

Biannual bulletin on relations between Cubans and Europeans

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# cuba-europe dialogues

Are Cubans Really Free to Travel?

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# Editorial

The arrival of 2013 in Cuba was marked by immigration reform: the famous white card, hated by all, has been cancelled and all Cubans have finally been allowed to travel anywhere in the world.

Since then, queues at offices issuing passports and at various embassies granting visas have grown. Many Cubans have thus been given a chance to travel out of Cuba for the first time in their lives and many opponents could, at last, accept invitations of foreign organizations and voice their opinions and experiences beyond the borders of the island.

However, since the very introduction of the new law there have been doubts about its true scope and concerns have been raised that it might be just a surface change aimed at polishing the image of Cuba in the eyes of the international community. Do all Cubans really have the chance to benefit from the new law?

First, it's interesting to point out that the government reserved the right not to grant the passport in cases when there are “reasons of national security or public interest suggesting it”, which leaves ample room for the government to decide who will be allowed to travel abroad and who will not. Although it seems that the government hasn't misused this right so far, it's clear that some people won't be permitted to leave, for example, the opponents from the “Group of 75” who have spent some time in prison.

On the other hand, most countries have prepared themselves to fight a massive inflow of Cuban immigrants by imposing the obligation to obtain an invitation, which is getting more and more difficult. There has been a fair number of cases of Cubans who sold all their possessions and property on the island but are unable to leave the island due to

Agnes Koleman 

lacking an invitation.

Yet, there is no doubt that the main obstacle to travelling for most Cubans has remained the same as before the reform: it's their economic situation. The cost of a passport equals four salaries of an average Cuban, not to mention other expenses incurred in connection with a trip abroad. All in all, the new law brings benefit only to a privileged few.

In this issue of the bulletin you will find texts of independent Cuban journalists talking about their personal experience with the new law, analysing its scope and revealing some peculiar aspects accompanying the process of the opening of their country. The question is, has the new immigration law made Cubans a freer nation? 🇨🇺



# My Journey

Lilvio Fernández Luis 

54 years ago, Fidel Castro, the master of all Cubans, reserved his right to decide who can travel out of Cuba and who can not. Thus, by law, all citizens had to apply for a permission to travel abroad; some were granted it, others were not. The punishment lasted for 54 years.

During this period, travelling abroad was the privilege of a favoured group of allies of the Castro's totalitarian regime. Paradoxically, most of the Cubans who could leave the country with the permission of daddy Fidel were those who went on a mission to Africa and many of them lost their lives in the war there. Also, in the last decade, daddy Fidel has permitted thousands of Cuban professionals to travel to Latin America and other countries to show the country's solidarity.

On January 14, when they announced that the fence surrounding the island for more than half a century had fallen, I didn't expect that I would really be able to travel. I still didn't believe it when I got my passport nor when I finally held an invitation visa to the Czech Republic. It wasn't before I was seated on the plane, SU Aeroflot 350, my seat belt adjusted and the loud sound of the turbines humming in my ears, when I realized that I was really leaving Cuba. Tears of pain and joy ran down my cheeks. I felt pain over my family, my friends and my beautiful island. And I felt joy because it was really happening, at last I could travel and I was free.

In Prague, I rejoiced at discovering the beauties of the city and I have made some new friends there. Also, I have been reunited with others whom I had already known from Cuba. They all helped me to become one of the privileged few who were given an opportunity to get the feel of the first world - free and democratic. My 22 days abroad have helped me reflect on the true extent of the new immigration law: How many

people like me will be able to travel out of the island? How many workers can afford to buy a ticket to travel anywhere in the world, if their salary doesn't even suffice to get enough food?

Although it's true that the new daddy, Raul Castro, has given us a permission to travel freely after the more than half-a-century long ban imposed by his brother, we shouldn't forget that without real changes in the political and economic system, all reforms will only have a cosmetic effect on our civil society, deprived of any possible development in the truly human sense.

My journey helped me to become more aware of the need for real changes in my country. After I came back, I am ready to fight even harder to start a process of democratization of Cuba. I want to be able to return to Prague one day and show my children the beauties of the city and introduce them to my good friends, to whom I owe thanks for making me feel free for at least 22 days of my life and celebrate my 39th birthday on the river Vltava, drinking Czech beer with my friend Lucas. 🇨🇪



# Can Cubans Really Travel Abroad?

Rolando Rodríguez Lobaina →

In the beginning of this year, the new immigration law have opened up new possibilities of travelling for Cubans, who are now finally able to see the light at the end of the tunnel after being kept in complete isolation from the outside world for half a century. The changes in the legislation have been thoroughly explained and widely discussed in the official press and on TV and have become the most topical and crucial issue in the lives of all Cubans.

The official media has been rejoicing over the suspension of the Exit Permit, a means through which the government exercised control over Cubans travelling abroad, yet it has somehow forgotten to look at this rather sensitive issue from another point of view, the one taken by Cuban workers, students and the general Cuban population. The question is, can Cubans really travel abroad?

Regardless of the suspension or the Exit Permit, travelling abroad has remained a privilege that only few Cubans can afford. The economic situation of an average Cuban worker or student makes it impossible for them to pay for the costly administrative procedures that must be followed before leaving the island (e.g. all paperwork at embassies) or save enough money to be able to cover all the expenses associated with travelling abroad.

“I work in my stall selling light snacks up to 24 hours a day and almost everything I earn I give back to the State on taxes. The rest of the money is necessary to ensure a decent life for my family,” says self-employed Carlos Enrique Rodríguez, adding, “If I wanted to go on holiday to any part of the world, I wouldn't be able to pay for it. I can't even afford to visit any of the Cuban keys or spend a night in a hotel here on the island.”

Basilio Martinez Obret, a baker by profession, has made an exact calculation: “I earn a monthly salary of 300 pesos in national currency (CUP). To pay for the passport, which costs 100 pesos in convertible currency (CUC), which is 2,500 CUP, I would have to lay aside my whole salary for 9 months. To be able to pay for the medical check-up before the journey, which costs 10,000 CUP, I would have to save up for about three years and four months. So, providing I would not buy anything else, no clothes or food, and save my whole salary, I would have to save for four years to be able to pay only for these two things.”

Although the State has lost control over Cubans via exit permits, the new law imposes a set of measures that still give the State power to continue exercising control over travellers. Although they no longer need a permission to leave the country, a significant part of the population still needs an official approval to travel abroad and the situation of professionals and experts is even worse – they really need to please the regime somehow in order to be granted the approval.

Daniel Chacon, a teacher, believes that the new law doesn't constitute any “opening” at all. He thinks that the new migration policy is just part of the set of measures introduced by Raul Castro with the sole purpose of recycling the country's image without losing the government's privilege to deny the citizens of the country the basic guarantees of a truly democratic country. “Also, the measures have an economic objective. For many years, emigration has been a source of funds for the State, which profited both from the fees for administrative procedures as well as from remittances sent by exiled Cubans to their relatives living on the island. All of this generates profit and doesn't require any effort. It's a great business,” says Daniel.

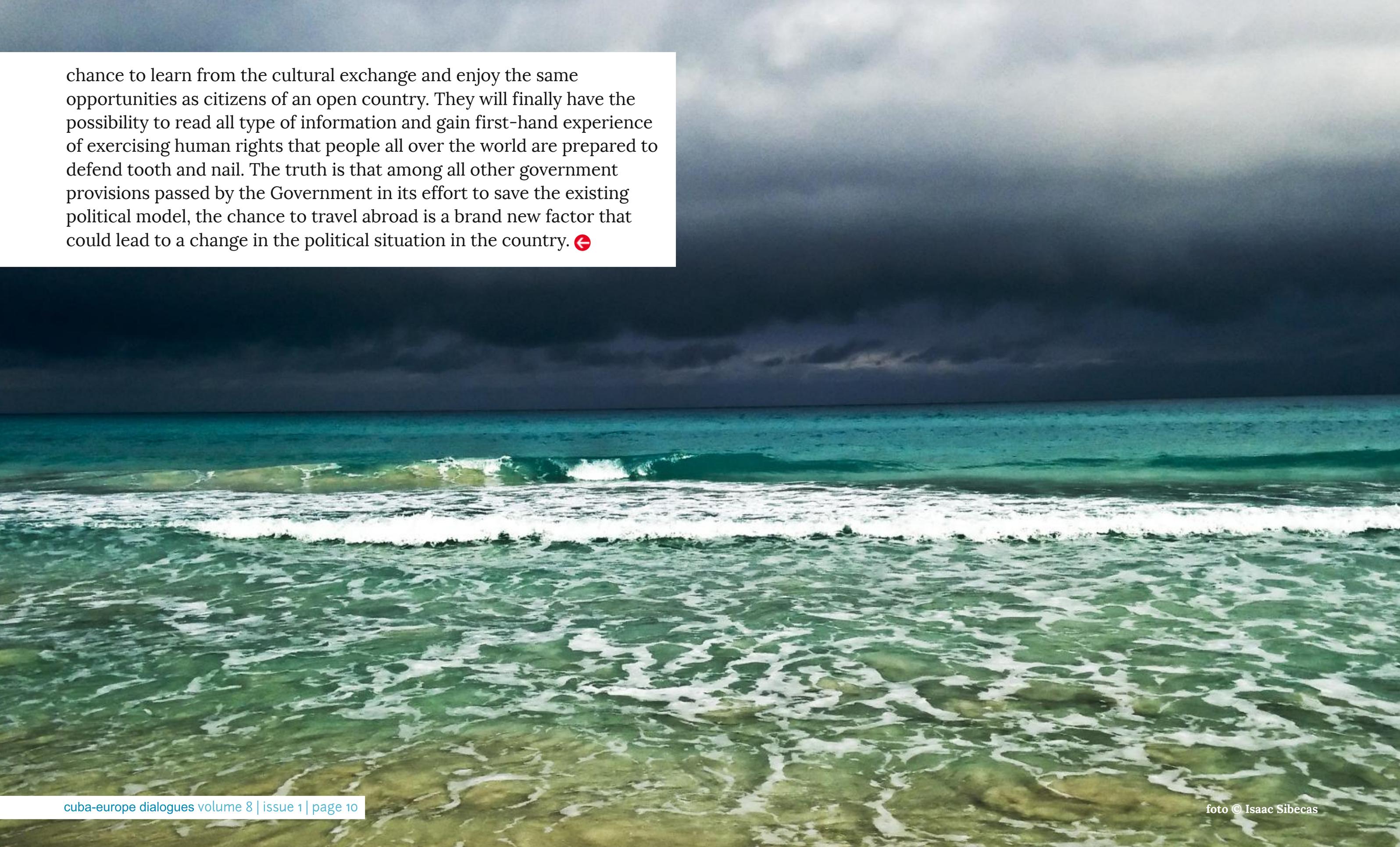
Since the enforcement of the new immigration law, many Cubans have sold their homes, cars and all their possessions, hoping that they would finally be able to undertake the long awaited journey. But suddenly they were faced with things that nobody explained before: travelling to other countries is not as simple as they have been led to believe – these countries have their own immigration laws that must be complied with. “I sold my house in order to try my luck in a different country,” says Laura Guerra Matos, a nurse specializing in intensive care. “But now I have to wait for the Ministry of Health to grant my release, which can take over five years. The Ministry can even refuse to grant it. After that I have to find a country where I would get a work visa, which is something they failed to explain on TV when discussing the new law,” comments Laura.

In fact, the government has incorporated in the law harsh conditions allowing it to control the flight of professionals and experts commonly known as “brain drain”. In this sense, all medical staff are trapped in the prison of the provisions of the new law and it is not expected that the measures will be softened.

Before, people were afraid of leaving the country illegally for fear of never seeing their loved ones again. The new law has eliminated this possibility and after the visit of the sport star from Pinar del Rio, baseball player Jose Ariel Contreras, many other athletes are thinking of fleeing the country to circumvent the costly immigration procedures.

With the new immigration law, the Castro regime bets it all on one card. In the coming years, Cubans, whom the government has prepared to never leave the yard of their home, even if it's open, will suddenly have a

chance to learn from the cultural exchange and enjoy the same opportunities as citizens of an open country. They will finally have the possibility to read all type of information and gain first-hand experience of exercising human rights that people all over the world are prepared to defend tooth and nail. The truth is that among all other government provisions passed by the Government in its effort to save the existing political model, the chance to travel abroad is a brand new factor that could lead to a change in the political situation in the country. ↩



# Galician Virgin

Julio César Álvarez →

Jose Ortega y Gasset used to say that for a full-blooded Spaniard, the word “bull” would never mean just “male cattle”, but would only and exclusively evoke the image of a male bovine of four to five years with three virtues: caste, power and good feet. A male bovine of less than four years would not be considered a bull, it would be called a stirk or a calf. In addition, if it failed to meet any of the three virtues forming the necessary combination, you could call it a “bull” only in conjunction with the adjective “bad”.

Cubans, who have always tended to lighten up any situation, have paraphrased the quote of the distinguished philosopher and essayist, coining the phrase “Galician virgin”. Contrary to what it may sound like, it does not refer to a Spaniard from Galicia that has not had any sexual relations yet. The phrase is solely and exclusively used to talk about Cubans who have reached legal age and have the following three virtues: they must have a Spanish passport, be in good health to be able to travel and, most importantly, they must not have travelled out of the country in the last year. Hence the noun “virgin”. If it's not the person's first trip that year, they can still be called “Galicians” but the term must be accompanied by the adjective “bad” because they are now “used”, they are not virgins anymore.

Enrique is one of those bad Galicians. He's been used. He works as an electronics technician in a small workshop with electronic appliances of Milagros y Heredia in the neighbourhood of La Vibora. Before he was granted Spanish citizenship thanks to his paternal grandfather, he had never been abroad, he had never left the island.

Enrique he has just returned from Cancun. “It's an exquisite place to lose your virginity,” jokes Enrique, who spent ten days in the Mexican

town without having to pay a penny. The flight ticket and accommodation was paid by his patron, who also gave him 200 dollars before he left Cuba. All he had to do was to serve as a mule, ceding his patron the customs allowances that he was entitled to due to its being his first journey abroad this year.

When travelling abroad for the first time in the year, Cubans pay duty for all the merchandise they are carrying in local currency, not in dollars as required when the person leaves the island more than once a year. This system substantially cuts the costs associated with getting merchandise across the border. Clearly, Enrique didn't travel alone. There were five more Galician virgins with him, who had the same benefits as him.

He says that this time, for instance, they were carrying modern equipment for a whole gym – among other things there were various modern technological appliances and twelve 32-inch Samsung TV sets, which cost not much over 200 dollars a piece in Mexico, whereas in Cuban stores they are sold for over 800 USD.

Yet, Galician virgins are usually not informed about the destination or the use of all the goods they are carrying. Their job consists only in getting it across the customs at the airport. It's no secret that private shops selling clothes and other merchandise ensure their supplies this way. It's a legal means that the ingenious Cubans have been able to use for their benefit – a means bringing the shop's owner a very good profit.

Hiring of Galician virgins is turning into a lucrative business. Enrique's patron now pays a commission of 5 USD to those who would find him another Galician virgin willing to join the business and serve as a mule.

Enrique has had quite a good year so far. He has visited Mexico for free (all expenses were covered by the patron), he has earned a salary of 200 dollars, and he has found two new Galician virgins for his patron. Moreover, he still works in his small workshop of La Vibora, fixing broken audio equipment.

Now he would like to travel to Panama, but for the rest of the year he will remain a bad Galician. He will have to wait for the next year to regain his virginity – a virtue that, to paraphrase Ortega y Gasset once more, is the sine qua non ingredient of the wonderful reality of the moment that Cubans call “Galician virgin”. ↩



# Open Wound

The United States Interests Section in Havana, located between L Street and the Malecon esplanade, is an open wound draining the veins of Cuba. Thousands of people arrive there every day to seek a remedy in form of a stamp and a soothing balm - a visa, which will allow them to escape from the communist nightmare devouring their lives.

Large numbers of workers, technicians, artists, sportsmen and scientists have been leaving their home country in search of better living conditions, making their dream true. Thanks to this, the consular building between L Street and Malecon, which is visible from all the four corners of Havana, has turned into a kind of a mystical place.

Those who are leaving include educated and trained men, pretty women, little babies as well as old people, whom their biological clock allows to make the very last trip of their lives, the only chance to reunite with their children and grandchildren, so that they can die in peace. In a foreign land.

If it wasn't for the tragic tone, many of the stories lived or narrated in the vicinity of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana could be taken for comedy pieces with sorrowful moments, or sometimes even for circus acts.

Many applicants are lucky to obtain a permission to leave their country and start a happy and peaceful life in their new home - our northern neighbour. Yet, those who are rejected come back to their homes disheartened, in tears, their illusions lost and their illusory hopes frustrated.

Some of my friends had the privilege of seeing the better side of the

Frank Correa →

consulate. Now they sent letters in which they complain about having to work really hard, harder than they have ever imagined, to get enough money just for food or shelter. Although they would never admit to feeling sorry for leaving their homeland, they all keep repeating like a chorus that they have left their roots and their lives here in Cuba.

I got a letter from a friend of mine who has recently left – he sent me a photo from a Sunday grill party. In the photo you could see him in a cook's apron, with a smile on his face, as he was turning steaks on the grill – something that Cubans only know from films. Next Sunday I got another letter with another photo of another grill party. Yet, you could see it was taken on the same day as the first one. Only the steaks had been turned this time.

Another of my friends, who left with the help of the Refugee Program, impressed us with a photo of himself and his new car taken at the airport in Miami. Later we learned that it was an arranged photo because he only stopped in Miami before he took a flight to Kentucky, where he had been placed by the program.

It was this long wound, which is draining the veins of Cuba, that my friend complained about one day, when the crowd of applicants for interviews and visa completely filled the park in front of the building of the Interest Section as well as the surrounding streets. My friend Ernesto Lavastida, Chairman of the Centre for Constitutional Rights.

That day, he climbed up a bench in the park and preached aloud: “People of Cuba, I can see so many of you willing to leave the country and turn their back to the fight, and I ask, why don't you join me, why

don't we go together, as the masses, to the square to demand freedom and decency, which have long disappeared from this country?”

All people around the Lavastida moved quickly away, as if he were some kind of vermin or an ill man, who could infect them with a virus. They left him alone, raised up on the bench, alone with his patriotic exhortation. They walked away a sufficient distance, to the opposite pavement.

Lavastida confessed to me that there was nothing he could do with them. He could just watch them leave and wish them good luck, wherever they go. 🚫



# Maria Won't Be Able to Travel Any More

Tania Díaz Castro →

Maria Dominguez is standing in front of me. An 80-year-old woman, her small eyes moist and sad. The story of her life is rather common – like many Cuban mothers she has been living separated from her children due to arbitrary and inhuman laws that have been in force for half a century. Yes, there are many like her, all sharing their suffering of people whose lives are not governed by fate but by a dictator, who considers himself the only master of the country.

Maria comes from Bauta, a village south-west from the capital of Havana. A simple woman living with her cats, she needs only few things for her life. Her life story reminds me of that of Hilda Molina, Cuban neurosurgeon, who waited for fifteen years for Fidel Castro's permission to travel to Argentina to get reunited with her son and the rest of her family.

Cuban laws have ruined Maria's life. Her son, a released political prisoner, left Cuba in 1988. Maria was denied Exit Permit. There was no chance for her – to assert the common right to leave and enter the country was of no avail because the rights of Cuban citizens were determined by the State as the sovereign authority.

Maria is mentally alert enough to realize all the cynicism of the new immigration law signed by president Raul Castro in January this year – the law whose aim is, as its text stipulates, “to ensure that migratory movements are legal, orderly and safe”.

Maria will also never forget her young nephew, who died in the Straits of Florida like hundreds of thousands of other Cubans who decided to flee the country after being denied travel permit – the devilish “White Card”, which was issued or denied by the Cuban Immigration Department as it

pleased.

One day, Maria came across a text by Jose Marti, which said: “Tyranny is always the same despite the various forms it can take, even if they have beautiful names or emerge as big events.” After reading this, she threw away her military clothes and certificates of acknowledgement and finished with the Castro dictatorship forever. She felt as if she had been relieved from a heavy burden.

Almost thirty years have passed since that moment. Maria's health status makes it impossible for her to travel now and she knows that it's even too late to dream. 🚫



# Traveling "For Free"

Average Cubans have grown accustomed to rationing or limited access to things and if any product is lacking, they say: "it's for free". This idiom, which has been used in Cuba for over 50 years of the totalitarian regime, can now be applied to another fact of the Cuban reality: the possibility of travelling, which has been given to some Cuban citizens earlier this year.

With no intention to downgrade the importance of the new immigration law, I'd like to point out that the law prohibits several people to leave the country, among them prisoners under "extrapenal" license, which includes members of the Group of 75 imprisoned in spring 2003, also known as the Black Spring, who have remained in Cuba. At present they are thirteen.

Another factor undermining the credibility of the law is the fact that the government has reserved the right to prohibit a person from leaving the country when they are already at the airport, even though they are holders of a valid passport. This has happened many times in recent months with terrible consequences for the detained passengers, many of whose have sold everything to be able to leave the country.

On the other hand, some countries have decided to protect themselves against a potential wave of immigrants by the requirement that travellers need to hold a letter of invitation. In addition, the United States have cut tourist visas for senior citizens, which used to be easier to obtain. This type of tourism when a person was allowed to leave the country for up to 11 months was known as "temporary departure" and if the person failed to return to the country, the case was closed as "definite exit." In the new legislation, these terms have been abolished.

Martha Beatriz Roque Cabello →

Yet, the possibilities of travelling that have recently opened up for some citizens are very closely tied to their economic situation. Not everybody can bear the costs associated with travelling, not all citizens can afford to pay for a passport not to mention the visas, tickets, or even medical examinations, insurance, airport fees, etc. required by some countries. Needless to say, all of the fees must be paid in hard currency (CUC).

So, if you take into consideration that all workers in Cuba receive their monthly salary in pesos (CUP), the average salary is 425 CUP and the exchange rate is 25 CUP for 1 CUC, it would take many years to save enough money to be able to pay the costs associated with emigrating. Clearly, Cubans with relatives living abroad have greater possibilities to travel. They have a charming abbreviation for their families living abroad – it's "FE" ("Familiares en el Exterior"), which in Spanish means "FAITH".

Although the queues at airports have not grown much, it's enough to visit the neighbourhood of Miramar, where most embassies in Cuba have their seats, to see the long lines of people waiting at consulates, above all at the embassy of Mexico and Canada, two comparatively close countries. Yet, the United States Interests Section has beaten the record.

In any case, too little time has passed since Cubans were allowed to travel "for free" and we will have to wait a bit more to see if they are able to find solutions to the existing obstacles. So far, Cuban people have shown great ingenuity in overcoming all difficulties they had to face. 🇨🇺



# Trick or Treat?

One of the most controversial issues in the twilight of the Castro regime has been the adoption of new immigration legislation, which has partially removed obstacles for Cubans travelling to and from their country.

Regardless of what it may look like, this measure involves rather little risk for the political elite that has based its power over citizens on denying them the exercise of fundamental freedoms. Their plans to maintain political and social control within the country show that they have sufficient guarantees to ensure a desirable course of development both in the short and medium term.

Yet, it is illogical that a political party in power would introduce measures that would be the very opposite of its main ideological foundations. I personally don't believe that the reason was that the government has been under economic or political pressure from within the country or abroad. I'm inclined to consider it an effort to reinforce the government's image – a public relations gesture to show that it is committed to further freeing the way for an opening of the country, which, so far, has been characterized by sudden stops and broken promises.

Moreover, the new legislation has the added value of bringing capital that will end up in the government's treasury by leading to an increase in the number of travellers to various parts of the world, who will then come back to spend their recently gained money in the so-called “dollar shops”.

In spite of the expected breakdown in the official political discourse in the international media and academic environment as well as in

Jorge Olivera Castillo 

important international forums, it's clear that the political leaders will not lose legitimacy fast enough, just remember that the one-party government still counts on support of a vast network of political and social organizations not only within the Third World.

In face of the wave of euphoria over the fact that 7 or 8 opponents have had an opportunity to express their criticisms in various foreign meetings, it's worth it to ask a few questions:

First, will these opponents be given a second chance after returning to Cuba? Will the limits for members of the internal dissident be extended? Keep in mind that the immigration law contains provisions that can be interpreted in a way allowing the government prevent certain people from travelling under the pretence of “public interest” or “threat to national security”.

Perhaps the current strategy, or at least its early stages, has been designed with some share of generosity in order to create an impression that the changes have been meant seriously. Yet, if we analyse the history of the regime and take into account the various crises that it has faced since it took the reins of power, some of which were really complex and seemed insurmountable, we will come to a conclusion that the regime has always had an ace up its sleeve.

For this reason it's not advisable to trust anything that resembles a concession or an act of weakness because in the end it may turn out to be a ploy to gain time. We must be twice as cautious and not to trust in appearances. Above all, we should make the most of every journey that has obtained the regime's consent, even if it is for reasons beyond our understanding. 🚫



# My United States of America

Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo →

Back in the 1970's, the years of my Cuban childhood, there were terrible shortages, the country had closed itself off to the world and the United States was seen as a mythical land – a land of the unknown, the beyond, the different, the free, the illusionary; a mirage of hope for people living in the sterilizing, malignant environment of true socialism. As a child, I imagined the United States as a grey country, perhaps because it was painted grey in the maps imported from Eastern Europe. Its cold grey contrasted beautifully with the raging red of my country's political banners with the wicked propaganda, which have been occupying Cuban classrooms up until today. Sadly, parents can't avoid (not even complain about) such form of brainwashing of their own children.

Visionaries of mythical lands, or of promised lands, if you want, seldom succeed in reaching them and living in them. I've been lucky and here I am, writing these lines in the stillness of a Manhattan morning. Manhattan has been the starting point for my journeys across the continent, which I've been making for three months now, travelling from coast to coast, visiting numerous universities and cultural institutions as well as governmental bodies and press agencies.

I don't have any relatives here, in the United States. I came to the capital of Washington, D.C., on my own, straight from my eternal neighbourhood of Lawton. At the Havana airport, they took my documents and retained them for an hour without giving any explanation. Surely, they wanted to see how I would react, waiting in a creepy room, as the time of the take-off approached. In short, they played with me as a fierce feline squeezing its last piece of prey before devouring it. Perhaps they wanted to turn my last memory of the island into a bitter experience verging on a state of disgust. Well, they almost succeeded. Yet, my last memory of Cuba is that of wishing all Cuban

people that the future may have mercy on them, regardless of whether they are the executioners or the victims of that pugnacious logic.

As soon as I arrived in the United States, I attended the Tech@State conference, where I saw several presentations on the redemptive power of the new digital media and social networking as well as on various types of technological tyranny that authoritarian states use to curtail freedom of expression. This helped me to understand from the very beginning that even for democratic countries, the experience of the repressive Cuban environment is not at all strange. The struggle for fundamental rights doesn't end with the overthrow of a dictatorship. It is a ceaseless fight against any kind of despotic control exerted by any power.

At The New School of New York I came across the Cuban blogger Yoani Sanchez (Generacion Y). Together we spoke to a packed audience about the free future of Cuba and civic education of our citizens, who, at present, are largely ignorant about legal matters and fairly intolerant in terms of social coexistence. A small group of Americans even honoured us with an “act of repudiation”, escorting us across the Big Apple as if they were our bodyguards. Also, we had to face a rude, anti-Cuban action taken by the Cuban government, which had sent a formal protest note to prevent us from holding a discussion in a hall in the building of the United Nations. We had to improvise our press conference in an office hallway, where there was very little space for the public.

With Yoani Sanchez we were received both by senators and the White House. I fantasized about seeing the faces of leading politicians that I knew only from the screen. I was impressed by the transparency of the governmental institutions in Washington, D.C., and by the

monumentality of its spaces. As a visitor to the American “heart of power”, I subconsciously expected to see military elite units, but instead I saw an army of laughing students crossing security barriers to peek in and find out who governs their country and what mechanisms of control are employed. What also surprises me, I haven't been stopped by any policeman in the street yet - no police officer has asked me to show my identification card so far, which was pretty usual in Cuba, where they would stop me without any reason - just out of boredom, because molestation of passersby is the source of their authority. Unpunishable, needless to say. That's what is called barbarism.

Shortly after Yoani Sanchez left the United States, another Cuban came: Rosa Maria Paya, the young daughter of the founder of the Christian Liberation Movement and holder of the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize, Oswaldo Paya Sardinias (1952-2012), a Cuban martyr who died in a violent way under so far unexplained circumstances. Sure, the Cuban government came up with a hypothesis of a “traffic accident”, but no sooner did the surviving witnesses deny it than they were deported from Cuba to their home countries.

With Rosa Maria Paya we settled in Miami, a city which has been every minute more merciful to those whom the Castro regime tortured and drove into exile. Miami, a commercial, cosmopolitan city, where so many spies gather to commit crimes, yet, a city that is less and less tense, without forgetting its dignified pain. A city lovingly preserving a 101% of Cuban culture in order to restore it, sooner or later, in the desert-dry (and deserted) soul of the inhabitants of the island, clutched in the materialistic hands of a clan of octogenarians.

With Rosa Maria Paya we swooped down on the major American radio and television channels, appearing together or separately, each of us

telling our piece of the truth to an audience of perhaps millions of people both from the United States and a larger part of the whole America. One morning, a strangely freezing one, I saw Rosa Maria leave for Cuba. It occurred to me that I should be there, too. Just a 45 minute flight and I would return to the land that I miss so much and from which I don't want to separate, even though I know there are men ready to commit the worst things to prevent every single democrat in the country from living to see a free future of Cuba – to name only some of their victims: Orlando Zapata Tamayo, Juan Wilfredo Soto, Wilman Villar, Laura Pollan or Oswaldo Paya.

In the United States, I have been lecturing on the Cuban blogosphere at the universities of Pittsburgh, Princeton, Providence, Boston, Los Angeles, New Jersey, La Crosse, Madison, Durham, and other cities. In all campuses I was treated with respect both by faculty representatives and students, who were full of questions – sometimes really naïve ones, exposing their vulnerability to the rhetoric of a government skilled in wooing the world by showing off its attractive image and benefits. Many times I would see Cuban informers dressed up like diplomats and academics, for instance, in LASA 2013, in which Havana dictatorially delivered its mediocre monologue. I've come across exiled families in every corner of North America, each dreaming about their lost home, to which perhaps only few of them would ever return. Yet, the welfare of their nation was of their daily concern and they would give their best to ensure it. Their diasporic homeland inflicts great pain upon them: They have an intimate relationship to their country and it's impossible to renounce it despite the Castro nightmare, from which they have woken up and are trying to save the next generation to prevent the anthropological damage from becoming congenital.

I felt even greater love for Cuba when the land got covered up by snow or when I was walking through a grove whose beautiful trees I was hardly able to name. I missed my dogs and cats, so I tried to feed squirrels, which is illegal here and I was fortunate that they are wild and mistrusted me. They didn't know I was Orlando Luis, didn't recognize me (neither did I). Almost every day I call my 77-year old mum through the Cuballama network, which the Cuban government tries to boycott since it poses a threat to its monopoly prices. My mother is happy that I don't live in the post-communist pot any more, but she seems very concerned about what the perverse system could do to me. She is not afraid of the “long arm” of the State Security, which has had its headquarters here for decades (the impudent are always capable of taking advantage of a weakness – in this case, the decency of a democratic regime). Although my mum, Maria, belongs to the generation raised in fear, she has every reason to be scared of the whisks of the tail of a dying beast – the state establishment. That's why her last words before saying goodbye are always: “Landy, don't talk about anything.” I'm her only son and I must bear the blame for never obeying her, because I keep talking and talking: It's as if the words were rooted in my throat... The words that come from you and you, and you know that, right?

I don't want to stop breathing in the United States. The air is clear here as the midnight in its highest latitudes (I haven't even sneezed). It's here that I saw snow for the first time. It felt lukewarm. It's here that I could experience the emptiness of ancient and classical pieces in the Metropolitan Museum, so often reproduced in books, sensing that the originals are exhibited in Hollywood settings, where tinsels are both a source of desire and a means of measuring of the truth. Here I've lived a

life that rather resembled a celibate than a life of a celebrity, although it's right here, in the United States, where I hope to be recognized (one late night in autumn, posthumously... forgive my terrible attempt at Cono Sur poetry) by the digital eyes of my intangible love.

Also, I want to visit two destinations marking the extremes of the country: Puerto Rico and Alaska. In many ways, Cuba seems to have full vibrations here in the United States compared to the island, where Cuba feels as if it was a confiscated imitation. Actually, we don't need it. We don't need anything like that in the universe of opportunities called the United States, where everything is within reach if you just make a click, a country where everything depends on your ability to be self-sufficient and good. Yes, we can leave the Cuban archipelago to itself, leave it alone in the hands of a group of uncivil soldiers that perhaps already form the majority society, along with the corrupt and the marginal: The fabric of the nation will have to be weaved from scratch, from the unknown, from the beyond, from the different, from the free, from the illusionary, from the mirage of hope at this side of the Malecon esplanade.

That's why I sometimes play with the idea of founding a new territory, a natural reserve of happiness, a micro-nation that could end up as an economic power and an example of respect for neighbours and for the environment. A piece of land in California, for instance, where there would be hardly necessary to introduce any legislation because no one would even think of harming anyone. A refuge in our planet where human values would be cherished, where no power would mutilate people's spirituality or humiliate life stories, whether or not inspired in any god. A country which wouldn't be “counting on all and for the good of all” (that Jose Marti's demagoguery, in which there isn't place for

anybody, the demagoguery which we dragged from the Republic to the Revolution and the Counter-Revolution), but a country which would be “counting on each individual and seeking the good of each individual” because we are not a mass, we are individuals, we were born and we will die on our own, preferably in private. This is my vision of a Cuba without leaders, a country that doesn't have to wait for the fall of the Castro regime in order to become the island's antipode, including in geographical terms.

Homeland is not the same as Humanity. Homeland means to behave in a humane way, here and now. 🚫



# CUBA

## January- June 2013

### **National**

On January 14, Cuba adopted the long-desired immigration reform, which has removed restrictions on travelling abroad so far affecting Cubans, as well as limitations governing visits of emigrants. Immigration reform is one of the most significant legal changes introduced by President Raul Castro. After several decades of restrictive immigration policy and expensive immigration procedures, it has now finally become possible to travel abroad only with a valid passport and the respective visa required by the destination country.

On January 31, Cuban blogger and dissident Yoani Sanchez announced on her Twitter account @yoanisanchez that she had at last obtained a travel passport. The blogger started her journey on February 14, heading for Brazil, and returned to Cuba after a 103-day long world tour, in which she had met and talked with important politicians and members of parliament.

37-year-old Sanchez, author of the blog Generación Y and one of the harshest critics of the government in the entire Cuban blogosphere, returned smoothly at the Jose Marti airport in Havana, where she was received by a dozen of people - her relatives, friends and bloggers, chanting "Welcome Home".

The leader of the Cuban opposition movement Ladies in White, Berta Soler, obtained her passport on February 8, and she also set out for a world tour, during which she got a chance to meet with Pope Francisco and, at the end of her journey, accept the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought in Brussels, which was awarded to the movement in 2005.

Former Cuban President Fidel Castro reappeared in public on February

3 to cast a vote in the parliamentary elections after failing to appear live on state TV for ten months. The footage of 86-year-old Castro showing up in elections in Havana in person was broadcast by state TV and by the Telesur multinational TV channel.

The family of the late Cuban dissident Oswaldo Payá came to Miami on June 6 and decided to stay there for an indefinite period of time. The family were able to leave the country thanks to the new immigration reform allowing Cubans to travel without the government's permission, which has been in effect since January. Their intention to take advantage of the benefit offered by the reform was confirmed by the local branch of the Christian Liberation Movement, an organization founded by Paya in his life. Under the new law they are entitled to claim the status of “residents” after they have lived in the U.S. for a year and a day.

The spokesman of the local branch of the Christian Liberation Movement in southern Florida said that the family has made the decision in order to protect the freedom and integrity of the family, which may be at risk since all members of the family have received threats. Since June 4, the Cuban government has extended internet access in the country, but only in places where it is provided by the State and at an increased price charged in convertible pesos (4.5 CUC per 1 hour).

According to the official newspaper Juventud Rebelde, 118 computer rooms with internet access have been opened across the country. Browsing on the Internet and the national intranet is ensured by the Nauta domain controlled by the state communications monopoly ETECSA.

The government also said that ETECSA will have the right to “immediately stop providing internet services to any user if it comes out that in the course of the internet session they have violated the standards of ethical conduct stipulated by the Cuban government.”

### **International**

On March 6, the leader of the “New Generations” youth movement of the Spain's People's Party, Angel Carromero, publicly stated that the car accident in which two Cuban dissidents died last June, namely Oswaldo Paya and Harold Cepero, was caused by a car of a distinguished government official, which rammed them out of the way. He also said that his trial in Cuba was a sham and that he was forced to lie and tell the court the “official version” of events. He confessed that he decided to tell the truth after meeting Paya's daughter, whose family has been defending his innocence.

The death of President Hugo Chavez on March 8 this year has fuelled fears that Cuba might sink into another economic abyss if Caracas stops providing it with subsidies, whose value is estimated to greatly exceed the massive aid offered by the Soviet Union to Havana in the past.

Nicolas Maduro, the man whom Hugo Chavez selected as his political successor, won a narrow victory in Venezuela's presidential election held on April 14. The opposition candidate Henrique Capriles refused to acknowledge the victory and called for a recount.

On May 28, the Venezuelan opposition released a recording supposedly addressed to President Raul Castro, which presumably brings evidence of a conspiracy in the Venezuelan political scene – a plot against

President Nicolas Maduro hatched by the Chairman of the National Assembly, Diosdado Cabello, who is also allegedly involved in corruption.

For another year, Cuba will remain on the list of countries promoting terrorism annually prepared by the U.S. State Department since 1982.

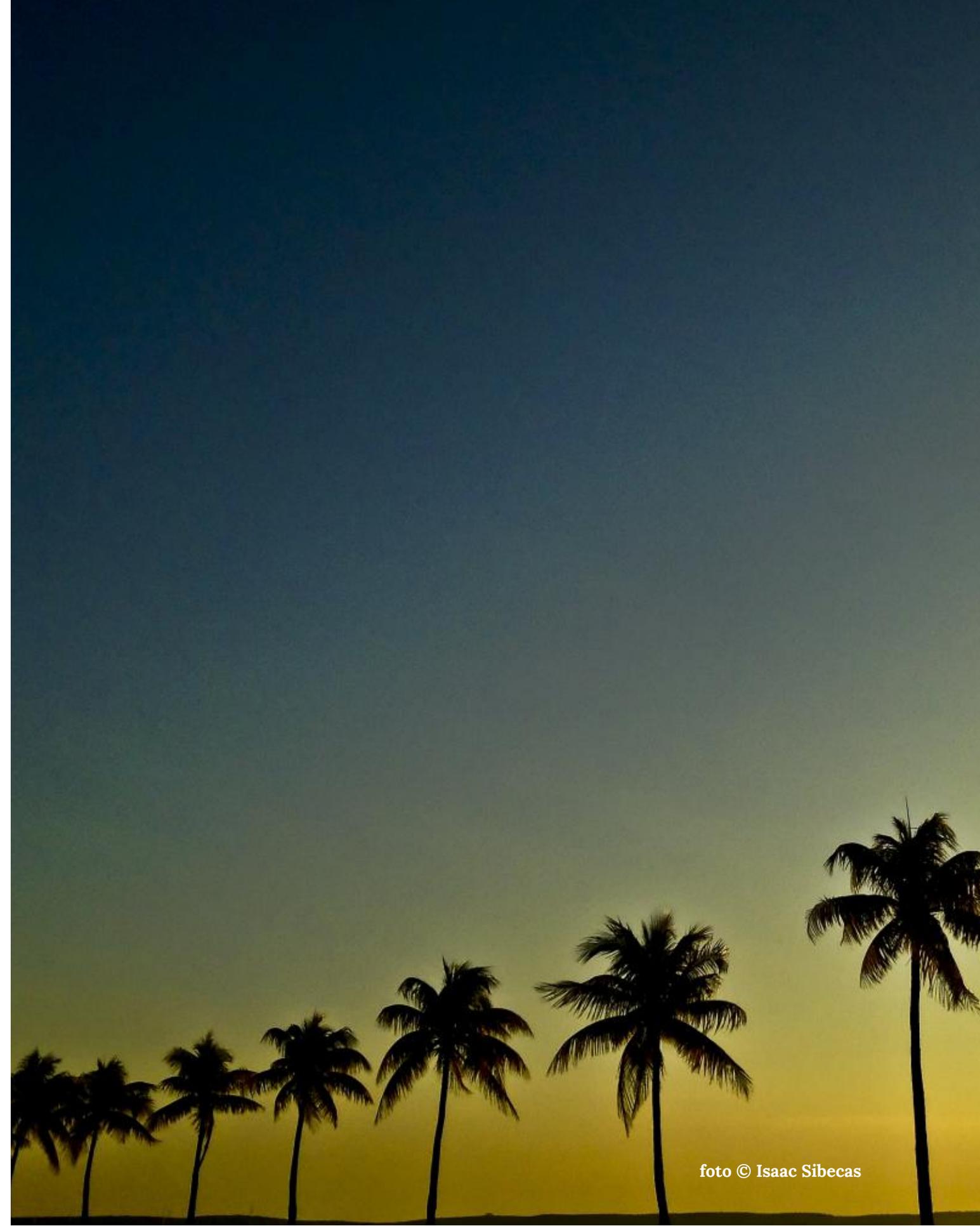
In a letter submitted to the White House in early June, over fifty Cuban Americans showed the U.S. president Barack Obama their disagreement with the decision of the U.S. Administration to keep Cuba on the list of terrorist countries. The document was signed by 60 Americans including entrepreneurs, academics, university professors, writers, artists and religious leaders who maintain that there are no legal grounds for keeping Cuba on that list and assert that the majority of Cubans living in the United States share their opinion.

### **Human Rights**

Since January 2013 until now, June 2013, Cuban human rights activists and opponents have continued to suffer repression, in particular members of opposition groups such as the Ladies in White and the Cuban Patriotic Union as well as the independent news agency Hablemos Press.

The most common human rights violations include arbitrary arrests, usually of short duration and showing a total disregard for guarantees that should be offered to detainees, who are in most cases released after a more or less short period of time in order to allow the government to save its face before the eyes of the international community.

Acts of repudiation against opponents and activists have continued in ➔



different regions of the country. These acts include throwing faeces, rocks and sticks and spilling paint at the homes of various opponents. Also, crowds performing acts of repudiation usually shout and chant insults. Sometimes the crusaders include even children – pioneers dressed up in their uniforms.

The right of freedom of assembly and association has been violated on numerous occasions and the number of evictions has been on the increase.

In April, more than 60 activists of the Patriotic Union of Cuba (UNPACU) went on hunger strike, demanding the release of Luis Enrique Lozada Igarza, who was arrested on April 9 on a charge of making threats after an act of repudiation at his home, in which some of his relatives had been beaten.

Early in the morning of May 8, the UNPACU leader, Jose Daniel Ferrer, informed from Santiago de Cuba that UNPACU has managed to secure release of their fellow-supporter Luis Enrique Lozada Igarza after he had spent a month on hunger strike in prison.

April 10 was the day of the release of Calixto Ramon Martinez Arias, journalist of the Hablemos Press who had been on three hunger strikes.

Calixto Ramon was arrested on September 16, 2012, at the Cuban airport of Jose Marti while he was conducting research on international medical aid – supply of drugs sent to Cuba, which had been left unused and expired. ↩

For more information on violation of human rights in Cuba, visit [www.eyeoncuba.com](http://www.eyeoncuba.com)

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