

In immigration battle, Cubans are spectators

Cubans generally won't be affected by immigration proposals being debated in Congress but differ in opinions about them.

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Miguel and Gerardo Gomez window-shopped in Little Havana dressed exactly the same -- Cuban identical twins separated by 14 years of exile and reunited a little more than a week ago.

Their casual jaunt at Flagler boutiques Thursday framed the best and worst that Cubans have to face under U.S. immigration policy. Their unique immigration status, defined by the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act but punctuated by family separation and yet an easy path to citizenship, can give Cuban Americans a different perspective on the issue.

It took 14 years for Miguel Gomez, 63, to see his twin, Gerardo. Like other immigrants, Cubans who make it to America usually must wait years to bring family members.

"I don't understand this country," Miguel Gomez said. "This is a country of immigrants, yet they hunt down immigrants and kick them out of here like that."

His twin, still awed by the American abundance surrounding him, said he would stay in this country and never return to Cuba. It's a right he has as a Cuban who touches U.S. soil regardless of how he arrived -- legally through a U.S. immigration lottery system that sets aside 20,000 visas a year or illegally, smuggled in by sea.

Legal experts say Cubans probably would not be affected by a Senate bill to help millions of undocumented immigrants gain work permits and eventually a path toward citizenship.

That leaves Cuban exiles and Cuban Americans watching the debate from the other side of the fence, secure in their own U.S. status and often ambivalent about what rights other immigrants should have.

Some Cubans, particularly older exiles with conservative views, believe that only legal immigrants should be allowed to stay and become citizens, and that the United States should aggressively secure the borders. Others believe that amnesty should be granted to all who want to work here.

"Cubans, we have a different situation from these people," said Spanish-language radio commentator Martha Flores, who has a nightly show on 710-AM, Radio Mambí. "But what I don't understand is why we should be against them. . . . Everyone here should have a right to live."

Some Cuban Americans at La Carreta restaurant in Miami's Westchester neighborhood expressed skepticism last week about any reforms that would allow illegal immigrants to qualify for citizenship.

"People can't claim rights if they start off in this country by breaking the law," said Manuel Nobregas, 62, who was born in Cuba.

Ignacio Jesus Vásquez, a retired division chief from the Miami-Dade County Police Department, said the United States has a right and a duty to protect its borders.

"These politicians are just playing politics with the security of our country," he said. "I'm a U.S. citizen. It's time this country assumed some responsibility with its borders."

CUBANS' SITUATION

Unlike most other immigrants, Cubans begin a path to citizenship immediately upon arriving in the United States, whether they came legally, were smuggled in, or arrived on boats or rafts. It's the result of the controversial wet-foot/dry-foot policy, started by the Clinton administration in the wake of a 1994 raft crisis, in which Cubans who make it to U.S. shores are allowed to stay, but those intercepted at sea are sent back to Cuba.

Miami immigration lawyer Wilfredo "Willy" Allen said the immigration reform proposals before Congress would generally not affect Cubans. "At the end of the day, a few Cubans may benefit from an immigration reform act," he said. "But Cubans are still in a very preferential position, which won't be affected positively or negatively by a new law."

But that doesn't stop Cubans from participating in a debate that has political ramifications for the 2008 presidential election. Alejandro Fernandez, 40, said it's dangerous for the United States to be dividing families by deporting immigrants who have U.S.-born children.

"If they take away the father or mother and leave these kids either without parents or poor in a Third World country, then they are only breeding resentment," he said. "These kids are going to be easy to brainwash into hating the United States."

Fernandez's friend Carlos Mendoza, 40, disagreed. He said undocumented immigrants want a handout.

"They're trying to figure out how to collect money from the government without working," Mendoza said.

Nearby, an Ecuadorean woman who came to the United States illegally 17 years ago was leaving La Carreta with her 7-year-old daughter. Lorena Jaramillo, 38, is now a legal resident and heads the Parent-Teacher Association at her daughter's elementary school, she said.

"The people who are here illegally are people who support this country," she said. "I think [the U.S. government] should give an opportunity to them."

RICH AND POOR

Cuban exile activist Ramón Saúl Sánchez, who advocates rights for all immigrants, says the Senate proposal, which the Bush administration backs, would widen the chasm between rich and poor across the hemisphere by giving highly skilled workers a better chance of immigrating legally.

"We should be doing more to support other immigrants who are fighting . . . for an opportunity to live in the freedom this country affords," he said. "It makes me sad when I see some sectors of the exile community with a louder voice that tend to not support them."

In Homestead, immigrants who would be affected by the Senate's proposed immigration overhaul -- Mexicans, Guatemalans, Salvadorans and Hondurans -- toil in the fields under the sun.

"They say this is the land of prosperity, of freedom," said Pedro, 21, who is too fearful of being caught to give his last name or stray far from the small rented house he shares with six other men -- including his older brother -- in one of the poorer parts of South Miami-Dade County. "But I have no prosperity, and I have no future."

He and his housemates, all undocumented, have found jobs in landscape nurseries.

"But there are no Cubans working next to us," Pedro said. "Why is that? Because they just have to touch the soil in the United States and they are here legally."

Housemate Juan Cristóbal, 36, chimed in with his own frustration. "They are Hispanic. We are Hispanic. They are immigrants. We are immigrants," he said. "And we're all children of God."