**Martin Palous**

**The Cuban question**

Re-opening the US embassy in Havana in presence of the Secretary of State rounded off the first stage of the process of rapprochement between the United States and Cuba, launched last December by a telephone call between President Barack Obama and Raul Castro. The fact that the Stars and Stripes are waiving again on Malecón - after fifty-four years of their absence! - is widely seen as a historic event. The message, say the advocates of the new US policy towards Cuba, cannot be clearer: also for Cubans Cold War, albeit with considerable delay, finally ended!

No wonder that "a new day in Cuba" raised great expectations. There is a grand parallel here lending itself as a key supportive argument for this optimism. If the policy of easing international tensions practiced in the 1970s and 1980s in Europe, led to the fundamental democratic reforms in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc, a similar effect has to be seen sooner or later on the Caribbean island, too. In the atmosphere of “confidence building measures” and “constructive communications” between the US and Cuban governments, it will not be possible any more for the communist regime of Cuba to keep mobilizing its population to the struggle against American imperialism in defense of the Revolution. It will not be possible any more to keep suppressing all free-minded nonconformist Cubans as its henchmen or agents.

 Who will benefit most from the changed atmosphere in the relations between Cuba and the United States, at least in the long term perspective, is definitely not the current regime, in power for more than five decades, but the Cuban society at large. The intensification of contacts between the members of Cuban exile community and their relatives on the island will boost private entrepreneurship and help to accelerate the process of reforms of Cuban stagnating economy. The end of hostilities on the official level will open space for genuine dialogue and exchange of information. The US economic embargo will be lifted sooner or later, and the new effective forms of cooperation will be agreed upon, assisting the Cuban nation to overcome - peacefully and step by step - the legacies of its totalitarian past. What we will see emerging within a course of years is a new Cuba, finally given chance to develop fully its creative potential and start setting out and realizing all the necessary steps to secure the dignified existence and economic prosperity of its people in the world of the 21st century.

It is, of course, indispensable to hear also the arguments of the other side. The decision of the Obama administration to engage Cuba and offer the Raul Castro’s government a new beginning, using in the first place the potential of the US-Cuba bilateral relationships, say the opponents of the actual Cuban-American courting, is simply wrong and ill-advised. It is an undeserved concession to the oppressive, tyrannical regime without getting anything back for it that could help the Cuban people to re-gain its freedom and initiate the real process of transformation. It is true that Raul who has replaced his brother Fidel in 2008 at the helms of the Cuban state, has launched some timid reforms of the dysfunctional economic system with the aim to improve its performance and to adapt it to changing international environment of the 21st century. But it is also true that he has repeatedly made clear at the same time that the “socialist” nature of Cuban state is definitely not going to change under his watch; that the preservation of the legacy of the Cuban Revolution will remain the principal goal of the current policies of ”adjustments and adaptations.”

The normalization of relations between the governments of Cuba and the United States may, indeed, open some new attractive opportunities for foreign investors, including American. The Raul’s reforms, for sure, also cater to small Cuban entrepreneurs who may now be able to increasingly count on the support (financial as well as logistical and knowledge-based) of economically strong and successful members of the Cuban American community and start playing more significant role in the Cuban society. There will be greater and greater influx of American tourists, not only bringing their money to the island, but also freely engaging with the local people and opening new forms of communication. All of that, however, does not need to weaken the communist regime, but can actually rather lead, quite paradoxically, to its stabilization or even further reinforcement.

The signal sent by Raul Castro and his cronies to the Cuban society at large - a signal that is well known in our Czech milieu from the period Husak’s "normalization"in the 1970s – is clear enough, leaving no doubts what is the intention: If you want a real freedom and not only a changed form of a totalitarian system which has come into existence in 1959 thanks to “Jefe Commandante” and his revolutionary companions in the Sierra Maestra - then quickly forget and “abandon every hope”. If anyone wants to succeed with his/her new projects or businesses, he/she has first of all to keep in mind who runs the show and controls the basic rules of the game in Cuba. The common feature of all the innovations – those being introduced now or planned to be introduced in the future – is their strict subordination to the fundamental goal of this operation which is to secure a smooth transfer of power from the generation of Moncadistas to their “post-totalitarian” successors. It is not at all about the opening of Cuban society, but about the preservation of the leading role of the Communist Party - being transformed from the revolutionary, ideologically conscious avant-garde into the unscrupulous ruling oligarchy believing in nothing. No matter how much liberalization will be tolerated in the daily-life of ordinary Cubans, the Party, still subscribing to its totalitarian nature and its ensuing “historic mission”, will retain its strict control of everything. High ranked officers or managers connected with the Ministry or Interior and Ministry of Defense will keep running all the key enterprises of Cuban economy. It will be them who will be in charge of their modernization, future strategies, the entry of foreign capital and eventual privatization. It will be their Party bosses and their spokespersons who will keep speaking on behalf of the citizens of Cuba without asking them about their real opinions. It will be them, who will keep masking their own claims for limitless and first of all lasting power in the international settings as a “legitimate” right of the Cuban state for the equal sovereignty - demanding from all other members of international society not to interfere into its “internal affairs”.

Do we need some more evidence what are the real intentions of the current Cuban Government in the process of rapprochement with the United States than the plain fact that not a single member of Cuban democratic opposition could be invited to the official ceremony of the re-opening of the US Embassy, because it would have been perceived as an “unfriendly act” of the US Government towards the Cuban state by the new John Kerry’s partners or even friends? That exactly on the contrary - in clear violation of the spirit of “good faith” and the need to start adopting some “confidence building measures” - more than two hundreds of Cuban dissidents were arrested in the time of John Kerry’s visit to Havana by the political police and some of them even brutally beaten during their police detention during these hey-days? What other conclusion can be drawn from the pertinacious efforts of Cuban negotiators dealing with their American counterparts to force from them, as an act of good will, the promise of discontinuation of all the US programs supporting the independent activities of the emerging Cuban civil society? Is there any other interpretation of the official Cuban argument still heard again and again, that these programs epitomize the old American imperialistic manners? That they are nothing else but an illegitimate intrusion into the domain reserved for the activities of Cuban government? What kind of “reform” of totalitarian regime are we observing in Cuba, if the proposed “dialogue about human rights” must be, according to the Cuban negotiators, an exclusive matter, besides the governments themselves, of the representatives of officially authorized non-governmental organizations? That it is unthinkable for the Cuban government to give a space in it also to the Cuban people at large, including the voices of democratic opposition, human rights activists, dissidents and members of independent civil society?

At the time when the US Secretary of State was visiting Havana and hosting the Cuban officials at the re-opened US Embassy, there was, however, another Cuban event taking place in San Juan, Puerto Rico: the Cuban National Assembly (Encuentro Nacional Cubano), the constitunt meeting of a new platform of Cuban democratic opposition. The representatives of twenty three independent entities from Cuba and more than thirty non-for-profit organizations from exile were in attendance. The objective of the “Encuentro” was to launch the debate on the common course of action in the current rapidly changing situation. For the first time the members of non-violent democratic opposition from the island and from the outside of Cuba met in such large numbers and talked to each other with a sense of common goals putting aside their differences, mutual grievances and recriminations. They all seemed to understand that it is their unity and a feasible political program for a new Cuba in the 21st century, what should become their most powerful weapon in their political, i.e. non-violent struggle against the obsolete totalitarian regime. Thus, what could be seen at the San Juan Cuban gathering was something really unprecedented: the harmony in the relations between home and exile, the reconciliation of two most influential Miami organizations – the Cuba American National Foundation and the Freedom Council - that have been in dispute since the mid 1990s. The support pronounced publically by Diego Suarez - one of the veterans of the liberation struggle against “Castro-communism”, now more than eighty years old - to Rosa Maria Paya - much less than thirty years old daughter of Oswaldo Paya, whose Projecto Varella had been heavily criticized in the Miami conservative circles in the past – has become a kind of symbolical expression of new spirit of hope and determination which has prevailed at the San Juan meeting and is hopefully in action till today.

The Cuban National Assembly elected from its ranks nine members of its Coordinating Committee – five from the island and four from the exile – and entrusted them to represent the Assembly before the world and be in charge of organization of its works in the next six months. What has also been agreed on by the Assembly, were the fundamental, non-negotiable demands of Cuban democratic opposition: the release of all political prisoners; the abolishment of the Cuban laws, suppressing the fundamental rights and freedoms; the recognition of the right to freedom of expression, freedom of press, freedom of assembly, freedom of association and peaceful demonstration; the recognition of the right to religious freedom and free choice of occupation; the recognition of the right to create political parties equally participating in political decisions; the holding of free and fair elections monitored by international observers. It was also decided that the next Assembly will take place after six months with the basic task to adopt the National Cuban program for the 21st century. The next Assembly will also assess the current situation of Cuba as well as the results achieved. Based on this assessment, it should come with concrete proposals concerning both its future institutional set up and its further political steps and strategies.

The debate taking place at the Assembly has sent out one crucial message that can be taken now as the very basis of its all its future endeavors and works; a message shared by those who agree with the current US policies towards Cuba, as well as by the opponents of these policies. What all of them want and are reclaiming loud and clear, is nothing more but nothing less – than the right of every Cuban to participate in the public affairs of his/her country. Because it is no one else, but Cubans themselves- and not aging Communist functionaries - who must be recognized as primary holders of Cuban sovereignty. What is at stake today in the first place is not the future of relations of Cuban government with its international partners - in the first place its future relationship towards the US government burdened by its complicated past. The basic problem today is - and it has always been - primarily the relationship of Government of Cuba to the Cuban citizens, from whose consent Government of Cuba can only derive its legitimacy and justification of its policies.

It's, indeed, only up to Cubans themselves to decide about their future and the international community, rightly expecting from the Cuban Government the fulfillment of all its international obligations in good faith, should respect it. At the same time, however, this respect - standing out as one of the key elementary principles of peaceful relations between sovereign states - doesn’t mean that the international partners of Cuba are advised to communicate only with their official Cuban counterparts. The concept of international human rights also means listening carefully to the voices coming from within Cuban society at large. It means to give them an adequate space also in the current ongoing diplomatic negotiations.

This requirement applies not only to the rapprochement between Cuba and the United States but also to the negotiations taking place today between Cuba and the European Union about the new bilateral treaty. This treaty, as it has been agreed by all the EU member-states and incorporated into the EU internal mandate for this negotiation, should cover all aspects of mutual cooperation: from peace and security, through economic cooperation to human rights and humanitarian issues.

A quick historical reminiscence at the very end: the fact that human rights played a crucial role in the ending of the Cold War between the East and the West and in the re-unification of the divided European Continent, is reality confirmed, indeed, by the historical experience; proven by the Helsinki process, which began with the adoption of the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation, signed in the capital of Finland in the summer of 1975, now more than forty years ago. Has this experience from the past some value for the dilemmas and challenges the Cuban democratic opposition is confronted with today? Can the so called “Helsinki process” be recommended to them as an essential inspiration and a kind of guidance - despite the fact that world we are living now is somewhere else than it was in the mid-seventies? It remains to be seen. It is a question, however, which will play a significant role, as far as the dynamics of Cuban politics, in a not very distanced future.