

Doing business with Cuba

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A worker in Havana. Photo by Flickr user [Zoriah](#), licensed under [Creative Commons](#).

When Yoani Sánchez began blogging about life in Cuba a few years ago, she had to pose as a German tourist and sneak into Internet cafés. From there she was able to post reports on her country's food shortages, its methods of political indoctrination, its glacial movement toward reform and its lack of freedom of speech. As Time magazine noted a few years ago, Sánchez is one dissident whom the world would never have heard from before the Internet age.

Sánchez is also one of 74 Cuban dissidents who in June urged the U.S. Congress to lift restrictions on trade and travel to Cuba. The 74 include journalist Guillermo Fariñas, who almost died while conducting a 140-day hunger strike to protest censorship by the Cuban government. Fariñas ended his strike in early July after Cuba announced that it would release 52 political prisoners in a deal brokered by the Roman Catholic Church and Spain's foreign secretary.

The argument for lifting the U.S. embargo on Cuba has been made frequently over the past 48 years, but the embargo has always been successfully defended by anti-Castro forces in the U.S., who view it as just punishment for the atrocities of Fidel

Castro's regime. After decades, however, it's clear that the embargo has had little political effect. George Schultz, secretary of state under Ronald Reagan, called the embargo "a failure by any measure"; it has served only to help impoverish Cubans while doing nothing to make them freer.

A first step toward easing travel and trade with Cuba was taken by the House Agriculture Committee this summer. It approved a bill that eases restrictions on trade and allows Americans to travel to Cuba without special permission. The bill is backed by business and agriculture groups that see in Cuba a nearby market for their goods—and a generator of U.S. jobs. The bill stands a good chance of passing the House if it makes it to the floor for a vote, though its fortunes in the Senate are likely to be more complicated.

The dissidents in Cuba who support the bill can hardly be termed apologists for Castro. They have put their lives on the line to criticize the regime and to publicize its brutal treatment of political prisoners. The U.S. embargo, the dissidents say, "benefits the most inflexible interests" of Cuba's government. What the regime fears most, they argue, "is an opening of free trade and of free enterprise, and the direct flow of information and communication between peoples." This is one case in which economic, political and moral interests are aligned. They call for ending a failed embargo and opening a new era for Cuba.