Salim Lamrani

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Salim Lamrani’s useful, well-written book deals with U.S. policy toward Cuba since the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in January 1959. It mainly concentrates on the effects on Cuba of the economic aggression, with principal emphasis on the embargo imposed early in the Revolution and lasting until the present. Although there is little analysis, it clearly summarizes how the embargo functions, with its damaging and sometimes bizarre consequences.

In February 1959 Batista’s henchmen stole US$424 million from the Central Bank and fled to Miami, whereupon the U.S. government refused to take action. In 1960, following the agrarian reform law of May 1959 that offered compensation for expropriated land, President Eisenhower began the process of eliminating the U.S. import quota for the purchase of Cuban sugar. In January 1961 the United States broke diplomatic relations with Cuba, and on February 3, 1962, it imposed a total embargo on Cuba, including drugs and food. Since most capital goods and transportation equipment had been imported from the United States, Cuba was unable to acquire spare parts. While Cuban nationalizations were used as the excuse for the embargo, the U.S. Supreme Court established their legality in 1964 (Banco Nacional de Cuba v. Sabbatino). In 1964, the United States pressured the Organization of American States to impose a total embargo on Cuba. And in 1968, it disallowed the importation of all products containing Cuban nickel.

In the 1970s some of the sanctions against Cuba were lifted during the Ford and Carter administrations, and diplomatic missions were opened in Havana and Washington. However this opening was reversed by President Reagan, whose Santa Fe Program was aimed at overthrowing the Cuban government. He restricted travel to and trade with Cuba, as well as trade by other countries with Cuba. In 1992, at the time of severe economic depression in Cuba caused by the fall of the Soviet Union, President George H.W. Bush signed the Torricilli Act which tightened the sanctions against Cuba. It disallowed U.S. subsidiaries in foreign countries to trade with Cuba, and vessels that docked in Cuba could not enter the United States for 150 days. It was expected that this act would result in the collapse of the Cuban regime. The Helms-Burton Act of 1996 transformed the embargo into law, meaning that only Congress could end the economic and political sanctions. International financial institutions could

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1 Please note that this review was submitted in October of 2013.
Lamrani notes that both acts are clear violations of international law.

Under President George W. Bush, money was allocated to finance internal opposition within Cuba. Visits to Cuba by Cubans living in the United States and financial assistance to family members were further restricted, and travel by non-Cubans was not allowed. Violations of these regulations could lead to a ten-year jail sentence and a million-dollar fine. President Obama eased some of the travel and financial assistance restrictions, but maintained the travel and other restrictions for non-Cubans. Presently the impact of the embargo also includes drugs and medical equipment available only from the United States, and the government seized U.N. funds allocated to Cuba for health care. Lamrani gives numerous examples of the impact on Cuba of these restrictions.

What Lamrani makes very clear is that the U.S. government has a strange obsession with Cuba. The goal of the embargo, with all its cruel consequences, has not brought the Cuban government to its knees or caused it to be overthrown. All members of the OAS, except the United States, now have diplomatic relations with Cuba. Every year the U.N. General Assembly votes overwhelmingly to oppose the embargo. Many countries resent the clear violation of international law, including the intrusion of the United States into their internal affairs. Today the embargo is a manifestation of a sense of hysteria against Cuba, with no clearly realizable purpose. Cuba is not allowed to receive drugs or medical equipment that are available only from the United States, which causes unnecessary suffering for Cuban children. Lamrani cites several bizarre incidents. A couple from Michigan was fined tens of thousands of dollars for providing “medical services to a Cuban national” because they gave gauze and tape to a Cuban who burned his hand (pp. 51–52). Three Methodists were fined US$ 25,000 for having traveled to Cuba in a religious group, accused of “undermining national security” (p. 53). A couple was fined US$ 9,750 for donating medicine to a Cuban religious congregation (p. 53). And a seriously ill thirteen-year-old Cuban boy who won a U.N. painting contest could not receive the prize of a Nikon camera since it contained parts made in the United States (p. 59).

The appendix contains the 2011 debate in the U.N. General Assembly regarding the resolution to lift the economic blockade against Cuba. This book is indispensable for comprehending the sanctions and economic embargo against Cuba. And due to Lamrani’s accessible writing style, it is an excellent teaching tool.

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