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## Obama's Cuba Visit Illustrates US Arrogance

By Garry Leech  
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In his speech to the Cuban people in Havana, President Barack Obama declared, “I have come here to bury the last remnant of the Cold War in the Americas. ... I’ve urged the people of the Americas to leave behind the ideological battles of the past.” But Obama made clear that his desire to end the decades-long US economic blockade of the island is not based on the fact that it constitutes the bullying of a small country by the world’s most powerful capitalist nation, nor is it a response to the sheer inhumanity of the blockade, it is simply an acknowledgement that the policy has failed to bring down Cuba’s socialist system and return the country to capitalism. Obama then proceeded to spend much of his speech telling Cubans that they should live under a US-style democracy and a capitalist economy. In other words, he has no intention of leaving behind “the ideological battles of the past.” He is simply shifting strategy.

During his trip, Obama frequently referred to human rights in Cuba, particularly “political prisoners.” In his speech to the Cuban people, he declared, “I believe citizens should be free to speak their mind without fear, to organize, and to criticize their government, and to protest peacefully, and that the rule of law should not include arbitrary detentions of people who exercise those rights.” Not surprisingly, the US press corps covering Obama’s visit obediently fell in step with the president’s message on the issue of human rights.

But Cuba has been forced to survive in the face of repeated aggression by the world’s most powerful nation. For more than half a century the United States has actively sought to bring down the Cuban government and replace Cuba’s socialist system with capitalism. To this end, it launched a failed attempt to invade Cuba, has made countless attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro, and has supported and funded Miami-based Cuban exile groups that have exploded numerous bombs in Havana and who blew up a Cuban airliner in mid-flight, killing all 78 people on board.

In addition to all of these efforts to topple both the Cuban government and its socialist system, Washington has enforced the oppressive economic blockade of the tiny island for the past 55 years. And, under Obama, the United States has continued to fund pro-US groups in Cuba in violation of Cuban law. This history of aggression, which is ongoing, has been largely ignored by the US mainstream media, which has instead chosen to focus on the “political prisoners” in Cuba’s jails.

But who are these so-called political prisoners? Political prisoners are defined as those accused or convicted of crimes committed to achieve political objectives. In other words, they have broken the law. Such offenders are not “prisoners of conscience,” which are people engaged in non-violent activities that have been imprisoned solely for their political views. According to Amnesty International’s latest report, there are currently no prisoners of conscience in Cuba.

Media coverage of Obama’s visit has repeatedly focused on the Ladies in White organization, which protests weekly in Havana in support of so-called political prisoners in Cuba. The US media highlighted the fact that the Ladies in White protesters were rounded up by police during a demonstration on the day Obama arrived in Havana. These arrests have been repeatedly pointed to by the media and pundits as a graphic example of how Cuba violates the human rights of peaceful political protesters. As such, it would appear that arrested members of the Ladies in White constitute prisoners of conscience. But these analysts have conspicuously ignored an important component of Amnesty International’s definition of “prisoner of conscience,” which states, “We also exclude those people who have conspired with a foreign government to overthrow their own.”

Last August, Wikileaks published a memo dispatched from the US Special Interests Section in Havana to the State Department requesting \$5,000 in funding for the Ladies in White. The memo also revealed that the US government had previously funded the group. It is illegal under Cuban law for Cuban organizations to receive funding from the US government, which is not surprising given that Washington’s stated objective for decades has been the overthrow of the Cuban government and socialism. Consequently, imprisoned members of the Ladies in White cannot be

considered prisoners of conscience but they could be considered political prisoners that broke the law by receiving funding from the US government.

The Ladies in White are not unique, the US government has supported and funded many anti-government groups in Cuba in its efforts to replace socialism with capitalism in that country. Consequently, the Cuban government claims that many of the so-called political prisoners in its jails are Cubans who have received funding from a foreign government that is intent on achieving regime change. One such foreign program was conducted by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) which, under the guise of “democracy promotion,” distributed Internet and satellite communications equipment to Cuban opposition groups in direct violation of Cuban law. The project came to light when US aid worker Alan Gross, under contract to USAID, was arrested by the Cuban government in 2009. Such activities make it clear that it is the United States that has failed “to leave behind the ideological battles of the past.”

One can only imagine the outcry in the United States if a foreign government such as the Soviet Union or China were funding anti-capitalist organizations in the United States during the Cold War in an effort to bring down the US government and overthrow capitalism. Undoubtedly any American citizens receiving such funding from ideological enemies in order to engage in activities that sought to overthrow the US government and bring down the capitalist system would have been considered traitors and charged with sedition.

And one can only imagine the response if a leader of the Soviet Union had visited Washington, DC and began publicly lecturing the US president and the American people about how flawed their capitalist system was and, during his visit, met with Soviet-funded, anti-capitalist groups in the United States that were seeking to not only overthrow the government but to bring down the country’s capitalist system. I think it’s safe to say that most Americans would be outraged. And yet Obama met with Cuban dissidents in the US Embassy while in Havana. Consequently, Obama’s visit to Cuba constitutes the 21st Century equivalent of such arrogance. In fact, it’s worse because it isn’t one superpower lecturing another, it is a superpower continuing to bully a small nation that poses no threat whatsoever to the United States.

Furthermore, according to the human rights group, The Cuban Commission of Human Rights and National Reconciliation, there are currently 60 political prisoners in Cuba. But this neglects the part of Cuba that has been under US colonial rule for more than 100 years: Guantanamo Bay. The United States currently holds 93 political prisoners in its internment camp in Guantanamo, most of whom have been held for more than 13 years without being charged with a crime or having their day in court. More than 50 of them have been cleared for release but there is nowhere for them to go because they are now, effectively, stateless. Perhaps Obama should have been more focused on living up to his campaign promise to remove these political prisoners from Cuba during his visit to Havana rather than lecturing the Cuban government about human rights.

In actuality, Cubans have no qualms about criticizing their government. I have visited Cuba on numerous occasions including living in Havana for three months last year. I have never encountered a Cuban who didn’t freely criticize their government’s policies in the same way that most Americans and Canadians gripe about their governments’ policies. In fact, the Cuban

government encourages public debate about how to improve the country's socialist system. However, advocating for the overthrow of the government and socialism is not permitted.

But then, in the United States, there is very little space in which to advocate for the overthrow of the US government and the capitalist system. The US Congress is overwhelmingly dominated by pro-capitalist Republicans and Democrats; all Supreme Court justices are appointed by the two dominant capitalist parties; alternative parties are barred from participating in election debates and have difficulty accessing campaign funding (even public funding); the corporate-owned mainstream media refuse to present anti-capitalist perspectives; and the grade school system does not educate our children about socialist or anarchist alternatives to capitalism. (And, by the way, Bernie Sanders is not a democratic socialist, he is a social democrat, which is a capitalist). The hegemonic structures that marginalize anti-capitalist views in the United States are much more insidious than those that defend socialism in Cuba, but they are nonetheless just as, if not more, effective.

Obama also promoted US-style democracy for Cuba when he declared, "I believe voters should be able to choose their governments in free and democratic elections." The US president either ignored, or was ignorant of, the fact that Cuba is a democratic nation. This is because the United States arrogantly views liberal democracy as the only legitimate form of democracy. Why? Because liberal democracy is the only form of democracy compatible with capitalism.

A liberal democracy almost inevitably results in major political parties serving the interests of economic elites, which means corporations and their owners—the one percent. The result is gross inequality as the rich get richer and the poor struggle desperately with minimum wage jobs and under-funded social programs. In contrast, Cuba's democracy is a socialist democracy in which citizen's vote for individual candidates because political parties are not allowed to participate, thereby limiting the influence of private sector wealth to influence political policymaking. So the problem for Obama and corporate America is not a lack of democracy in Cuba, but the lack of a liberal democracy that serves corporate interests.

The United States uses its massive wealth and power to influence political parties in Latin American countries that are multi-party liberal democracies to ensure that they serve US interests when in power. But when, despite Washington's best efforts, a party comes to power that challenges US interests, then Washington's support for democracy goes out the window. The United States has repeatedly ousted democratically-elected governments in Latin America when those governments failed to serve US geo-political and corporate interests in the region. Just in the past 14 years Washington has overthrown three democratically-elected governments in the region that challenged the interests of US corporations and capitalism in general.

The 2002 US-supported coup of Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez failed when millions of Venezuelans took to the streets demanding that their democratically-elected leader be returned to power. The Venezuelan military capitulated and returned Chávez to office three days after his ouster. In 2004, the US military—with Canadian and French support—ousted Haiti's democratically-elected president Jean Bertrand Aristide because he dared to raise taxes on foreign corporations and double the minimum wage in the hemisphere's poorest country. The new US-installed regime then proceeded to ban Aristide's political party—by far the most

popular in the country—from participating in future elections. And in 2009, under Obama's presidency, the United States supported a military coup that ousted Honduras' left-leaning president Manuel Zelaya and turned that country into the worst human rights disaster in the Americas. These examples are further evidence that it is the United States that cannot leave behind the ideological battles of the past whenever capitalist interests are threatened in Latin America.

US policy in Latin America—and throughout the world—has not been motivated by the promotion of democracy and human rights; it is intended to serve US corporate interests and entrench capitalism. This is why the most brutal right-wing dictatorships in Latin America during recent decades have been supported by the United States. And this is why left-leaning democratically-elected governments are ousted by Washington. It is only the most naïve and ignorant Americans, and the most naïve and ignorant US journalists, who take Washington's rhetoric about democracy and human rights at face value. After all, if US foreign policy were motivated by democracy promotion and the defense of human rights, then how do we explain Washington's support for undemocratic and repressive regimes such as the Saudi Arabian dictatorship?

The dominant human rights model under capitalism prioritizes individual rights—particularly the right to private property to establish corporations—to the degree that they cannot be significantly infringed upon in order to ensure that the collective—social and economic—rights of *everyone* in society are protected. This is why there is no right to food, housing or healthcare for citizens of the United States where, according to a 2009 Harvard University study, 45,000 people die annually due to a lack of access to the latter. But when a country such as Cuba defends the collective rights of all of its citizens with regard to access to food, housing, education and healthcare against the threats posed by those who seek to prioritize individual rights in a manner that violates the country's socialist constitution, the Cuban government is portrayed as a major violator of human rights.

Obama made clear his desire to promote corporate capitalism in Cuba when he referred to the blockade by declaring, "It's a burden on the Americans who want to work and do business or invest here in Cuba. It's time to lift the embargo." Such a declaration should come as no surprise given that his delegation was filled with US corporate CEOs. He then proceeded to tell Cuba how it should manage its economy by stating, "But even if we lifted the embargo tomorrow, Cubans would not realize their potential without continued change here in Cuba. It should be easier to open a business here in Cuba." And then, in an effort to ensure that US corporations can exploit Cuban workers in the same manner they exploit poor Latin Americans in capitalist countries throughout the region, he declared, "A worker should be able to get a job directly with companies who invest here in Cuba." Furthermore, in contrast to Obama and the US media's suggestions that the economic reforms implemented in Cuba in recent years constitute a shift towards capitalism, in actuality they represent a redefining of Cuban socialism that seeks to improve the degree of economic democracy in country.

So while Obama is urging the US Congress to end the economic blockade of Cuba, it is clear that his objective remains the removal of Cuba's socialist government and the replacement of socialism with capitalism. He disguises his imperialist objectives with arrogant rhetoric about

democracy and human rights along with suggestions that Cubans could live like Americans under capitalism. But Obama ignores the fact that, geographically-speaking, the closest capitalist country to Cuba is not the United States; it is Haiti. And, in Haiti, 70 percent of the population lives in poverty and life expectancy is 20 years less than in socialist Cuba. Furthermore, Haiti is closer to the reality experienced by most Latin Americans living under capitalism than the standard of living enjoyed by most Americans. After all, it is not capitalism that allows us to live so well, it is imperialism.