

Cuba

Cuba: what is left for Trump to topple?

Washington hopes Nicolás Maduro's capture will hasten the downfall of the ossified communist regime in Havana

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Published 3 HOURS AGO

Soon after US special forces kidnapped Nicolás Maduro from Caracas, Cuban president Miguel Díaz-Canel said his people were prepared to “give their blood, even their lives” to defend Venezuela and Cuba’s revolution.

At the Bleco lounge bar in central Havana — where the servers have sculpted physiques, wear risqué outfits and conspicuous consumption is the norm for the few Cubans who can afford to spend a month’s state salary on a pizza — that kind of revolutionary sacrifice seemed unlikely.

“Hard times are coming,” said Roberto Hernandez, a 34-year-old Cuban who now lives in Spain and was visiting family. “But look at what is here already: it’s a complete negation of socialism, everyone is enjoying themselves, while outside people scrape for a living by snorkelling through piles of garbage.”

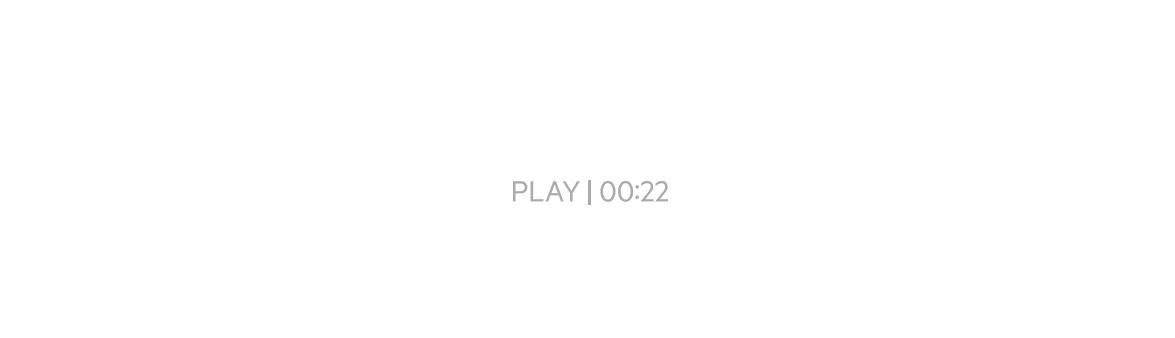


People play dominoes on the street during a blackout in Havana in September. Outside of the capital, daily electricity cuts of 18 hours are already common © Yamil Lage/AFP/Getty Images

Beyond the hedonistic bubbles of central Havana, Cuba's economy is close to collapse. Since 2021, well over 1mn Cubans — a tenth of the population — have fled, according to official figures, and it is hard to find anyone under 40 years old who want to stay. Real wages have collapsed. Hunger — previously rare — has grown, and infant mortality has more than doubled, according to official data.

Yet with Maduro now facing trial in the US, Cuba is confronting even worse prospects, with the end of support from its closest ally Venezuela plunging the island deeper into the void. And Washington, which has over the course of six decades sought to topple Cuba's communist regime, has indicated it senses the end is near.

“Cuba looks like it is ready to fall,” Donald Trump said on Sunday while on Air Force One. “Cuba now has no income, they got all their income from Venezuela.” “You just wait for Cuba,” added Senator Lindsey Graham, who was standing by the US president. “Their days are numbered . . . I hope in 2026.”

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Donald Trump said on Sunday that 'Cuba looks like it is ready to fall' © Reuters

For over two decades, Venezuela has provided Cuba with fuel and financing in exchange for doctors, teachers and security personnel — 32 of whom were killed during the US [raid in Caracas on Saturday](#), according to the Cuban government, which declared two days of national mourning.

Without such programs — which former Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez once described as part of Cuba's "ocean of happiness" — its devastating shortages of energy and basic goods will only worsen. Outside of Havana, daily electricity cuts of 18 hours are already common.

"Of course, I am worried," said Havana resident Mario Jesus Reyes Cabrera, 54. "Look at the situation with the power outages . . . and the only help we [were getting] was from Venezuela with Maduro."

US attempts to overturn the Cuban government have ranged from a plot to assassinate former leader Fidel Castro with an exploding cigar to the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, which failed in part after Washington denied air support to the exile invasion force.

While some presidents such as Barack Obama tried to encourage change by relaxing the US's long-standing embargo, Trump — led by secretary of state Marco Rubio, who is of Cuban parentage — has steadily ratcheted up pressure. In mid-December, [US forces seized a tanker](#), called Skipper, bound to Cuba from Venezuela with almost 2mn barrels of oil.

“If I lived in Havana and I was in the government, I’d be concerned,” Rubio told NBC on Sunday.



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Yet exactly how the process of squeezing Havana will lead to political change remains as unclear as ever, given that its government has already survived decades of isolation.

“The Trump administration’s view for months has been that taking down Maduro is the best and easiest way to overthrow the Cuban government,” said Fulton Armstrong, a former US national intelligence officer for Latin America. “But they have never explained how they’d get from the present to their imaginary future. The pieces of the puzzle to make that picture just aren’t on the table”.

The current route, analysts and former government officials said, could involve forcing Venezuela to stop its energy supplies to Cuba, while discouraging other countries in the hemisphere like Mexico — which *overtook* Venezuela to become the island’s top oil supplier last year — from filling the gap.

At its peak around a decade ago, Venezuela provided 100,000 barrels per day of oil to Cuba. This has dropped to less than 30,000 bpd — compared with Cuba’s estimated daily needs of 70,000 bpd. Another 25,000 bpd comes from domestic production.

“The Trump administration is bound to demand abandonment of Cuba by Venezuela as a side hustle of Maduro’s decapitation,” said one European official, who has dealt regularly with Havana. “Even if they don’t get all of that from the new government in Caracas, they’ll get what they can.”

The end of such programmes will worsen an economy that Díaz-Canel admitted in December was already suffering from “an accumulation of distortions, adversities, difficulties and mistakes of our own”.

In Havana, there was widespread indignation at Maduro’s capture, especially among poorer Cubans. “We’re going to get through this,” said Mercedes Carbonero, 65. “Cubans are tough.”

Even so, an oil cut off would increase the social divide between Cuba's many "have nots", who struggle to make ends meet on average salaries worth just \$10 a month, and the island's few "haves" — such as relatives of the political and new business elites — who drive BMWs and can afford \$70 tomahawk steaks at Havana's "The Garden of Miracles" restaurant.



People drink cocktails in a bar in Havana. Cuba is divided between 'haves' who can afford to dine out and 'have nots' who struggle to make ends meet on less than \$10 a month © Adalberto Roque/AFP/Getty Images

But that disquiet is unlikely to translate into mass protests, which Cuban security can quash easily — as in July 2021, when lockdown and a Covid surge prompted tens of thousands to take to the streets in a shortlived outbreak of demonstrations marked by the protest song "Patria y Vida".

"What good is it to protest, even if all 11mn of us come out, or just 1,000?" said Pedro, a 41-year-old labourer in Havana. "If we protest, they'll beat us, they'll imprison us, and things will stay the same.

A second possibility, analysts said, is a Venezuelan-style solution, where the US executes a military-led decapitation of the government and then seeks to work with more pragmatic elements of the regime. But that is even more unlikely given the high degree of internal cohesion at the top of Cuba's government, and regular purges of ministers who step out of line.

In December, former economy minister Alejandro Gil Fernández, once a senior aide to Díaz-Canel, was sentenced to life imprisonment on espionage charges. Another sign the leadership is hunkering down, analysts said, was the postponement of the Communist Party's ninth congress, which was scheduled for April and usually takes place every five years.



Cuban president Miguel Díaz-Canel said his people were prepared to 'give their blood, even their lives' to defend Venezuela and Cuba's revolution © Adalberto Roque/AFP/Getty Images

"I don't see anyone in Cuba like [Venezuela's acting president] Delcy Rodriguez," said Frank Mora, a former US deputy assistant secretary of defence for the western hemisphere during Obama's presidency.

“For change you’d need to see regime splits and competing factions, and I just don’t see that in Cuba — unlike in Venezuela, where there have always been tensions between the various groups.”

In the days following Maduro’s capture, the crumbling streets of Havana and secondary cities such as Cienfuegos remained calm, with little in the way of unusual activity — except for the many Cubans avidly following the news on their phones by public WiFi hotspots.

That sense of decay and stasis, said one Cuban intellectual who has a modus vivendi with the regime, suggested a third possible future for the island, similar to that of the western hemisphere’s poorest country: Haiti.

“It’s going to be a total collapse,” said Hernandez, the patron at Havana’s Bleco bar. As he spoke, the power suddenly flicked off, the bar went dark and the air conditioners fell silent. “There you go,” Hernandez added, gesturing that his point had been made.

Additional reporting by Daniel Montero; cartography by Andrew Francisco

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