

Cuba's Economic and Demographic Challenges: Examining Regime Sustainability and Ideological Fragmentation between the "two" Cubas

Mirko Ivanović

Department of Human Geography, Geography Faculty Belgrade/ University of Belgrade

Orcid Number 0009-0007-4991-8890

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100500539>

Received: 26 April 2026; Accepted: 15 May 2026; Published: 06 June 2026

ABSTRACT

This paper is significant because it includes research from several scientific perspectives, which together with the research of the author of this paper gives an overall multidisciplinary picture of the current economic, demographic and geopolitical situation on the island of Cuba and the reasons that led to it. Cuba's communist regime is facing the greatest threat of collapse in its decades-long rule of the island. The author of this paper wants to prove the existence of "two" Cubas, one on the island, while the other was created due to mass migrations in the South Florida region. That "other" Cuba has a great influence on the elections in the USA as well as on its foreign policy towards Cuba. It is not possible to single out a specific methodology that contributed to this work, as mentioned this is the result of multidisciplinary research, all the methods used are listed in a separate chapter and all of them are significant. The US Trump administration wants to carry out a long-awaited geopolitical strategy of overthrowing the only remaining "real" communist government in the world located just 90 miles from the US mainland.

Keywords: Cuba, USA, geopolitics, economy, embargo, communism, regime.

INTRODUCTION

The author of this paper would like to point out that the goal of this paper and the main theory is to prove the economic-geographical and political-geographical situation in Cuba at the moment and what are its potential geopolitical and other consequences for the regime in Cuba and its population. The main scientific theory is proving the existence of "two" Cubas and how their ideological differences affect regional and global geopolitical stability.

The author of this paper wants to explain the historical-geographical situations that led to the current situation on the island of Cuba, after proving the theories he put forward, and how they influenced the great ideological difference between the numerous Cuban diaspora and the population on the island itself, first of all, the communist regime that has ruled Cuba for decades, and is this the end of the last true communist stronghold in the world?

This paper has a special scientific weight because it combines many scientific disciplines that, through proving the author's theories or through references, have helped to bring together the entire picture of what is currently happening on the island of Cuba through various scientific prisms (geopolitical, economic, geographical, demographic, historical, cultural, etc.)

At the end of everything, the author of this paper wants to remember everyone and conclude that there are no political or ideological reasons for this paper, but this is the factual situation of everything that is currently happening on the island of Cuba and what are its consequences for the region and the world.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this paper is large and extensive. Standard methods of analysis, synthesis, comparison, induction and deduction, illustrative and demonstrative method were used. Statistical and demographic methods,

GIS analytical methods, historical, geographical, and economic methods were used in this paper as well. The following statistical databases were used: World Trade Organization (WTO), National Statistics Office of Cuba or Oficina Nacional de Estadística e Información (ONEI), the United Nations (UN), ANES-American National Election Studies, Statista research development. A lot of data is also collected from the papers in books listed in the references.

The comprehensive methodology that is stated and used in this paper is used throughout the results chapter and the main text and through the author's conclusion. The author of this paper would like to thank especially in the part of the methodology the non-governmental organization The Cuban Observatory for Human Rights, an NGO based abroad in Spain, which provided many data that are difficult to obtain due to the geopolitical situation on the island and the protests. The regime in Cuba through its statistical agency wants to show the embellished numbers that the author has shown through the text and despite the embellished numbers and if we take them as reality on the ground even they confirm the author's theory.

Finally, in the methodological chapter, the author of this paper would like to thank all the authors listed in the references and their individual research that helped the author of this paper to get the data he needs to crystallize the whole picture of what is happening on the island of Cuba and, as said in the introduction, brings together a multidisciplinary scientific picture of the current situation on the island.

MAIN TEXT AND RESULTS

The island of Cuba is currently facing the worst existential crisis that it has ever faced in its history. Over the past five years, Cuba has witnessed the most rapid population collapse that any society has experienced so far in the XXI century. At the start of the decade in 2020, Cuba was reported to have had a population of around 11.2 million people ^[1]. Since then, it has been estimated by independent observers that as many as 2.75 million ^[2] Cubans have left the island, meaning that nearly one in every four Cubans have probably left the country in only five years. An utterly catastrophic demographic emptying out of the people of the island of Cuba.

The Cuban government itself officially claims a much lower number of people who have left since 2020. But even their own likely downplayed data claims that 14 % of the island's population have left the country over this last five years. Even if that official data was true, it would already be the second fastest rate of population decline experienced by any country in the world this decade, only behind the demographic rate that is experienced in Ukraine, a country that has been actively at war for years and being massively invaded by its neighbor.

If the official data is that bad, the truth is probably much worse and closer to the independent analyses that are being done. The Cuban government now officially claims that the population on the island has shrunk from 11.2 million people in 2020 to around 9.7 million people as of the start of 2026 ^[1]. While the independent analyses conducted by Juan Carlos Elzibu Campos, a leading Cuban demographer, estimates that it is actually and probably declined closer to around 8.25 million people instead. One of the biggest things that all of these people have been fleeing from has been a similarly rapidly collapsing economy ^[2].

Since 2018, the Cuban economy has declined by at least 15 %. And that is according to official Cuban government data. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, inflation in the country has absolutely skyrocketed. In 2019, the Cuban peso traded at a value of twenty to one to the US dollar, but by November of 2025 it was trading at 470 to one to the US dollar at the informal rate instead (Figure 1.), implying an annualized inflation rate of around 68 % every year for six straight years, which has been verging on hyperinflation and wrecking Cuban savings ^[1].

The Cuban Observatory for Human Rights, an NGO based abroad in Spain, has recently estimated that an astonishing 89 % of the Cuban population now lives in extreme poverty, while seven out of ten Cubans are having to skip at least one meal per day. Only 3 % are capable of finding the medicine that they require at pharmacies, 12% of the working age population is presently unemployed, while a whopping 78 % of Cubans they surveyed reported that they either wanted to leave the country themselves or knew someone else who did. Wages and the cost of living in Cuba have gotten to a point where life on the island is almost impossible for the vast majority of people ^[3].

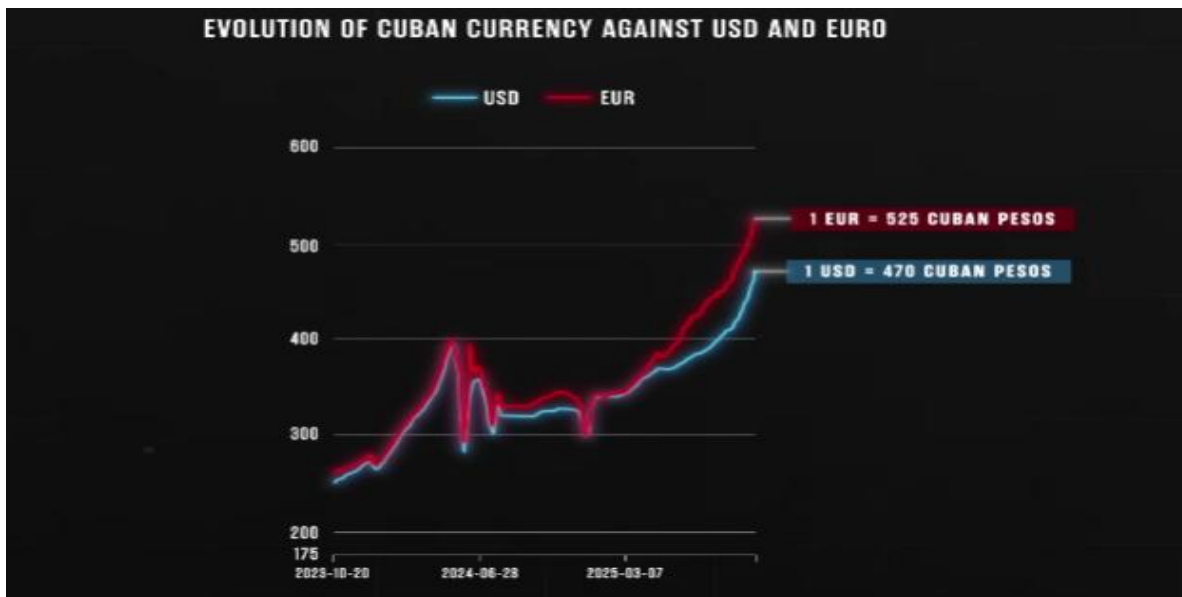


Figure 1. Evolution of the Cuban peso since 2020. (Source: ONEI) ^[1]

The official average monthly wage in Cuba based on the governments own data is just 6 560 pesos a month, which is about the same as just a little over 14 US dollars a month the informal rate. And yet a carton of 30 eggs on the island currently cost 2 800 pesos, equivalent to 43 % of the average monthly wage. Even a kilo (kg) of rice and a kilo of beans, the typical staple of diet in Cuba, currently cost the average worker in the country about three full days worth of their labor. Gasoline shortages across the island have become chronic and too expensive for most to afford as well. Drivers frequently have to wait weeks now just in order to acquire a rationed allocation of 40 liters (l) or 10 and a half gallons of gas that now costs about 46 US dollars, which is usually several times their own typical monthly wage ^[1] .

The highways across the country have emptied out. People in the rural countryside beyond the big cities have gone back to using horsedrawn carriages and carts because of the lack of fuel. While public transportation, even within the big cities, has effectively grinded to a halt, there is also an increasingly chronic electricity and energy shortage that has been suffocating the island as well ^[3] . Mass blackouts have become routine occurrences since 2020 (Figure 2.).



Figure 2. Blackout in Havana in 2025. (Source:The Associated Press)

With no fewer than five nationwide blackouts taking place just across 2025, during the blistering heat of the summer, electricity across most of the island will flicker off for at least four hours a day. Now, while some of the lesser populated provinces outside of the major cities can sometimes go up to 20 hours a day without power, affecting everything from air conditioning to fans to refrigerators. Cuba is currently producing about 25 % less power than it did just six years ago before the pandemic, based on research published by Ricardo Torres, a Cuban economist affiliated with an American University, which is why the blackouts sweeping across the island have been increasing in frequency. The big reason why is because the vast majority of the island's electricity is generated by oil with outdated and worn out Soviet era diesel generators. While the island's imports of oil have been dwindling, roughly 83 % of Cuba's electricity is generated through burning oil at these diesel plants, while 60 % of the island's oil demand has to be imported from abroad ^[2].

Historically, until very recently, Venezuela was providing Cuba with the lion's share of its imported oil supply that it needed to keep the lights on. In 2021, Venezuela was providing Cuba with more than 100 000 barrels of oil per day, enough to satisfy about 80 % of their domestic needs and more than they actually needed. But as Venezuela's own economic crisis began getting worse, their exports of oil to Cuba declined by 75 % to only 16 000 barrels per day in 2025 ^[1]. And now, after the US military captured Venezuela's president through a raid in early 2026, the Donald Trump US administration is threatening to sever even this last drip of oil that is coming into the country too, that will cause more blackout and energy shortage in the near future. Since the Trump administration has captured the president of Venezuela, they are very clear in their message that Cuba and the communist regime is next. And with an aggressive US government breathing down their neck after the Venezuela operation, many geopolitical analysts are predicting that the communist regime in Cuba, that is in power for the last 67 years is going to fall, accomplishing one of the United States's longest held geopolitical goals for decades. But people have also been predicting the Communist Party's imminent collapse in Cuba for a long time now. At least going back to the Cold War, when the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990's. Yet it is always somehow managed to endure and hang on despite all these outside people's expectations ^[4].

The Communist Party's control of Cuba has made it a thorn in the side of US for generations now. The successive president after president since the Eisenhower administration (US president 1953-61) has never been able to solve. Cuba is essentially one of the final remaining relics of the Cold War that's still left behind in the world today, including its tense relationship with the United States. Cuba is arguably the only true surviving Marxist Leninist state left over from the Cold War that never collapsed or significantly pivoted its ideology in the same kind of way that other surviving states that claim to be communist today did like North Korea which went down the radical path of its own unique Juche nationalist ideology or China, Vietnam and Laos which have all adopted significant economic and free market reforms that have introduced vibrant private businesses that Cuba has still never done in resistance. And all of this is even though the world's last pure Marxist Leninist state exists just 90 miles away from the most capitalistic country on Earth, the United States, who has been embargoing all trade with Cuba and sanctioning it for decades.^[5]

In order for understanding how Cuba got to the point what is potentially the brink of collapse today, why the relationship between Cuba and the US has remained so tense, even this long after the end of the Cold War, and how the orthodox communist regime in Cuba has somehow managed to survive against all of the odds into the present day and defied collapse and why this time might be different, we need to look in history.

Immediately before the communist revolution took place in Cuba, the country was ruled by an authoritarian dictator known as Fulgencio Batista, who was genuinely widely unpopular and also backed by the United States because he did America's bidding, often to the detriment of his own people. Batista was a colonel in the Cuban armed forces who served as a president of Cuba once between 1940 and 1944 and then ran again for his second term in 1952. When he faced almost certain defeat in that second election, he launched a military coup and seized power through force instead. After which he almost immediately suspended the Cuban constitution and revoked most of the country's civil liberties, including the right for anyone to strike. Then in order to shore up his shaky and illegitimate position, Batista aligned himself closely to the US government as a foreign benefactor along with Cuba's own wealthy landowning elites who owned the island's largest sugar plantations, which was Cuba's number one trading commodity for centuries. Batista was also very closely connected to the American mafia and in exchange for bribes, he basically gave tax-exempt status to mafia owned casinos, racetracks, brothel and nightclubs across the country. That was an open secret across Cuban society throughout the later 1950's ^[6].

Eventually, due to him opening up the entire country to the Americans and other foreigners in exchange for blatant personal bribes, it reached a point under his rule where about 70 % of all the arable land in the country was owned by foreigners, including most of the island's most valuable asset, its sugar plantations. And perhaps the most infamous example of Batista's personal corruption and openness of bribes while he was dictator, an American telephone conglomerate literally presented him with a golden telephone during a ceremony to thank him for raising the prices of telephone usage in Cuba to ridiculous levels. Batista was openly willing to be personally bribed and enriched in exchange for making his fellow Cubans have to pay more for basic services provided by American companies. Enduring him with zero loyalty from his own people and consistently making him appear to be nothing more but a corporate American backed stooge to most. As his unpopularity grew within Cuba, Batista consistently and increasingly resorted to the military censorship and repression to keep the Cuban people's anger under control, even establishing his own secret police force, that conducted massive violence, torture and even public executions ^[7].

Throughout Batista's dictatorial rule, it's believed that up to 20 000 Cubans were killed while countless others were jailed or tortured. And throughout all of this, the US government appeared indifferent to the suffering of the Cuban people so long as they got what they wanted out of Cuba economically. Throughout Batista's rule in Cuba, there was a saying that the US ambassador was the second most powerful man on the island. He effectively controlled the flow of arms to Batista's regime, which he needed in order to repress his own people and defend his position of power. In exchange for increasing the US arms deliveries, the ambassador would demand more generous conditions for US businesses on the island. Batista along with his backers in Washington were so repressive and unpopular in Cuba that large segments of the population began turning to the radical revolution being led by Fidel Castro and their gorillas as a solution to their plight instead. On the final day of the year in 1958, Castro's revolution was finally successful, and Batista fled the country on New Year's Day of 1959, for the Dominican Republic, which was ruled at the time by fellow US backed right-wing dictator Raphael Trujillo. Along with him, Batista also pillaged most of the Cuban treasury's assets to the tune of as much as 700 million dollars worth of cash and fine art, which immediately kneecapped Castro's incoming revolutionary government that overthrew him ^{[5]-[7]}.

Nonetheless, Castro was dramatically popular with most of the Cuban people at the time, both for having overthrown the oppressive and hated Batista regime, and for his own personal charisma and sense of presence. Many of Cuba's old elites who were close to the Batista regime immediately began fleeing the country, especially to south Florida. While Castro himself initially insisted that his revolution was not actually communist in nature, attempting instead to present at least a nominal restoration of democracy in Cuba. Nonetheless, the US government was still intensely worried about what Castro's rise to power in Cuba meant for their lucrative and exploitative business interests on the island. So, the Eisenhower administration began preparing the top-secret Bay of Pigs invasion operation to use CIA trained Cuban exile anti-Castro paramilitaries to invade the island and topple Castro, ideally from Washington's perspective, enabling them to claim at least some degree of plausible deniability ^[6].

A few months after the Bay of Pigs plan began being set into motion, American-owned oil refineries on Cuba refused to accept Castro's demand that they began processing oil from the Soviet Union, which led to Castro nationalizing and expropriating their assets over the summer of 1960, which led to the US halting their imports of Cuba's sugar, which led to Castro retaliating by nationalizing more US owned assets in the country in a spiraling trade war ^[5].

After John Fitzgerald Kennedy (in later text JFK) assumed the presidency of the United States in early 1961, he inherited the Eisenhower administration's planning for the Bay of Pigs operation, which he decided to ultimately authorize in April of that year, a few months later. Which would quickly prove to be a catastrophic overplaying of Washington's own hand. The day before the roughly 1 000-man strong force of Cuban exile paramilitaries hit the beach in Cuba, the US air force began bombing strategic Cuban airfields in order to weaken their defenses. And Castro finally publicly declared himself a Marxist Leninist for the first time in response. The next day, the Cuban exile paramilitary stormed the Bay of Pigs, but in order for the plan to work, it required the aerial support of the US Air Force, which never ended up materializing after it almost immediately began going very badly for them, undermining Washington's own goal of maintaining plausible deniability. The entire invasion force was either killed or captured, and the hundreds who were taken prisoner were taken to a sports stadium in Havana,

where they were publicly and flamboyantly interrogated by Castro himself on live television. All of which simply ended up skyrocketing Castro's popularity in Cuba as a symbol of resistance against American imperialism. All the Bay of Pigs invasion ended up doing was to rapidly speed up Cuba's transformation into a Marxist-Leninist one-party state and push it directly into the lap of the Soviet Union ^[8].

Because immediately after the failed invasion, Castro had both the legitimacy and the power to declare the country a socialist state that would no longer hold any open elections. And this right here is part of how the Communist Party of Cuba has managed to hang on to power in Cuba for decades longer than nearly every other communist regime was capable of. In countries across Eastern Europe like East Germany, Romania or Poland, their communist governments were forced upon them by an outside invader, the Soviet Union. By contrast, Cuba's communist revolution was the result of an entirely natural domestic homegrown popular revolution that almost immediately gained strong legitimacy after the JFK led US government instantly and clumsily began attacking them in order to maintain their privileged and exploitative business interest on the island ^[9].

Forever since then, relations between Cuba and the United States have remained extremely negative and tense. The US government severed its relations with Cuba the same year as the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961. And then in the following year, the JFK lead US administration declared a full and comprehensive trade embargo against Cuba that has blocked all imports and exports between the two nations ever since. With the sole exceptions being on food, medicine and humanitarian goods ^[10].

Running continually for the past 64 years now, even decades after the Cold War ended. It has evolved into the longest running trade embargo of modern history and has contributed greatly to the crushing of the Cuban economy. Since the Cold War ended, and starting in 1992, the UN General Assembly has voted no less than 33 consecutive times every single year to adopt a resolution calling for the US to finally end its trade embargo on Cuba. The US has naturally simply voted against the resolution every single time. During the most recent vote in October of 2025, 165 member states of the UN voted in favor of the resolution, while the US along with its key allies like Israel, Hungary, Ukraine, Argentina and North Macedonia were the only ones who voted against it (Figure 3.) ^[11].



Figure 3. Voting results on Cuba's resolution in the UN 2025. (Source: UN) ^[11]

The Cuban government and the UN have officially estimated that over its entire length of more than six decades now, the embargo has inflicted between 130 and 148 billion US dollars in cumulative damage to the island's economy and it has continually been used as a tool by the US government to try and pressure regime change. In 1963, following all the drama associated with the Cuban missile crisis, the US government also froze all of Cuba's assets in the United States and outlawed virtually all financial transactions between the two countries as well. Being blocked off completely from the US and its allies, Cuba needed an outside patron in order to survive.

For decades, until the end of the Cold War, that outside patron was the Soviet Union. They provided cheap subsidized oil to Cuba that they could use for fuel and electricity, while Cuba provided the Soviet Union with cheap sugar and a strategic foothold in the Western Hemisphere to project power from, only 90 miles away from the US mainland. ^{[5], [11]}

Castro's Marxist Leninist regime in Cuba, while authoritarian and undemocratic, was also capable of accomplishing some great things on the island. They were able to rapidly improve the literacy rate in Cuba from only about 68 % when they took over to 96 % within only a couple of years. They also implemented a state-run universal health care system free to all Cuban residents with well-trained doctors and the highest number of doctors per capita in the entire world. Which eventually evolved into an influence engine of the regime of their own, as they could export their well-trained doctors and medical brigades abroad in exchange for resources they needed like oil, food and medicine back home that they couldn't get from the United States ^[12].

At the same time, however, that doesn't mean that there weren't also a lot of people in Cuba who were not in acceptance of the new system of government. Castro seized and nationalized tens of thousands of small private businesses around the country, effectively outlawed all private businesses and enterprises and redistributed the large agricultural lands and estates that were owned by the prior wealthy elites and foreigners. Unlike other communist leaders in places like East Germany ^[13] and North Korea that strictly didn't allow any of their citizens to leave, Fidel Castro from time to time actually allowed waves of disrupt Cubans who were angry with his way of governance to leave the island, as a sort of blowoff valve to relieve pressure and reduce the internal resistance to his government, filtering out the island's demographics to being mostly loyalists who still remained ^[9].

In the immediate aftermath of the revolution's success in 1959, an estimated 250 000 Cubans, most of them disgruntled former business owners and landowners who were associated with the former Batista regime, left the island within a few years by 1962. Most of them across the Florida strait to Miami and the South Florida region more broadly. Then between 1965 and 1973, the US government organized the so-called "freedom flights" between Cuba and Miami, a program that was funded by the United States and authorized by Castro, that flew hundreds of chartered flights full of additional Cubans who wanted to migrate to the US. Over the years that the "freedom flights" ran for, an estimated 300 000 additional Cubans were flown out of the country and into South Florida, mostly Miami. They were all granted expedited pathways to US citizenship after they lived in the country for just a single year. All of this mass migration of Cuban exiles who were disaffected with the communist regime on the island into South Florida, lead to permanently altering the region's demographic trajectory to this day. And it's why there is an argument that there are in reality two different Cubas today. The Cuba on the island of Cuba and the new Cuba in South Florida ^[14].

There have been many additional waves of Cuban migration to South Florida since the 1960's and 1970's as well. In 1980, following a downturn in the Cuban economy, thousands of Cubans attempted to gain asylum status by taking refuge on the grounds of the Peruvian embassy in Havana, which lead to Castro announcing that anyone who wanted to leave the country could do so freely. The Cuban-American community in South Florida then assembled a hastily put together flotilla and began bringing thousands of Cubans to the United States from the island's Mariel harbor, which gave this particular exodus its name, the Mariel boat lift. Castro is also known to have opened up his prisons and mental institutions during this specific exodus and sent thousands of prisoners and patients he didn't want along with the rest who were all taken to South Florida by the boat lift along with thousands of others who wanted to leave for economic or political reasons. Within a few months another 125 000 Cubans were transported to the Miami area before the US and Cuban governments mutually agreed to put a stop to it. All of this history of Cuban migration into South Florida has since made it the most Cuban area in the world anywhere outside of the island of Cuba itself. ^{[5], [14]}

Today roughly two million people in the Miami metropolitan area are of Cuban ancestry. They are the largest single ethnic group present in the Miami area now, and they make up 34 % of Miami's total population. When you consider that today Havana itself has an estimated metropolitan population of around 2.15 million people, the Cuban population in Miami is actually about the same size. And since Miami's Cuban population is growing faster than Havana's is, it's conceivable soon that Miami will become the largest Cuban city in the world. When you further consider this more recent population exodus from Cuba that is been happening since 2020, South Florida as a broad region now has a quarter of the same Cuban population as the island of Cuba itself has ^[15].

This the evidence that this region (South Florida) is consider by many as the new or second Cuba. And it's through this lens that the author of this paper would argue that the Cubans are one of the world's peoples that were also divided along ideological and political lines during the Cold War, like the Germans as well. And like the Germans ^[13], the Cubans became divided between a hyper communist system on the island of Cuba and a hyper capitalist system in their enclave in South Florida. One of Miami's nicknames today is the capital of Latin America. And there is a lot of evidence to back that claim up. Because of the large Cuban population in Miami and other Latino groups, around 70 % of the city's population speaks Spanish as their primary language, which makes Miami the only one of America's top 10 largest metropolitan areas that is both majority Spanish-speaking and ethnically Latino ^[15].

Miami also has by far the largest GDP and economy of any majority Spanish-speaking city in the world today, giving it the legitimate authority to claim the title as the Spanish-speaking world's most economically valuable city. Miami, all on its own, currently has more than double the GDP of the entire island of Cuba combined, and is arguably becoming the most capitalistic city not just in Latin America, but even in the United States ^[16]. Since 2020, the Miami area has gained another nickname, Wall Street South, because of all of the New York City-based financial companies and institutions that have relocated or shifted their operations there due to the lower taxes and more business-friendly environment. It's been estimated that more than a trillion dollars worth of assets have been shifted from New York to Miami just since 2020, including the headquarter relocations of more than 50 major investment firms ^[9]. And a big part of why that's been happening is the foundation of Miami as a bastion of exiles from Cuba, who happened to be the most capitalistic-minded Cubans who left the communist system on the island over generations and made Miami basically the capitalist alternative to the island of Cuba ^[17] in the same way that West Germany was to East Germany, or South Korea and North Korea today ^[13].

When the Soviet Union suddenly collapsed in 1991, the communist regime in Cuba lost their historical benefactor and supporter and entered into what the government has called the special period throughout the 1990's. In a flash, Cuba lost all of their Soviet era subsidies and privileged oil imports that have been propping up the economy for decades, which lead to their imports and exports crashing by more than 80 % and their economy losing about a third of its value over just a couple of years by 1993. Then, as now, there was a lot of speculation that this was inevitably going to become the end of communism on the island. In 1994, in the midst of this crisis over a period of five weeks during particularly intense rioting in Cuba, Castro once again announced that anybody who wanted to leave the country could do so freely without hindrance, which triggered another mass migration of around 35 000 Cubans who assembled makeshift rafts and attempted to float over the Florida strait to the US. This exodus ultimately became a sort of turning point in US relationship with Cuban exiles and refugees. Struggling to deal with the political consequences of this particular exodus, the Clinton US administration (1993-2001) reformed America's migration policy regarding Cuba through the new "wet feet, dry feet" policy, which set it so that Cubans caught in the waters between the two countries would be summarily returned back to Cuba or sent to a third country. While Cubans who made it to the shore on land in the US would receive a chance to stay and pursue permanent residency and citizenship following a year's time ^[18].

Conflict between the US and Cuban governments reached a new high point throughout the 1990's as well, where the Cold War effectively never ended like it did in most other parts of the world. In 1996, an organization made up of Cuban-American exiles in South Florida called Brothers to the Rescue were using small private CESTA aircraft to take flights over Cuba to drop anti-Castro propaganda leaflets across the island. In February of that year, a Cuban Air Force MIG 29 fighter aircraft shot down two unarmed CESTA's that were taking part in one of these operations, killing all four Cuban-American exile participants who were on board and sharply spiking tensions in the process. Then the next year in 1997, an anti-communist militia of Cuban-American exiles based in South Florida organized a series of bombing attacks against various hotels in Havana in an attempt to undermine Cuba's resurgent tourism industry. One foreign tourist from Italy was killed in the bombings and eleven others were wounded. A man named Luis Posada Carriles later admitted to having organized the bombings, a Cuban-American exile and former CIA officer. He had also previously helped organized the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 and tried to assassinate Castro multiple times. He died in Florida in 2018 despite Cuba's multiple attempts to pressure the US to extradite him ^[9].

In 1998, five Cuban intelligence officers were arrested by US authorities in Miami on charges of espionage, who later became known as the „Cuban 5“. After consistently denying that the captured men were intelligence agents,

the Cuban government finally acknowledged them three years later in 2001, claiming that they were only spying on Cuban exile community in Florida rather than the US government itself. Most of the men would be held in prison for the next decade and a half, until the Obama administration (president from 2008 to 2016) later negotiated a prisoner exchange for them with the Cuban government. And all the while the US trade embargo on Cuba continued as Cuba floundered around trying to find new trade partners to replace the Soviet Union with [19].

Near the end of the decade in 1998, the communist regime in Cuba finally gained a new lifeline after Hugo Chavez and his socialist party won the presidential election in Venezuela. Chavez's administration began supplying Cuba with a new source of heavily subsidized oil again in exchange for thousands of doctors with Cuba's well trained medical brigades along with their intelligence and security services, both to help spy on their own people and to guard their leadership. At the peak of this cooperation between the two countries between 2008 and 2015, Venezuela was supplying Cuba with approximately 100 000 barrels of subsidized oil per day that met more than half of Cuba's oil import needs and underpinned Cuba's faltering electricity generation and industrial output [1]. While nearly 30 000 well trained Cuban doctors and medical technicians served in Venezuela [20].

Cuba also gained the capability to resell the subsidized oil that they were receiving from Venezuela to China for higher prices than what they had paid for it, which gave them a rare avenue to acquire hard foreign currency in defiance of the US financial and trade sanctions that were still placed upon them [21]. Meanwhile, tensions between the US and Cuba remained locked in the old Cold War mentality throughout the Clinton and Bush administrations until, for a brief moment, things looked like they might be finally changing during the later years of the Obama administration. In December of 2014, Obama and communist Cuba's second president Raul Castro, Fidel's younger brother, who had taken over in 2006, after Fidel grew ill, shocked the world with a dual announcement on television that Cuba and the US would be restoring full diplomatic ties again for the first time since the 1960's. While all of his predecessors had demanded immediate political and economic concessions from the Communist Party of Cuba in exchange for a normalization of ties, which were always refused, Obama was the first US president who calculated instead that immediately establishing closer economic, cultural and political ties with Cuba, even without any upfront concessions from the Communist Party of Cuba, would gradually result in a moderation of the Communist Party's platform over the long haul. Immediately after their joint address, both countries reopened their embassies for the first time in 53 years. A few months later in 2015, Obama removed Cuba from America's state sponsors of terrorism list. And in 2016, he loosened up US restrictions on Americans ability to travel to Cuba, enabling US airlines to resume regular air service to the island and for US cruise ships to port in Cuban harbors, which all opened up a massive surge in US tourism to Cuba again, and a big new source of foreign currency for both the government and small local entrepreneurs like taxi drivers and restaurant tours who began catering to them [22]. In just a single year in 2015, because of this Cuba's economy grew by more than 4 % and it was a boom for US businesses as well. For a couple of years, Cuba was one of Airbnb's fastest growing markets, while executives from Marriott and PayPal accompanied Obama's personal visit to Cuba in March of 2016 when he became the first sitting president of the United States to visit the island in 88 years. Obama's opening up to Cuba was massively popular with both Cubans and the broader American public. But as it would turn out, this new policy would only end up lasting for a couple of years. Because the successor to the US presidency, Donald Trump, would effectively end and reverse everything. For Trump, railing against Obama's friendly policies towards Cuba and promising to reverse them was a campaign tactic to appeal to conservative Cuban-American voters in South Florida. [23], [24]

A demographic long opposed to the continuation of communist rule in their ancestral homeland, both for ideological reasons and also because much of their own property had been seized after the revolution and they wanted to be fairly compensated for. Many high profile Cuban-American politicians like Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz were staunchly opposed to the Obama administration's policies of openness with the regime in Cuba without demanding any major political concessions from them. Trump's strategy of attempting to appeal to their demographic in the 2016 election ultimately proved to be very successful for him. [25], [26]

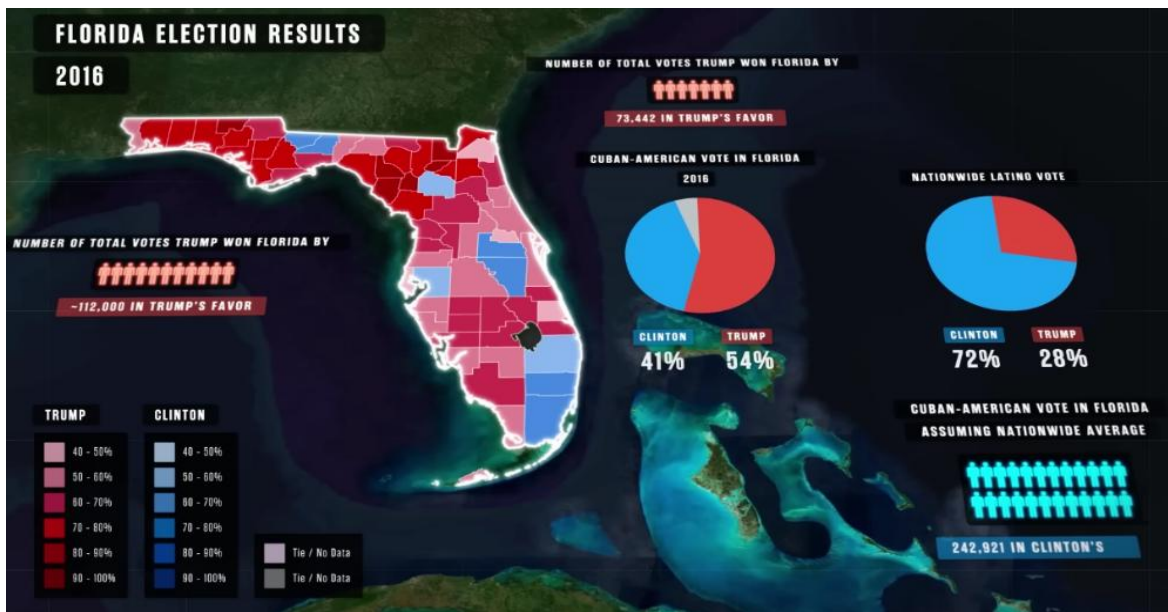


Figure 4. Florida election results and comparing the with national levels in 2016. (Source: Mirko Ivanović with data from US ANES-American National Election Studies) [25]

Trump won 54 % of the Cuban-American votes in Florida. This ended up to be politically decisive for Trump in Florida, and likely handed him the entire nationwide election. Florida just barely voted more for Trump than Hillary Clinton in 2016, with 49 % overall vote gone to Trump and 47.8 % to Hillary Clinton. Trump won in Florida by only a little more than 112 000 votes. Out of 9 million total votes cast, nationwide Latinos voted overwhelmingly in favor of Hillary Clinton 71 % (Figure 4.). Cuban-Americans in Florida, however were one of the very few Latino demographics in the country who voted significantly more in favor of Trump during the election instead. And had they voted more in line with the broader Latino community nationwide, their vote would shifted from plus 73 442 in favor of Trump to plus 242 921 in favor of Clinton, which in other words would be enough to shift the entire state and elections in the US. [25], [27]

Basically, the Cuban-American support for Trump in Florida effectively handed him the presidency in 2016. And Trump rewarded them for their loyalty by immediately doing what he promised them when he entered into office in 2017, adopting a renewed hardline approach to the communist regime in Cuba with the ultimate goal of full-on regime change and reversing all of Obama's policies that had attempted to open up and normalize relations with the Castro's still being in charge. Trump immediately began restricting the ability for Americans to travel to Cuba again. And he eventually placed a cap on the number of remittances that US citizens were able to send to Cuban nationals. Before Trump's cap, Cuban-Americans could essentially send however much they wanted to their relatives on the island. But Trump's first administration capped the maximum limit to just 1 000 US dollars per person, per quarter or 4 000 US dollars per year instead, sharply reducing the amount of cash inflows that were coming to the island. Later in 2017, multiple staff members at the US Embassy in Havana began reporting mysterious neurological symptoms and illnesses that later became known simply as „Havana syndrome“. No cause for Havana syndrome has ever been publicly confirmed, but the US government has suspected the Cuban government of being involved. And after the report started happening, the US State Department severely reduced their staff at the embassy in Havana and expelled most of the Cuban staff from the Cuban embassy in Washington. That essentially brought the visa processing between them to a screeching halt. By 2019, American visitors to Cuba were blocked from staying in most hotels in the country. Most air and cruise travel between the countries was halted again. Western Union was pressured into ending their money wiring services to the island, and the Trump administration was already attempting to interrupt Venezuela's oil shipments to Cuba through targeted sanctions on the carriers that were transporting the oil. In the final days of the first Trump administration, right before Joseph Biden Jr. (US president from 2021 to 2025) took over office, the Trump administration also readded Cuba back to the US State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism again. The most severe consequence of which was wrecking Cuba's ability to participate in the international financial structures that are dominated by the United States. All of these renewed American sanctions on Cuba, plus the crippling trade embargo that had continually been in place since the 1960's, inflicted billions of US dollars worth of damage on

the Cuban economy with the explicit purpose of attempting to encourage either regime change or regime moderation on the island. And at the same time, the COVID 19 pandemic wrecked whatever was left of Cuba's tourism industry just after it had started growing again during the Obama's administration. ^[4]

Foreign tourists to the island plummeted from millions in 2018 and 2019, to virtually nobody across 2020 and 2021 (Figure 5.), costing the country billions of additional US dollars in lost tourism revenue. And as Cuban-American families stopped visiting because of the new restrictions and the world-wide pandemic, the value of their remittances also collapsed from 3.7 billion US dollars in 2019, down to just 1.1 billion US dollars in 2021. ^[28]

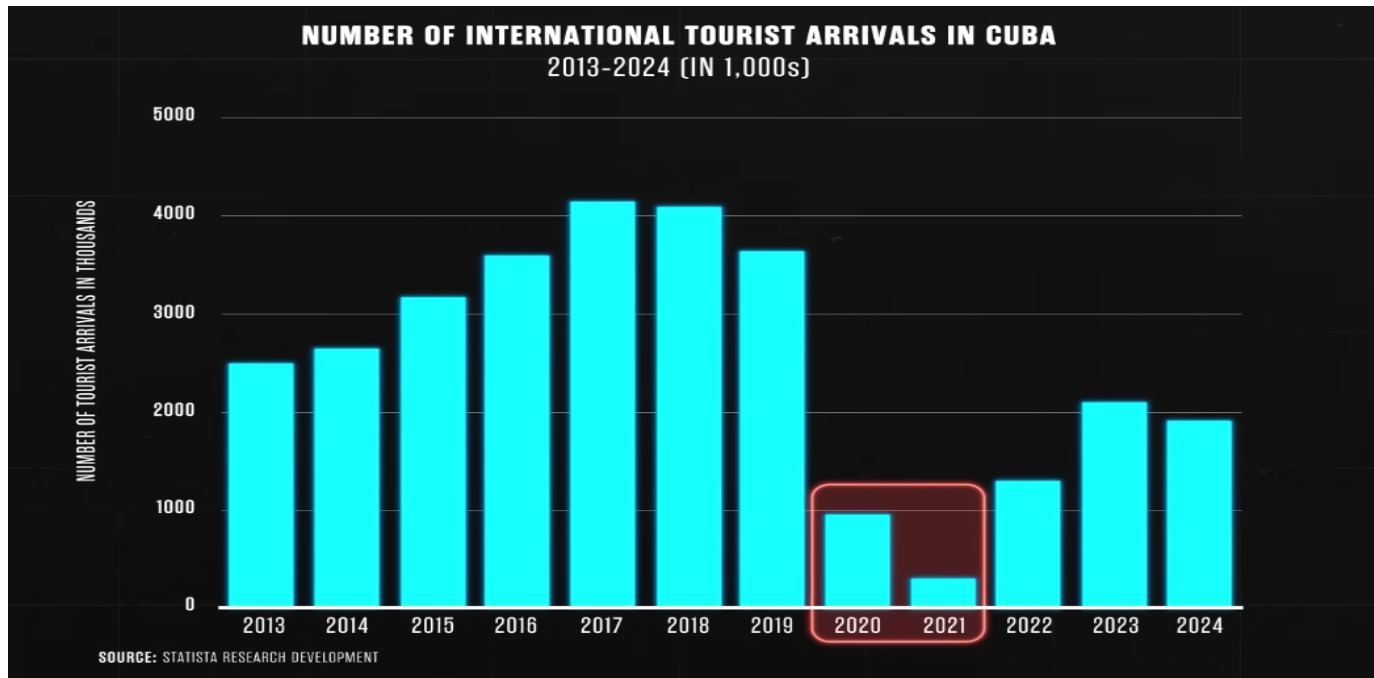


Figure 5. Number of international tourists in Cuba from 2013 to 2024. (Source:Statista research development) ^[2]

On top of all of these externally induced problems, the Cuban economy itself was still saddled with the inefficient structural problems that are associated with most centrally planned economies as well. Food production in Cuba completely collapsed during this time period, both due to a lack of cash for farm equipment and fertilizer, but also because of inefficient government set price controls on produce that left Cuban farmers with no real incentive to actually work and produce. The Cuban Armed forces themselves are also known to control a sprawling conglomerate in the country that's best known by it's acronym GAESA, which according to reporting by the Miami Herald currently controls at least 40 % of the Cuban economy and 18 billion US dollars worth of secretive stashed away assets that have been hidden from the Cuban public. GAESA controls most of the island's hotels, supermarkets, gas stations and the whole currency exchange business, which are all of the most profitable industries on the island. ^[29]

The Communist Party of Cuba has long blamed all of the island's problems on the US government and the trade embargo and yet, reporting by the Miami Herald on GAESA's secretive operations and assets has revealed that they have plenty of cash on hand to cover all of Cuba's most vital expenses, including the 43 million US dollars that's required per year to cover access to the 63 priority medications that have been limited in Cuba and the 250 million US dollars per year that's required to operate and maintain Cuba's electricity grid. They simply don't and have continued hoarding the limited assets that are available in Cuba for themselves to the detriment of everybody else who's not closely connected to the Communist Party itself. In the five years up to 2023, Cuba's once vaunted sugar industry collapsed by 68 %. It's fishing industry by 53 %, it's broader agricultural industry by 52 %, and it's manufacturing industry by 41 % (Figure 6.). On top of the near total collapse in the tourism industry which GAESA had misallocated most of their investment capital into over more pressing industries that could have benefited the Cuban people more, like agriculture and medicine. ^[30]

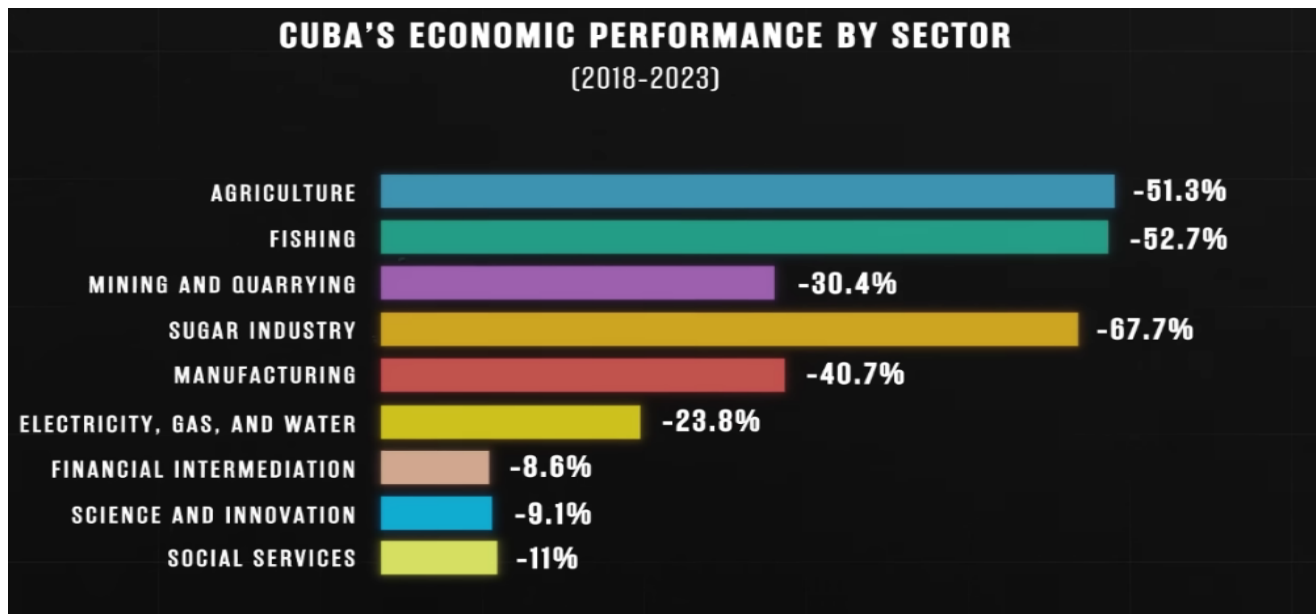


Figure 6. Cuba's economic performance by sector from 2018 to 2023. (Source: Statista research development) ^[2]

All of this, near the end of Trump's first term, was the beginning of Cuba's current existential crisis, as the lack of foreign earnings lead to an collapse in the government's ability to provide most basic services. Then Biden's administration ran on a campaign criticizing how Trump's policies had negatively affected Cuban families and promised to revert back to the Obama's era of normalization again. ^[31]

But then after Biden assumed the presidency in 2021, he basically just didn't do anything for years then kept nearly all of Trump's maximum pressure policies on the island still in place. Wary of the outsized political influence of the Cuban-American exile community in South Florida that has always favored a tough foreign policy approach to Cuba, Biden remained fearful throughout his presidency of doing anything much different than Trump. Biden didn't want to upset them and risk losing Florida again in the 2024 election. Biden eliminated Trump's restrictions on the number of remittances that could be sent to Cuba and some of the travel restrictions for US citizens, but he also maintained the first Trump administration's designation of Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism, which continued in snaring Cuba's ability to access the global financial system. ^[32]

It wasn't until Biden was imminently about to leave the presidency on the 14th of January 2025, that he finally decided to remove Cuba from the State Department's list. But it was too late, because just six days later when Trump returned to the presidency for a second term, he immediately readdd Cuba back on the list the very first day in office. With virtually all of the Trump era restrictions on Cuba remaining in place throughout the Biden era and the COVID 19 pandemic wrecking the island's tourism sector, Cuba was also stricken by the crippling economic crisis in Venezuela, which resulted in the Venezuela's government sending less and less of their subsidized oil to Cuba's way. Remember that as recently as 2021, the Venezuela's government was still sending Cuba approximately 100 000 barrels of oil per day. But by 2024, they were only sending Cuba 32 000 barrels of oil per day instead and by 2025, it had declined even further to just 16 000 barrels of oil per day ^[1]. This exacerbated Cuba's shortage of foreign exchange currency and contributed to the increasing pace of fuel shortages and electricity blackouts across the island as they struggled to find replacements willing to trade with them in the face of the US economic and trade embargo and sanctions regime. Struggling to cope with the scale of all of these crisis striking the island at the same time that were triggering blackouts and shortages of basic food and medicine, largescale anti-regime protests erupted across Cuba over the summer of 2021, that were met by the Communist Party with harsh repression. Hundreds of protesters were arrested and at least 710 of them were later charged with crimes, including serious charges like sedition that carried lengthy prison sentences of up to 30 years behind bars. The scale of the crisis, the biggest since the collapse of the Soviet Union for the island and the Cuban government's own repression and crushing of descent, is what led to the unprecedented exodus of people away from Cuba across the 2020's. ^[33]

In 2020, Nicaragua significantly loosened visa restrictions for Cuban nationals, which led to Cubans by the hundreds of thousands taking flights to Nicaragua and then traveling by land north towards the US southern border and entering throughout the Biden administration. The latest episode in the Cuban government's apparent willingness to export its dissenters away from the country^[34]. Throughout the Biden's presidency, an estimated 850 000 Cubans entered the United States and then came the return of Trump again in 2025 and the return back to his even stricter policies on Cuba. Trump's handpicked Secretary of State is Marco Rubio, the son of Cuban exiles, who is the product of South Florida's Cuban-American exile community. He has been a lifetime hawk on America's policy towards the communist regime in Cuba and his ultimate geopolitical project has been the toppling of the communist party from power in Cuba once and for all. As Secretary of State, he is now the highest-ranking US government official of Cuban ancestry in the country's history. And while simultaneously serving as Trump's national security adviser, he is arguably the most powerful Secretary of State in American history since Henry Kissinger. He is incredibly influential in the second Trump administration and the primary force that's driving the administration's policy towards Cuba and showing how much does the Cuban-American influence is strong in the Trump administration. The author of this paper has already shown how influential was the Cuban vote in 2016 for Trump (Figure 4.) they were not as essential in 2024 for winning the elections, but they voted for him and his policy on Cuba again all the same. All of which has given the Trump administration the full legitimacy to finally attempt and accomplish the capitalist Cuba's decades long dream of toppling the communist from power in the island of Cuba.^[33] With the military operation that ousted Maduro from Venezuela, one of Trump and Rubio's goals has been to eliminate the remaining trickle of oil that was still flowing into Cuba from the country. This will probably plunge the island into an even greater electricity and fuel crisis than it was suffering before.^[32] With other countries like Mexico and Russia unlikely to step in and fill the gap because of political pressure from the United States, the pressure on Cuba is therefore still building, but it's unclear whether or not it will be enough to truly crack the regime. While it is unclear if the pressure could become too great and cause a catastrophic state collapse scenario like over in Haiti^[4].

CONCLUSION

Cuba is unlike Venezuela in the sense that the Communist Party has maintained its grip on power on the island for nearly seven decades now, it has managed to survive the retirement and death of Fidel Castro when power passed to his younger brother Raul and it managed to survive when Raul Castro passed the presidency to a handpicked successor in 2018, Miguel Diaz-Canel, who remains Cuba's current leader and the first non-Castro head of state since the 1950's. Nonetheless, Raul Castro is still alive for the time being and maintains a significant level of control, influence and power behind the scenes. At the elderly age of 94 years old, however, his remaining time in our world is likely not much longer and a potential succession crisis in the Communist Party of Cuba looms behind the scenes once he is gone^{[35], [36]}. It remains unclear how and if communism can continue surviving in Cuba without the leadership of the first generation of Castro's. **For the moment**, the Trump administration seems unwilling to use military force in Cuba to encourage regime change the same way they have done so in Venezuela and Iran.

There is probably a high degree of fear of applying too much pressure on Cuba right now and causing it to completely collapse in a Haiti style scenario which would skyrocket rates of Cuban migration to the United States even further than it's already been these past few years. This would greatly complicate the Trump administration's domestic migration agenda and policy. What is most likely to continue happening between the US and Cuba instead is a continuation of the decade's long trade embargo and financial sanctions choking Cuba's ability to trade. A continuation of severing Cuba's few remaining sources of oil imports to further cripple the island's electricity and fuel supplies and a holding out for hope in Washington that the Communist Party of Cuba will eventually agree to become pragmatic and negotiate with the US on moderating their economic policies and their political authoritarianism. And in so doing allowing more private businesses access to US companies, restoring some of the value of expropriated assets and property over the decades to the Cuban-American community in South Florida and to US businesses and releasing some political prisoners in exchange for America's loosening up of the sanctions, the oil restrictions and the embargo terms. The Communist Party of Cuba is currently in the most dire crisis that it's probably ever been in, and while it might end up finally collapsing or relenting to US pressure under the weight of this crisis, like many people are predicting, it also might continue

defying everybody's expectations and continue on existing regardless just as it managed to do so far. Time will tell.

Author declares no conflict of interest.

Author declares that he received no funding for this paper.

REFERENCES

- [1] ONEI Cuba <https://www.onei.gob.cu/> National Statistics Office of Cuba or “Oficina Nacional de Estadística e Información” (ONEI)
- [2] Statista research development <https://www.statista.com/statistics/795181/population-total-age-cuba/> Internacional Global Statistics
- [3] The Cuban Observatory for Human Rights (NGO) <https://observacuba.org/8th-study-social-rights-cubans-live-extreme-poverty-plan-emigrate/>
- [4] Rodríguez, R. R. (2023). The political economy of sanctions: the case of Cuba. In *The Routledge Handbook of the Political Economy of Sanctions* (pp. 187-196). Routledge.
- [5] Gott, R. (2005). *Cuba: A new history*. Yale University Press.
- [6] Hernández de Lara, O. (2023). Memory, Destruction, and Traumatic Pasts in Cuba: The Escuadrón 41 During Batista's Dictatorship, 1958. *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, 27(3), 626-647.
- [7] McAvoy, M. (2025). *Sugar baron: Manuel Rionda and the fortunes of pre-Castro Cuba*. University Press of Florida.
- [8] LeoGrande, W. M. (1998). From Havana to Miami: US Cuba policy as a two-level game. *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, 40(1), 67-86.
- [9] Marshall, S. K. (2022). State Violence and the Cuban Diaspora Since 1959. *Graduate Review*, 2(1), 79.
- [10] Hershberg, E., & Dolezal, J. (2016). The Impact on US-Cuba Latin America Relations of Rapprochement between Washington and Cuba. *Anuario de Integración*, 97-99.
- [11] United Nations <https://www.un.org/en/>
- [12] Pateman, J., & Pateman, J. (2023). Why Has Marxism-Leninism Succeeded in Cuba?. *International Journal of Cuban Studies*, 15(2), 235-260.
- [13] Ivanović, M. (2025). The “Invisible Wall” of Germany. *Cultural Conflict and Integration*, 2(2), 36-47.
- [14] Hanson, G., Orrenius, P., & Zavadny, M. (2023). US immigration from Latin America in historical perspective. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 37(1), 199-222.
- [15] Betancourt, R. J. (2024). CONTRIBUTION OF CUBAN RESIDENTS ABROAD TO THE CUBAN ECONOMY. *International Journal of Cuban Studies*, 16(1), 104-122.
- [16] Perez-Stable, M., & Uriarte, M. (2012). Cubans and the changing economy of Miami. In *New American Destinies* (pp. 141-162). Routledge.
- [17] Portes, A. (2018). The social origins of the Cuban enclave economy of Miami. In *The New Immigrant in the American Economy* (pp. 340-372). Routledge.
- [18] Aygar, B. Ç., & Al Mamun Chowdhury, S. M. A. (2022). Republic of Cuba. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Comparative Public Administration: Concepts and Cases* (pp. 281-306). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.
- [19] Pedemonte, R. (2025). The Ideological Effect of the Soviet Demise in Cuba and the “Rewriting” of History. In *The Routledge Handbook of 1989 and the Great Transformation* (pp. 101-108). Routledge.
- [20] Ciano, A. (2024). From revolution to resilience: The impact of the US embargo on the post-revolutionary Cuban public health system.
- [21] Domínguez, J. I. (2020). Cuba: The Military and Politics. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*.
- [22] Gimmon, E., & Felzensztein, C. (2023). The emergence of family entrepreneurship in the transition economy of Cuba. *International Journal of Emerging Markets*, 18(9), 2239-2258.
- [23] De Bhal, J. (2018). More continuity than change? US strategy toward Cuba under Obama and Trump. *Contemporary Politics*, 24(4), 436-453.
- [24] Kribes, A., & Toulgui, L. (2023). Toward Rapprochement between the United States and Cuba with a Special Emphasis on Obama's Cuba Thaw.
- [25] ANES- American National Elections Studies <https://electionstudies.org/>

-
- [26] Liu, B. (2018). The Haitian and Cuban American Electorates in South Florida: Evidence from Ten Federal, State and Local Elections, 2008-2016. *National Political Science Review*, 19(1), 51-60.
- [27] Bell, A. T. (2016). The role of the Latino vote in the 2016 elections.
- [28] Delgado, I. P. (2023). Cuban industrial development and its heritage. In *Social Struggle and Civil Society in Nineteenth Century Cuba* (pp. 103-124). Routledge.
- [29] Hu, L., Wang, C., & He, P. (2025). Sustainable development of Cuban agricultural economy: Policy and practice. *Sustainable Futures*, 9, 100523.
- [30] Backer, L. C. (2024). Cuba and the Constitution of a Stable State of Misery: Ideology, Economic Policy, and Popular Discipline. *Economic Policy, and Popular Discipline* (October 17, 2024).
- [31] Pedraza, S., & Romero, C. A. (2023). Contemporary Crises in Cuba: Economic, Political, and Social. *FIU L. Rev.*, 17, 609.
- [32] McKercher, A. (2024). United States–Cuba Relations. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*.
- [33] Mallett, E., & Kitchen, N. (2025). Neoclassical realism, policy paradigms and strategic change: understanding the US rapprochement to Cuba. *International Relations*, 39(4), 632-656.
- [34] Anderson, J. L. (2022). A New Cuba?: The Fight to Define the Post-Castro Era. *Foreign Aff.*, 101, 173.
- [35] Bye, V., Bye, V., & Pusca. (2020). *Cuba, from Fidel to Raúl and beyond*. Londres: Palgrave Macmillan.
- [36] Oxford Analytica. (2022). Unexpected death may trigger power struggles in Cuba. *Emerald Expert Briefings*.