

Cuban exiles divided over travel rules, sending money

New leaders in Havana and Washington spur speculation and hope for policy changes on both sides of the Florida Straits.

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restrictions on travel to Cuba

From Hialeah to Westchester, Cuban Americans wonder what the recent changes in leadership -- in both Havana and Washington -- will mean for the communist island.

Some hold out hope for a thaw in U.S.-Cuba relations. Democrats took the leadership posts in Congress last week for the first time in more than a decade -- just five months after Fidel Castro temporarily ceded authority to his brother, Raúl Castro.

In Hialeah, the local political beachhead for Cubans who recently have arrived from the island, many new arrivals think Democrats should lift tight restrictions on travel and remittances, which prohibit visits to family in Cuba more than once every three years and to send more than \$100 a month to close relatives, such as a parent or spouse.

Those restrictions were imposed by the Bush administration in 2004, just a few months before the president's reelection.

"I have a 20-year-old daughter in Cuba, and it's been two years since I saw her," said Haydee Prado, who came from Cuba two years ago. "They should change the policy that keeps families apart."

Changes in Washington and Havana could redraw the battle lines over Cuba policy and give new hope to opponents of U.S. sanctions limiting travel and remittances.

Ana Maria Ruiz, 51, manager of Mesa Laundromat in Hialeah, said Cuba is starving for democratic changes. But she said U.S. policy is not helping to make that happen. She has not been able to visit a sick sister because she went to Cuba two years ago, and wants to send more money to help her family. "We should be able to send money that we earn here and pay taxes on," she said. "We should be able to send as much as we want of our own money."

The Treasury Department's tightened rules ban exiles from sending money to aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces or nephews in Cuba, allowing remittances only for immediate relatives. Many of the newer arrivals still have family on the island, and are most affected by the restrictions.

But older, more established exiles, who arrived decades ago, are more likely to be registered to vote and believe the restrictions help strangle the Castro government. Many of them don't have close family left in Cuba -- or when they did, the Cuban government didn't allow travel there.

'STABS IN THE BACK'

Most vote Republican. Alberto González, a retired truck driver shopping for groceries at a Winn-Dixie in West Miami-Dade on Friday, mistrusts Democrats.

"We will never forget what Kennedy did with the Bay of Pigs invasion, with the October crisis with the Russians and with Elián González," said González, 67. "Those are three stabs in the back that the

Democrats did to my generation of Cubans, and we will never forget that. The younger generations might feel differently."

Hilda Mendez, 24, who was born in Venezuela to Cuban parents, said the Cuban government is making its people suffer, but the U.S. government's travel restrictions are also harsh.

"I've never seen something so inhumane in my life," said Mendez, referring to U.S. travel restrictions. "You should be able to go to your country as many times as you want."

Alison Diaz, 26, a student at Florida International University, said her father and brother are "conservative Republicans" who wouldn't want money going to Cuba, but she doesn't see the good that the travel restrictions have done.

"I have an aunt who has been trying to go see her family in Cuba, but she can't because I guess it has to be an immediate family member," Diaz said. "It would be good to lift those restrictions so that people who want to see family . . . [can] see them."

'I'M TORN'

For Emilio Alvarez, 41, a small-business owner born in Miami to Cuban parents, discussing a softening of the U.S. embargo is a complicated issue. It was a particularly difficult day on Friday as he ran errands to prepare for his mother's funeral.

"I wish I could bring my mom back and go to Cuba with her," he said. "As a Cuban American, I'm torn between those views. All four of my grandparents passed away here in Miami, very adamant about not visiting the island while Fidel is still in power. My mom . . . passed away very adamant about that."

He said his family felt that any visit was aiding the Cuban government.

"But yet I always dreamt of going with my mom to see where she lived and where my grandfather's doctor's office was. And now I won't be able to do that."

Manuel Alvarez, who came to Miami during the 1980 Mariel boatlift and was hanging around Tropical Restaurant in Hialeah on Thursday, said he would never go to Cuba while it remains communist -- "out of principle."

"But I feel that they should let everyone travel," he said of the Bush administration's travel rules for Cuba. "Those restrictions haven't changed Cuba yet. They are never going to change it."