

How not to bring liberty to Cuba

Praising only hard-line dissidents ignores a wider pool of reformers.

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Winter Park, Fla. - When President Bush awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Dr. Oscar Elias Biscet earlier this month, he honored the jailed Cuban dissident by calling his example "a rebuke to the tyrants and secret police of a regime whose day is passing." Two weeks earlier, Mr. Bush gave a rousing address on the cause of Cuban freedom for an audience that included prominent Cuban exiles and families of jailed Cuban dissidents, saying, "I join your prayers for a day when the light of liberty will shine on Cuba."

Such tributes make for good rhetoric, but it's not clear, to say the least, that they aid the cause of reform in Cuba. In fact, Bush's excessive attention to a handful of poorly organized hard-line dissidents ignores the new internal dynamics at play in Cuba since Fidel Castro relinquished power to his brother Raul more than a year ago. By focusing only on those dissidents who, like the White House, virtually reject all policies perpetuated by the Cuban regime, the administration is foolishly disregarding the will of many Cubans who favor a more moderate course of action by advocating economic changes within the existing socialist framework.

To varying degrees, both radical dissidents and reformers who prefer to work within the system support changes that would move Cuba toward the adoption of democratic practices. The crucial issue is that the latter group, encouraged by a national debate on economic reforms launched by Raul Castro, is more likely to influence developments than the radicals.

In spite of this reality, Bush refuses to reach out to those Cubans who are gaining clout in demanding meaningful changes. As noted by dissident economist Oscar Espinosa Chepe, "change in Cuba will never be radical and happen overnight like President Bush said."

What explains Bush's flawed and myopic policy toward Cuba? It has little to do with what happens in Cuba and much to do with domestic politics.

In March 2003, just a week after Fidel Castro ordered a massive crackdown that resulted in 75 dissidents being jailed, the White House eased conditions under which Cuban Americans could travel to Cuba and raised the amount of remittances that the US authorized visitors could carry to the island. But in June 2004, in the middle of his reelection bid, Bush again strengthened restrictions on Cuban American travel and remittances after a group of Cuban American members of the Florida legislature warned him that he could lose the support of the exile community if a tougher line against Castro had not been taken. Since then, Bush has intensified his hostile policy and rhetoric against Cuba with measures and speeches ill-suited to stimulate democratic

changes on the island but well received by hard-line segments of both the Cuban exile community and the Cuban dissident movement.

Labeling the recent power shift in Havana a continuation of "autocracy," the Bush administration has vowed to maintain restrictive measures aimed to deny hard currency resources to the Castro government and provide increasing financial support to dissident groups. It appears almost irrelevant that several Cuban dissidents, often portrayed as US-backed "mercenaries" by the island's authorities, have described Bush's policy approach as counterproductive and actually favor lifting the embargo.

In effect, Bush's stance on dissidents seems to be carefully crafted to appeal to opposition figures in Cuba whose views are closely aligned with the position of Cuban American hard-liners.

In his remarks from the Rose Garden in October 2003, Bush condemned Castro's crackdown on internal dissent and praised "brave" dissidents Oscar Elias Biscet and Marta Beatriz Roque for their struggle for freedom. He made no mention of Osvaldo Payá, leader of the pro-democracy Varela Project, who one week earlier took the dramatic step of delivering 14,000 signatures to Cuba's National Assembly, calling for democratic reforms within the island's system. Unlike Payá, neither Biscet nor Roque support the Varela Project, and both agree with Bush that the embargo should be maintained.

In his emotional speech before dissidents last month, Bush unveiled new plans for Cuba and received a standing ovation from the audience. But reactions from dissidents in Havana, apart from Roque's commending words, were mostly negative. Eloy Gutierrez Menoyo, a former Cuban revolutionary who later spent 22 years in prison, described the situation better than anyone else by saying, "as usual, US policy toward Cuba has been kidnapped by elitist groups that are a minority in exile."

In that address, Bush proudly claimed that "the dissidents of today will be the nation's leaders." He also noted, "And when freedom finally comes, they will surely remember who stood with them."

In reality, the future Cuban leaders will probably not be those identified by Washington and, unfortunately for the United States, they will indeed remember who helped them and who did not.

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