EDITORIAL

BIDEN – HIS TIME?

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The nature of academic publishing, as we have commented before in these editorials, means that, by the time you will be reading this, it will already be out of date. However, as we went to press, the news came from the Biden Administration spokesperson on Western Hemispheric affairs that his boss ‘was not Barak Obama’ and there would only be a gradual change if any to US policy towards Cuba under the new Democratic regime. If this remains unchanged it is a huge disappointment and a dangerous decision for a number of reasons.

If the aim of the United States is to engender political change in Cuba, it is clear that the policy of trying to starve the country of foreign investment and trade has not worked. Instead of facilitating the advance and growth of private enterprise on the Island, the policies of Donald Trump have had the opposite effect. It is simply high time the US helped Cuba reform economically.

The changes in Cuba are steady and being carried out at a pace that is being chosen by the leadership according to circumstances. If it is responding to the demands of any outside actor, it is evident that Cuba is listening more to the EU than it is to the United States. Absent US involvement, monetary reform and the amplification of private enterprise are more to the benefit of those businesses that already deal and are allowed to deal with the Island than those of the United States. In terms of foreign relations, Cuba’s cooperation with EU countries and others has been growing apace in areas such as biotechnology, Covid-19 response and climate change. With regard to Asia, Cuba is making significant overtures to be a part of China’s Belt and Road Initiative, seeking infrastructure investment that will make the Island a hub in the Caribbean of this global commerce belt-way. In other words, Cuba will reform in its own way with or without US involvement. Therefore, it would be better for the US to engage now rather than be isolated later.

That said, it is absolutely the case that it is impossible to imagine a US policy change that will not have the stated intention of bringing down the Communist government as its goal. Whatever policy Biden adopts will be justified on the

basis that it will hasten ‘a democratic transition’ in the Island. Biden will face arguments that easing the pressure will assist the regime to survive, and within the parameters of the political paradigm in Washington, this cannot be contested with anything less than an agreement with the premise that the current regime in Cuba is unacceptable.

However, at the same time, the US does not have much choice other than to alter its policy and actually help the Cuban government deal with the problems that US policy itself has created. If US policy under Trump was to hurt the Cuban population then it has succeeded but this has only intensified the pressure to migrate. Food insecurity in Cuba, as a consequence of the economic downturn caused by the Covid pandemic and made worse by Trump’s policy, is causing hardship that threatens stability. As in the early 1990s, the US, were it to continue Trump’s agenda, would run the danger of causing another migration crisis. Biden would be wise to do everything he can to avoid creating a crisis similar to that which beset his Democratic predecessor Bill Clinton in 1994.

The situation in Cuba, at the time of writing, is tense, with a government trying to carry out the unification of the dual currency under extreme difficulties. Without a strong economy, the current reforms, intended to create hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of new jobs in the private or non-state sector, will not work. But, faced with a population suffering rising prices and falling standards of living, the Cuban government has no choice other than to respond by “reordering the reordering” as a current joke labelled decisions to reverse some measures to alleviate problems. So in fact, US policy under Trump was stopping Cuba from dismantling its Communist centrally planned economic system. The Cuban government has plans to remove universal benefits and subsidies on prices. It wishes to distribute more land to private farmers and introduce private limited liability companies, but it cannot do any of these successfully without being fully inserted into the global market. Presently, this is prevented by US policy. Recently, for example, the British government failed to persuade its banks to clear transactions between the Island and UK companies. The banks refused to do it not because they were not in agreement that they should do it, or that they should have the right to do it, but because to do it would result in sanctions in the US market that simply did not make such transactions worth their while.

This is just one example of the extra-territorial reach of US policy that not only affects the sovereignty of Cuba but that of the US’s closest allies. People ask us – what do Cubans want? It is one of the key questions that this journal and the International Institute for the Study of Cuba were established to explore. Some might say they want socialism but this is not universally true by any means.

If the basic aim of the US government is the end of Communism on the Island then at bottom what almost all Cubans would agree that they want is something that is not incompatible with US desires. Essentially, Cubans want the same today as they wanted more than 100 hundred years ago when they yearned for independence – a sovereign state that, in the words of Martí, would be “for all and the good of all”. It should be possible to imagine that this can happen in Cuba without a single-party system, but it is impossible to imagine it without economic prosperity. The tragedy is that for so long the United States has refused to see that by preventing the latter it has guaranteed the continuity of the former. If, by the time you read this, Biden has still not taken the time to reverse Trump’s policies, the tragedy may well be his and not Cuba’s.