

Cuba's Twin Embargoes

Donato Di Santo 2 September 2026

For decades, the prevailing view has been that **Latin America's** authoritarian regimes were exclusively right-wing. It was also believed that, unlike other regions of the world, the Americas made it easier to establish authoritarian rule through coups d'état than through the manipulation of democratic procedures — this despite widespread and repeated instances of electoral fraud. The one exception, it was thought, was **Cuba**. There, however, the Castro dictatorship took hold not through a betrayal of democracy — already badly compromised by the previous dictator, **Fulgencio Batista**, and certainly never restored by Castro — but through a betrayal of the revolution.

The early decades of this century then brought a new and unforeseen situation to our attention. In two Latin American countries, **Nicaragua** and **Venezuela** — both governed by democracies, however fragile — democratic electoral processes gave victory to figures and movements commonly labeled (and self-labeled) as left-wing, or **left-wing populist**. Subsequently, both countries' governments worked to install autocratic and **authoritarian regimes**, controlling — and at times dismantling — the very democratic and constitutional structures that had allowed them to prevail at the polls. So, in these cases, unlike Cuba, it was democracy itself that was betrayed.

In short, for an entire period the dichotomy that gradually took hold was the one between winning government and seizing power — almost as if, within a democracy, the two outcomes were equivalent and interchangeable.

A great deal of time has now passed since **Salvador Allende's** generous attempt at a Chilean, democratic road to socialism. That attempt was blocked — beyond the internal contradictions within the Allendista left itself — by **Augusto Pinochet** and **Henry Kissinger**, the former now brazenly rehabilitated and championed by Chile's current president, José Antonio Kast. Its failure can hardly have displeased the Soviets, who were uneasy with the idea of pairing **socialism with democracy** and who were careful never to chip away at the golden rule of “spheres of influence” that let them patch up — with tanks — the cracks in the post-Stalinist empire. Nor can it have displeased Fidel Castro, who was deeply averse to — indeed, alien to — the very concept of democracy.

Less than a decade later, new hope arose from the anti-Somoza revolution led by Nicaragua's Sandinista movement. Despite many internal contradictions, they attempted to build a socialism grounded in freedom, democracy, multiparty politics, and respect for civil and political rights. That attempt was derailed by a combination of **endogenous authoritarian pressures** — led by then-Interior Minister and Castro plenipotentiary Tomás Borge — and **exogenous ones**, namely the “low-intensity” war unleashed by the United States. **Daniel Ortega** later sealed its fate for good, installing a ferocious dictatorship that he now shares with his wife.

And now to Cuba — the case of a country, perhaps unique in the world, that for 30 years, from the revolution until the early 1990s, was kept afloat by immense and constant flows of subsidies from one of the two superpowers of the time, the **Soviet Union**. Cuba was the wedge the USSR drove into the flank of the other great power (and came close to becoming its missile launchpad).

Exporting nickel and sugar at political prices to the so-called socialist bloc, and importing oil and technology from that “bloc” at prices just as political, if inversely so: for thirty years, this was the reality of the island of the revolution. And in the early decades, undeniably thanks to the enormous **subsidies** flowing in from the USSR as well as to the intrinsic qualities of the Cuban people, a kind of social welfare system was also built up, particularly in education and public healthcare. This, too, should not be forgotten.

The United States **embargo** on Cuba (*el bloqueo*), though imposed in the very early 1960s, caused no real trouble until the early 1990s; in official speeches, the Cuban leadership invoked it, but only as a rhetorical reference. It wasn’t until 1992 — a full thirty years into the *bloqueo* — that a resolution calling for “an end to the United States embargo against Cuba” was brought before the UN General Assembly for the first time. Nearly every member state voted in favor; the United States, a permanent member of the Security Council, voted against, alongside Israel, and so nothing came of it. From that year on, for all 32 years that followed, the same script played out with the same result.

The embargo was **the pretext Castro used to conceal his own monumental historical responsibilities**. “It’s the fault of the US *bloqueo*” was the regime’s standard answer to deflect any question or protest. Why only one party? *El bloqueo*! Why are human and civil rights trampled? *El bloqueo*! Why is any form of property banned, beyond collectivization? *El bloqueo*! Castro’s real, great ally was *el bloqueo*!

Instead of taking advantage of that incredible privilege — one that had fallen into its lap undeservedly — to **rebuild and develop the economic and productive system**, to break free from the sugarcane monoculture, to nurture the extraordinary cultural and professional talents of the Cuban people, the Castro regime did exactly the opposite. It collectivized, Sovietized, regimented. It suppressed individual initiative as well as civil liberties. And it squandered the wealth handed to it by the Russians (in exchange, naturally, for political submission), frittering it away on adventures like “**exporting the revolution**” (sic!) — which in part gave the mirror-image “exporting democracy” (double sic!) by the *gringos* its justification. Both were absurd, both failed, and both were paid for dearly by populations used as guinea pigs.

A US embargo — not decided by the United Nations but declared unilaterally by a single country — is, in effect, an act of war, and therefore illegitimate and reprehensible. It is, moreover, a cowardly act, one that leaves the military oligarchy’s power untouched while starving a population already worn down. And in the version devised by the Trump administration, which cuts off energy and medical supplies and blocks hospitals and delivery rooms, it amounts to **an obscene assault on the most basic human rights**.

Given this premise, one question arises naturally: why, in the thirty preceding years, from 1962 to 1992, did the embargo cause no trouble — so much so that Cuba brought no resolution before the UN? Because for thirty very long years, until the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the USSR, the embargo’s effect was almost entirely offset by massive “fraternal” Soviet aid. But then the next question is: in those thirty long years of a subsidized economy, how did the Cuban government make use of this globally unparalleled condition?!

Because **it was only then that the embargo truly began to bite, as thirty years of Soviet welfare-state support ran dry**. That was when “the emperor was revealed to have no clothes.” All the grandiose promises Castro had made in the immediate aftermath of the revolution — starting with diversifying production to overcome the supposed colonial legacy of sugarcane monoculture — had gone completely unfulfilled. Thirty years of dependency, which had begun with sugarcane monoculture, ended with sugarcane monoculture! And the modest social welfare system mentioned earlier had also reached its end. In a country where socialism was paired with democracy, faced with such total failure and mismanagement, the government would have been voted out. In Cuba, even the mildest hint of criticism of the dictator meant isolation, ostracism, repression, prison,

death. By then, **the further slide from illiberal autocracy into reactionary totalitarianism was complete.**

With the disaster of Castro's government and the actual unleashing — though thirty years late — of the US embargo's perverse effects, **Cuba was technically a failed state**, kept alive by repression and by the paramilitary social control of the CDRs, the notorious Committees for the Defense of the Revolution. The *período especial*, roughly corresponding to the 1990s, came down like an axe on a Cuban population pushed ever closer to the brink. The **single party's nomenklatura** could get access to dollars and consumer goods, and send their children to study abroad; the military apparatus, the only glimmer of a counterweight to power, isolated itself from society and went into business, concentrating more than half the island's economy in its own hands. With the situation now on the edge of the abyss, the ruling caste tried to shore things up — not through self-criticism or by opening itself to society's demands, but simply to save its own skin. So, it reinvented its tourism sector, almost nonexistent in the regime's first thirty years except for political tourism. It was, in effect, a return to pre-revolution tourism — except that in place of Americans came the French, Canadians, Italians, Germans (there to engage in the very same "tourist activities" Americans had engaged in before '59!).

For the ruling caste, the embargo was — and still is — a formidable lifeline. Faced with the indignation of ordinary Cubans (that is, neither the caste nor its opponents), who may well have believed in the revolution but now found themselves living alongside brothels for foreigners just as before '59, on a starvation wage, the embargo, *el bloqueo*, was — and is — the best fig leaf the government has to cover up the shame of its own failure. Moreover, for the more recalcitrant segments of society, alongside the ever-present social repression, Castro would occasionally turn on the tap of **migration waves toward Miami** — as in the dramatic *balseros* crisis, when in 1994 the regime let, or pushed, thousands of people to leave the island on makeshift rafts, some of which broke apart and sank during the crossing, their occupants feeding the sharks that infest that stretch of ocean.

In this context, it's worth remembering that a significant part of **Cuba's democratic and socialist opposition** — the part least beholden to the Miami lobbies — has long developed a critique aimed both at the US embargo and at the internal regime. This is a position I came to know directly from the people involved, in Cuba, over a long relationship spanning a dozen years, with numerous trips to Havana between 1989 and 2001, in my capacity as the official responsible for Latin American relations for a coalition of Italian left-wing parties. That work came to an abrupt end in 2001, when I was expelled from Cuba by the political police, guilty of having built a network of relationships with dissidents and democratic opponents in Havana.

Returning to the *período especial*, when the situation now seemed desperate and even the lever of predatory tourism was no longer producing results, the figure of Hugo Chávez and the acronym PDVSA — Venezuela's state oil company — loomed on the Castro regime's horizon. For Castro, a man undoubtedly blessed with a considerable dose of luck, it was an extraordinary and unexpected breath of fresh air. Chávez's barrels of oil helped Cuba get through the *período especial* and catapulted it into an even more *especial* period: Castroism's Chavista twist. But poor Cuba had, over the previous forty years, grown wearily accustomed to these reckless swings of the *Líder Máximo's* rollercoaster.

So, to sum up, **there isn't one embargo — there are two.** On one side, there's the US economic embargo against the Cuban government. On the other, there's the Castro regime's democratic embargo against human and civil rights. For decades, the *gringo bloqueo* has been the pretext that concealed the other *bloqueo* — the Castro regime's embargo against the Cuban people, against their rights, and against their freedom.

And so we come to the present day, and to what Trump and Rubio are getting ready to do in Cuba. Specialists mobilized by the US State Department, with the aim of creating psychological pressure

and political blackmail against the regime's oligarchs, have distilled **“the case” that could justify a “targeted” intervention by US troops** on Cuban territory. In Venezuela, this past January, the pretext used to capture the autocrat Maduro was the *“Cartel de los Soles”* (the real motive, of course, was oil). In Cuba, to strike at Raúl Castro, the old *“Hermanos al Rescate”* affair could instead serve the same purpose.

It was February 24, 1996. For some time, **President Bill Clinton** had been trying to resist pressure from the Republican majority in Congress, whipped up by the powerful (anti-Castro and fascistic) Cuban lobby in Miami, and had been vetoing the push to adopt the pernicious **Helms-Burton Act**, which would have tightened the unilateral embargo in place since 1962.

For decades, mutual provocations between the US and Cuban governments had become routine. The United States would organize the Bay of Pigs invasion, and Cuba would respond by installing Soviet nuclear-warhead missiles; small aircraft, chartered by anti-Castro Cuban exile associations, would take off from Miami to scatter propaganda leaflets over the island, and from Cuban shores, every so often (whenever Castro decided), waves of *“balseros”* would set out for Florida.

That February 24, 1996, however, things went differently: the two Cessnas belonging to the *Hermanos al Rescate* association, which had taken off from Miami and were provocatively flying over the island — as they had done many times before — carrying their highly dangerous cargo of leaflets, were shot down by Cuban MiGs. All four crew members died.

The effects were twofold, and both were disastrous for the Cuban population. On one hand, having taken this resounding slap in the face, Clinton could no longer hold out and had to withdraw his veto, ratifying the Helms-Burton Act under the smug, satisfied gaze of the Republican ringleaders. On the other hand — and this may well have been Castro's real objective — the unprecedented, unified mobilization of all opposition groups, which had been building on the island for weeks and was shaping up to be the largest since the establishment of Castroism, was crushed by these events and never took place.

Who decided to shoot down the two civilian, unarmed planes? Even though Raúl Castro was Minister of Defense and would certainly have had a say in the matter, nothing in Cuba could be decided without the direct and unquestionable approval of the dictator, Fidel Castro Ruz.

There was a later attempt, serious and genuine, at reconciliation and at moving past the embargo: President Obama's, in 2016, when he traveled to Cuba intending to turn the page. That attempt was buried by Castro. On this point, the veteran progressive dissident Dimas Castellanos said, from Cuba: *“EEUU cambió su política, Cuba no cambió la suya”* (“The US changed its policy; Cuba did not change its own”).

There's no point piling on the current reactionary caste. Appointed through co-optation among the apparatus's bureaucrats, **Miguel Díaz-Canel**, the current “president,” is a kind of executor of the estate, acting under the watchful eye of the heir. Fidel's brother, Raúl Castro Ruz, couldn't decide anything on his own even if he wanted to — at least not while the heir remains alive. And, to make matters worse, a “nephew” of Raúl Castro has also materialized, out of who knows where, whom the CIA perhaps hopes to use as a sort of Cuban answer to Delcy Rodríguez.

In conclusion, and to seal this last reflection, I want to quote a passage from Ariel Goldstein: “The radical right represents a danger in Latin America, but so does a dogmatic, authoritarian left, reluctant to reflect on its own past, which aligns itself with authoritarian hardliners, thereby forsaking the critical reflection necessary to leave authoritarianism behind.”^[1]

^[1] Ariel Goldstein, *La Reconquista Autoritaria. Como la derecha global amenaza la democracia en América Latina*, Marea Editorial, Buenos Aires, 2022, p. 318.