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In Cuba, Hopeful Tenor Toward Obama Is Ebbing

By [MARC LACEY](#)

HAVANA — The Obama honeymoon here is over.

When [President Obama](#) came to office, the unflattering billboards of [George W. Bush](#), including one outside the United States Interests Section of him scowling alongside [Hitler](#), came down and the anti-American vitriol softened. [Raúl Castro](#), who took over from his ailing brother Fidel in 2006, even raised the possibility of a face-to-face meeting with Mr. Obama, which would have been the first time one of the Castros met with a sitting American president.

But the tenor here has changed considerably, and Mr. Obama, whose election was broadly celebrated by [Cuba's](#) racially diverse population, is now being portrayed by this nation's leaders as an imperialistic, warmongering Cuba hater.

“As things appear now, there will be no big change in the relationship in the near future,” said Ricardo Alarcón, the president of Cuba's National Assembly. He dismissed the Obama administration's recent steps, like loosening restrictions on Cuban Americans' traveling or sending money to the island and allowing American telecommunications companies to do business there, as “minor changes.”

The two countries have postponed the talks they restarted at the beginning of the Obama administration to discuss migration, postal delivery and other issues, blaming each other for the delays. In the absence of talks, Mr. Obama's carrot-and-stick approach of relaxing some Bush-era policies while continuing to denounce the Castro government on human rights has failed to engage — and perhaps has enraged — the Cuban leadership.

While Raúl Castro repeated the offer to meet with Mr. Obama in a fiery speech recently, he also blasted the Obama administration for “undercover subversion” against Cuba and warned that his nation was ready for any American invasion. In one of his recent written commentaries in the state press, [Fidel Castro](#), who has not appeared in public in nearly three years, wrote that Mr. Obama's “friendly smile and African-American face” masked his sinister intentions to control Latin America.

Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez Parrilla also recently accused Mr. Obama of behaving like an “imperial chief” at the [climate change](#) talks in Copenhagen, displaying “arrogant” behavior aimed at quashing developing countries.

“It's unfortunate,” [Wayne S. Smith](#), a former American diplomat in Havana, said of the rising tensions. “There was and still is potential for the Obama administration to change relations with Cuba. These comments coming out of Havana don't help.”

Mr. Obama is the 11th president from what the Cubans call “El Imperio,” or “The Empire,” that the Castros have jostled with since the revolution a half century ago. And given that the Cubans have used Washington as a foil for so long, some of the high-voltage criticism of Mr. Obama is chalked up by some Cuba analysts as merely Havana's normal stance when it comes to the United States. It is only a matter of time before the first anti-Obama billboard goes up, some experts speculate.

Mr. Alarcón, the National Assembly president, did give Mr. Obama credit for using language that is “more peaceful, and civilized and open” than his predecessor. But he said that it was clear to him that the White House was too distracted with other issues to make Cuba a priority.

Others in the Cuban government take matters further, maintaining that Mr. Obama, despite some initial steps toward rapprochement, has continued to follow the Bush administration’s goal of toppling the Communist leadership. “In the last few weeks we have witnessed the stepping up of the new administration’s efforts in this area,” Raúl Castro told Cuba’s National Assembly during its annual session on Dec. 19. “They are giving new breath to open and undercover subversion against Cuba.”

He was referring to the [detention](#) this month of an American contractor distributing cellphones, laptops and satellite equipment in Cuba on behalf of the Obama administration. The Cubans have accused the contractor, whose identity has not been made public, of giving the equipment to civil society groups in Cuba without permission. For its part, the Obama administration complains that Raúl Castro is running the island exactly like his brother did, without fundamental freedoms and with continued abuses against political opponents. But Cuban officials say Washington’s insistence on more democracy in Cuba continues an old pattern of meddling in their country’s sovereign affairs.

“If the American government really wants to advance relations with Cuba, I recommend they leave behind the conditions of internal governance that they are trying to impose on us and that only Cubans can decide,” Raúl Castro said in his assembly speech.

Cuba continues to press its own issues with the United States, arguing, for instance, that Mr. Obama ought to immediately pardon five Cuban agents, known on the island as the Cuban Five, who are serving long prison terms in the United States for gathering information about Cuban exile groups in south Florida.

Mr. Alarcón reiterated a proposal that Raúl Castro has made on more than one occasion: the exchange of political prisoners in Cuba for the five Cubans held in the United States

The Cubans also insist that the Obama administration extradite to Venezuela [Luis Posada Carriles](#), an anti-Castro militant accused of helping to blow up a Cuban airliner in 1976, killing 73 people. Mr. Posada, who is living in Miami on bail, faces charges in federal court in Texas for making what the government says were false statements to [immigration](#) officials. An immigration judge has ruled that he cannot be sent to Venezuela, a close ally of Cuba, because he faces a high likelihood of torture there.

“With the previous administration, it didn’t make sense to talk about anything,” said Mr. Alarcón. “This administration came to office pledging to change and to improve relations. Obama has nothing to do with the past but he’s finished his first year and so far nothing has happened with these issues.”

Mr. Smith, now a Cuba analyst at the Center for International Policy who advocates a lifting of the American trade and travel bans on Cuba, was supposed to accompany Barry McCaffrey, a retired American [Army](#) general, on a trip to Havana from Jan. 3 to 6 to discuss how the two countries could cooperate on fighting drug trafficking. But General McCaffrey pulled out, incensed by recent criticisms of Mr. Obama by Cuban officials.

“This type of shallow and vitriolic 1960s public diplomacy also makes Cuban leadership appear to be nonserious, polemical amateurs,” he said in a letter to Mr. Smith. “President Obama is the most thoughtful and nonideological U.S. chief executive that the Cubans have seen in 50 years.”

At the same time, still hopeful that the two countries can put their grudges aside, Mr. Smith said the United States should continue efforts to improve relations by removing Cuba from the list of state sponsors of terrorism, for instance, and by closing Radio Martí and TV Martí, the anti-Castro broadcasts financed by the United States government and sent from American soil to Cuba.

Some Cuban exiles, however, argue that Mr. Obama has gone far enough and that it is Cuba’s turn to make a meaningful gesture.