

OAS vote on Cuba exposes waning US power in Latin America

By Bill Van Auken
5 June 2009

The unanimous vote taken Wednesday by the Organization of American States to repeal the 47-year-old decision barring Cuba from membership is a clear indication of the weakened economic and political position of US imperialism throughout the region.

The decision by the OAS General Assembly held in San Pedro Sula, Honduras followed 36 hours of contentious discussions that revealed the diplomatic isolation of Washington—now the only country in the hemisphere without diplomatic relations with Havana—in the face of unanimous Latin American support for ending the nearly half-century ban.

The suspension of Cuba from OAS membership and the ban on its rejoining the hemispheric organization was imposed at the demand of Washington. Following the failure of the CIA's Bay of Pigs invasion nine months earlier, the Kennedy administration opted for a policy of isolating Cuba, including through a US economic embargo that remains in place to this day. In January 1962, the OAS met in Punta del Este, Uruguay and adopted the measure removing Cuba from the organization, declaring that "adherence...to Marxism-Leninism is incompatible with the inter-American system."

Washington resisted making Cuba the overriding issue at the OAS meeting, but to no avail. On the eve of the session, the Obama administration announced that it had reached agreement with Havana to open talks on a number of issues, including terrorism, drug trafficking and mail service. Earlier, Obama announced a very limited easing of US economic sanctions, making it easier for Cuban Americans to visit Cuba and send remittances to the island.

In Honduras, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton sought to block the OAS from passing a resolution that offered Cuba reentry into the organization without imposing definite conditions. In particular, she and the US delegation tried to introduce language tying the proposal to Cuban compliance with the 2001 Inter-American Democratic Charter, which defined "democracy" as "a pluralist system of political parties" and invoked previous OAS documents upholding the inviolability of private property.

The OAS members with the closest ties to Havana—Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua and Ecuador—categorically rejected such conditions, and Tuesday night it appeared that the organization was at an impasse. Some Latin American foreign ministers warned that failure to reach an agreement could spell the end of the organization.

A smaller group of foreign ministers—including Clinton—met behind closed doors to work out mutually acceptable language. In the end, a compromise was reached, but only after Clinton had left. The US agreed to more ambiguous language, while the governments of Hugo Chavez, Evo Morales, Daniel Ortega and Rafael Correa acquiesced to the inclusion of a clause that would placate Washington.

The two-part resolution announced the repeal of the earlier measure excluding Cuba from the OAS, while adding that the island nation's readmission would arise out of a "process of dialogue initiated at the request of the government of Cuba and in conformity with the practices, purposes and principles of the OAS."

The measure was passed without opposition.

The countries advocating the unconditional offer to readmit Cuba interpreted this second clause as merely procedural, indicating that Cuba's readmission would be carried out under the existing rules of the OAS.

The US delegation, however, tried to present it as a vindication of its demand that Cuba first prove its commitment to democracy, as defined in the earlier OAS documents. Clinton, flying to Cairo to join President Barack Obama, claimed victory, stating, "I am pleased that everyone came to agree that Cuba cannot simply take its seat."

The State Department official in charge of Latin American relations, Thomas Shannon, a holdover from the Bush administration, also tried to put the best face on the resolution, telling the assembly that Washington was "not interested in fighting old battles or living in the past." He called the measure "an act of statesmanship," while insisting that it upheld "our profound commitment to democracy and the fundamental human rights of our peoples."

Such inflated claims, however, cannot conceal the essential significance of the vote by the OAS. It represents a stinging defeat for Washington, which has tried to carefully manage a partial thawing of relations with Cuba, while continuing its campaign for regime change in Havana.

It is a telling indication of the waning power of the US throughout the region. Tied down by two protracted wars and confronting increasing challenges from both Europe and China, as well as from Brazil, for Latin American trade and investment, Washington is no longer in a position to dictate terms to the governments representing the interests of the ruling elites south of its border.

The meaning of the decision was not lost on anti-Castro Cubans in the US, who bitterly protested the OAS decision. Cuban-American members of Congress, including Democratic Senator Robert Menendez of New Jersey and Representatives Mario and Lincoln Diaz-Balart, called for legislation cutting off US funding for the OAS. In a joint statement, the Diaz-Balart brothers called the OAS "a putrid embarrassment," while Menendez called the resolution "absurdly vague" and said that Congress would debate "how much we are willing to support the OAS as an institution."

Latin American heads of state celebrated the decision. Venezuela's President Chavez said that the resolution meant that "we aren't the backyard of the United States anymore; we aren't a colony anymore."

Honduran President Manuel Zelaya proclaimed that with the passage of the resolution, “the Cold War has ended this day in San Pedro Sula.” Referring to the famous passage in a speech given by Fidel Castro during his trial for the failed 1953 assault on the Cuban army barracks in the town of Moncada, Zelaya added, “I say to Comandante Fidel Castro: ‘Today history absolved you.’”

Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva called the OAS decision “a victory for the Latin American people.” Lula delivered his remark at the end of a three-nation Central American tour in which he promoted commercial ties and capital investments for Brazilian corporations and banks. Among the deals concluded was the setting up of an ethanol production plant in Costa Rica for export to the US market.

“I don’t even know if they want to come back to the OAS, but in any case, they will not be so marginalized,” the Brazilian president said of the Cubans.

In reality, Lula spoke not for the “Latin American people,” but for Brazilian capitalists, who see in Cuba a potential source of super-profits and want an end to the US economic embargo and the significant difficulties it presents for exploiting labor and resources on the island.

It was not history that absolved Castroism in San Pedro Sula, but rather the Latin American bourgeoisie. This has been a protracted process in which their governments have restored normal diplomatic relations and have seen the US attempt to quarantine Cuba as more and more irrational.

From the beginning, the attempt of US imperialism to isolate Cuba in the name of an “inter-American system” based on “democracy and free markets” was drenched in hypocrisy. Among those voting in 1962 to throw Cuba out of the OAS were the iron-fisted dictatorships of Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, Somoza in Nicaragua and Stroessner in Paraguay.

For his part, Fidel Castro rejected even the possibility of Cuba returning to the OAS, which he referred to as a “ministry of colonies of the United States” and a “putrid, revolting den of corruption.”

Within the OAS itself, however, the ban on Cuba came under increasing challenge from Latin America’s bourgeois governments, which, by the 1970s, saw Cuba as posing no threat to their stability. The nationalist regime in Havana had abandoned its revolutionary pretensions of the 1960s. Castro gave up the policy of promoting guerrilla wars, accepted the existing state setup in Latin America and subordinated his regime largely to the policy of “peaceful coexistence” advocated by the Moscow Stalinist bureaucracy, which heavily subsidized the Cuban economy.

There was a significant move to repeal the ban on OAS membership for Cuba in 1973, after the organization adopted a realpolitik doctrine of “ideological pluralism,” largely to accommodate the growing number of US-backed military dictatorships that clearly failed to meet the democratic pretensions of the so-called inter-American system. By July 1975, the OAS voted to free its members to determine their own relations with Cuba. Nonetheless, Washington was able to quash all attempts to readmit Havana to the organization.

While hailing the vote in Honduras as a “historical vindication,” the Cuban regime reiterated that it had no interest in rejoining the OAS. On the eve of the vote, the ailing former president, Fidel Castro, writing in one of his regular “reflections” columns, denounced the OAS as an “accomplice in all the crimes committed against Cuba” and declared it “naïve to believe that the good intentions of a president of the United States justify the existence of this institution,”

which he described as a “Trojan horse.”

While the Castro regime has enjoyed a string of diplomatic victories, Cuba’s internal economic situation appears to be growing increasingly desperate. Beginning on June 1, the government of Raul Castro announced “exceptional measures” to deal with a growing crisis. Severe restrictions have been placed on the use of electricity, forcing government offices and the retail sector to keep lights and air conditioners off for much of the day and threatening blackouts of entire provinces if they use more than their quota of power.

Economy and Planning Minister Marino Murillo revealed that earlier projections of 6 percent economic growth had been scrapped, and now only 2.5 percent growth was anticipated, as the Cuban economy is battered by the global economic crisis and is still reeling from \$10 billion dollars in losses inflicted by three hurricanes over the last year. Prices of imports have soared, while the price of nickel, the country’s main export, has plummeted. Earnings from tourism and remittances from abroad have also slackened.

Among the other austerity measures that have been implemented are a drastic reduction in bus service and a 50 percent cut in spending for lunches provided to employees at state enterprises.

The measures are the most severe seen since the so-called Special Period that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, when subsidies from Moscow ended and GDP fell by 35 percent.

While Raul Castro had promised to increase living standards when he took over from his brother Fidel last year, the policies of the government and the pressure of the global capitalist crisis have produced just the opposite, resulting in increased social tensions.

For decades, the Castro regime has claimed political legitimacy based on its resistance to US aggression and an appeal to the nationalist sentiments of the Cuban people, as well as its maintenance—at least until the recent period—of a certain level of social equality, even if at an impoverished level for the majority of workers.

The lifting of the US economic embargo against Cuba, bringing with it an influx of foreign capital—a measure supported by predominant sections of US corporate and finance capital, as well as the ruling elites in Latin America—would pose a sharp intensification of the political and social crisis on the island.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>