DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 25.02.2026 | Bert Hoffmann

Cuba has its back against the wall

As fuel runs dry in Havana, Trump's blockade risks humanitarian disaster and a dangerous new normal

The crisis could scarcely be more dramatic. The US is blocking practically all oil deliveries to Cuba. The island depends on imports for all diesel, petrol and kerosine. Without diesel trucks cannot move, food cannot reach Cuban towns and hospitals will not get any oxygen. The airports are already without kerosine and several airlines have already suspended flights to and from Havana. The strategy is clear: strangulation. The US extreme right is jubilant; at last they have found the 'choking point' that may finally bring Havana to its knees, 67 years after Fidel Castro's revolution.

Trump says that negotiations are already under way, outside of declaring that Cuba is a 'failed state' and the government there needs to make a deal. But Trump says a lot of things. Even a sober look at the alternatives, however, is fairly terrifying. There are basically four scenarios:

Scenario 1: Cuba continues to be denied oil deliveries. The government can impose austerity measures and commit itself to heroic resistance. But without new petrol or diesel the current crisis will become a humanitarian catastrophe within weeks. Havana could pin the blame for this on the US and with complete justification. For all its own faults, no other Caribbean island could withstand such an oil embargo, whatever its political system. But what good would playing the blame game do in the end? The social and human costs would be horrendous. Without diesel even international humanitarian aid deliveries couldn't get from the ports to the towns that need them.

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Scenario 2: Some oil tankers reach the island, perhaps from Moscow, from spot market purchases or from other sources. This could relieve the worst of it, no doubt. But the question remains, to what degree? And for the foreseeable future? Trump's threats of punitive tariffs and the seizure of proscribed tankers are already sufficient deterrent. Even Mexico had to

pull its support under pressure from Washington. But who else is up for incurring America's wrath? Moscow says that it is willing to supply Cuba with oil, but so far it hasn't followed through. On top of that, Russian airlines are bringing their passengers home and suspending flights. Up until the US military strikes on Maduro on 3 January Venezuela had provided 70 per cent of Cuba's oil imports. Instead of demanding hard currency payments, it settled for Cuban medical personnel. Who will take over this role?

Scenario 3: The desperate situation intensifies, leading to protests, unrest and the fall of the government. This is what the hardliners in Miami have been dreaming of. But for all the pent-up frustration Washington's own policy is stymying mobilisation. Already in Venezuela Trump and Rubio ignored the opposition and made deals only with the post-Maduro elite. If Trump is now saying that negotiations with Havana are already going on and the regime will fall of its own accord, who on the island will be inclined to put themselves on the line in demonstrations or protests? No doubt there'll be outbreaks of desperation, windows may be smashed and sporadic looting. But if the message is that only the power struggle between Washington and Havana really counts it makes more sense for the populace to see how things develop, waiting until things have been decided by those at the top.

Scenario 4: The US oil blockade could be lifted in the course of negotiations. But even though Havana has resumed communications with Washington dialogue remains a distant prospect. Some possible steps seem realistic. The Cuba government could order the release of hundreds of prisoners, held in the protests of 11 July 2021. It could also remove particularly controversial sections of the penal code, push ahead with market reforms or improve investment possibilities for Cuban emigrees. And all without undermining the foundations of the system. This would not only serve US interests, but also many of the civilian population. In return, Washington could permit a resumption of oil deliveries to Cuba from Mexico and elsewhere. Restrictions on remittances from US Cuban expats could be lifted. A first milestone would be reached.

Never been weaker

Nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine what kind of common denominator could be found that would ease the tension and usher in

some kind of new normal. Cuba has been a worldwide symbol for the left since the revolution in 1959. But the same could be said for the right in the US. Indeed, the latter would like nothing better than to see it fall. Trump won't say what kind of deal he wants. But rest assured it will involve Cuba once more within the US sphere of influence and a US-friendly government in Havana.

Cuba really has its back against the wall. Its negotiating position has never been weaker. Venezuela has shown, however, that the US wants more than political alignment and access to resources. It also desires stability. The government in Caracas may have changed, but the military and the police, the state apparatus and even para-military forces remain intact. Cuba isn't a complete match in this respect, but if the US doesn't want to put boots on the ground it will continue to need the state's existing forces of order: police, military and administration. This gives the Cuban side at least something to bring to the negotiating table.

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Nevertheless, Havana will have to cross a lot of red lines to reach an agreement with this US administration. And what's more, under the constant shadow of the latent threat that Washington will again turn off the oil tap. The US government would be well advised to be pragmatic enough to allow the other side to save face. But this is unlikely given the intoxicating fantasy of omnipotence by which Washington is currently spellbound. Cuban-born hardliners in the US Congress are already demanding that the Department of Justice bring the 94 year old Raúl Castro to trial.

Or perhaps everything will be resolved very quickly. The power bloc around Raúl Castro's family and its associated network controls not just the military and the security apparatus, but also by far the biggest business entity in the country, the military holding GAESA. The profound crisis of recent years has enabled them to invest with grim determination in the expansion of luxury hotels, transferring state-run restaurants into private management and acquiring stakes in lucrative online supermarkets that emigrants in Miami and elsewhere use to support their families on the island. Could the upshot be a form of capitalism that maintains their economic privileges, with American partners in the hotels, while the old networks retain control?

None of the four scenarios seem entirely credible, but surely one of them, or some combination, will be realised in the not too distant future. But

maybe not, if all those who are currently mute in fear of falling victim to Trump's random impulses actually come together. Not out of nostalgia for the Cuban revolution, but to stand up and be counted as the Washington regime calls into question the basic norms of coexistence between peoples and states, whether in Cuba or Greenland.



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