but not less important, solve the causes that have made Cuba a country of emigrants and return to what it always was, a country made by immigrants, open and hospitable.

We hope that the change of the migration policy is not just an adjustment. We hope that it becomes the beginning of a path toward openness that should not be the end, but a beginning for human growth, social progress and happiness that can be reached in our suffering country. We ask that all restrictions to free travel by Cubans are removed without distinction of any kind, which shall be another ingredient for the integration of our mixed race and culture which shall be enriched not only by the results, but also by the process itself of the relationship with other cultures and lives. The majority wants this, both the Cubans in the Island and those in exile.

We welcome the updating of the migration policy, not the readjustment that maintains the violations to these basic rights and keeps the country in poverty. Cuba awaits.

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VIRGILIO TOLEDO LOPEZ

Virgilio Toledo López was born on May 5, 1966 in Pinar del Río, Cuba. He is married and has three children.

He was born to a family of farmers and attended a country elementary school, and middle school at Escuela Julio Antonio Mella, in the city of Pinar del Río. He graduated from boarding school, like the majority of Cuban teenagers at one of the state-run IPUEC (Preparatory School of El Campo). From 1983-1986 he was drafted to comply with the mandatory military service. In 1986 he started to work at the *Combinado de Componentes Electrónicos* in Pinar del Río, and the following year he started Engineering and Electrical Components studies at the University level, graduating in 1993. The same year he began to participate in the Civic and Religious Courses imparted by the Dioceses of Pinar del Río. He had several responsibilities at the Center and he was the founder of the Civic Support Center, which provided support and psychological, legal, family, civic and ethical orientation. He was also director of its publication "En Consulta". He taught courses at the Civic Center and collaborated writing articles for the magazine "Vital" www.vital.org until 2007, and as Graphic Designer.

Mr. Toledo was also a member of the Board of Directors of the Civic Center. In 2007 the magazine "Vital" and the Civic Center were intervened by Bishop Jorge Enrique Serpa, who substituted Monsignor José Siro González Bacallao at the Episcopate. In combination with Dagoberto Valdés Hernández, Karina Gálvez Chiu and other members of the team, he resigned the positions that he had held under other bishops due to the collaborationist policy with the government shown by the new Bishop. In 2008 he founded with Dagoberto Valdés, Karina Gálvez, Jeshuadín Pérez and Belisario Pi Lago the publication "Convivencia" www.convivencia-cuba.es and was a member of the Writing Council and Graphic Designer. He has published numerous articles in different publications, such as "The anthropological damage and human rights in Cuba" [Fundación Hispano Cubana] [Madrid, 2009]; "Anthology the Voices of Change" [Ediciones El Cambio][Miami, 2005]. He currently resides in Madrid, Spain.