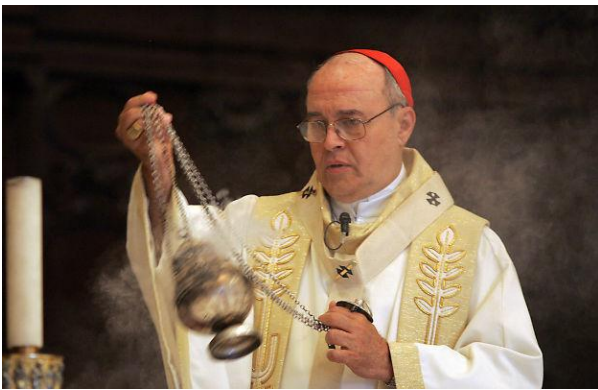




A Failure to Communicate

Why is the Obama administration using its radio station to attack the Cuban Catholic Church?

BY FULTON T. ARMSTRONG | JUNE 1, 2012



ADALBERTO ROQUE/AFP/Getty Images

Pope Benedict XVI's [trip to Cuba](#) in March was, by most accounts, a successful pastoral visit -- a show of support for the Cuban Catholic Church as the Vatican wanted. But it did little to assuage the White House's discomfort with the church's approach to change on the island.

The next month, in Colombia, U.S. President Barack Obama [spoke of](#) his hope for improved human rights, democracy, and economic reform in Cuba. "I assure you that I and the American people will welcome the time when the Cuban people have the freedom to live their lives, choose their leaders, and fully participate in this global economy and international institutions," he declared.

If that's Obama's goal, he doesn't appear to have a lot of faith in the Catholic Church in Cuba helping to achieve it. In fact, the administration has supported repeated attacks on the church and its leader, Cardinal Jaime Ortega -- the man who has done more to promote human rights and democracy in Cuba than anyone, anywhere. The cardinal has created political space for millions of Cubans to live their faith, [personally negotiated](#) the release of more than 100 political prisoners in the past two years, and [directly carried](#) to Cuban President Raúl Castro the appeals -- subsequently granted -- of human rights groups, including the female relatives of political prisoners known as the [Ladies in White](#).

Nevertheless, administration-supported harangues against the church and cardinal have become routine. The most recent was an editorial by Radio/TV Martí, the U.S. government's radio and television service to Cuba. The station's director, Carlos García-Pérez, personally penned a commentary [accusing](#) the cardinal of "political collusion" with the Castro regime and having a "lackey attitude" toward it. This senior Obama political appointee [offered](#) patronizing advice: "Cardinal Ortega, please be faithful to the Gospel you preach."

At issue was the cardinal's criticism of a group of dissidents with no established record of political activity who took over a Havana church in March, demanding that Pope Benedict meet with them when he visited Cuba several days later. The Obama administration provides \$20 million a year to groups that profess to promote democracy in Cuba -- including many small, unknown groups like the one that occupied the church -- through USAID and the State Department. Although neither agency is authorized to run covert operations, these are conducted with such extraordinary secrecy that the U.S. Congress and the American people will never know how much taxpayer money is spent on activities like this and through which groups.

When the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) investigated the Martí broadcast services in 2009-2010, a pattern of news items and commentaries challenging the cardinal and church emerged. The station has chronically dismal ratings in Cuba and therefore little direct impact, but the broadcasts are significant in that they are indicators of U.S. policy or, at the very least, the U.S. government's willingness to hand its megaphone over to the Miami conservatives who have long dominated Martí. Rather than flagging this antagonism toward the church in [the report](#), however, committee staff privately asked for reassurances that the attacks would stop, and García-Pérez, then the station's new director, promised they would.

Martí isn't the only U.S. government program undermining the church and cardinal. When the SFRC discovered that USAID and State Department contractors and government-sponsored NGOs were running operations, including websites, against church leaders in 2010-2011, USAID said that the groups were merely "exercising their First Amendment rights." Like Martí, these organizations accused the cardinal of being a regime collaborator. The attacks never stopped.

The primary reason for this campaign is that the church supports evolutionary change in Cuba rather than the regime-collapse scenarios preferred by certain sectors of the Cuban-American community.

Cardinal Ortega lives in three realities that his detractors do not grasp. Despite his clear record in support of democracy and human rights (including his own time in a work camp in the early 1960s), he [knows](#) his church is weak and can ill afford more direct confrontation with the Castro regime. He also knows that the Cuban people, fatigued by years of communism and U.S.-Cuba bickering, don't want civil strife, government collapse, and all the pain that such events would cause. Most observers of Cuban affairs -- and all of the leading Cuban rights activists themselves -- firmly believe that the Cuban people want peaceful, evolutionary change. The cardinal knows that growing a stable democracy takes time, and that, however well-intentioned some exiles may be, the loudest rhetoric coming from the north casts them as authoritarian carpetbaggers, not democratic saviors.

The church has embraced a number of initiatives to promote peaceful change in Cuba. It advocates that humans have a spiritual need for freedom and rights just as they have a physical need for food, medicine, and economic well-being. Over the years, the cardinal has led an expansion of services to the elderly and poor, filling needs previously met by the government. As a result, the church's voice is far stronger than the number of regularly practicing Catholics in Cuba, often estimated at [5 to 7 percent](#) of the population. Although weak compared with its counterparts in countries such as Poland, where the church was a frontline player in promoting democratic change, the Cuban church is the country's single most powerful NGO and voice for change.

The U.S. policy adopted by the Bush and Obama Administrations toward Cuba has at its center a series of programs under the [Helms-Burton Act of 1996](#) that are aimed explicitly at effecting regime change in Cuba. It's a 50-year-old U.S. dream, and the State Department and USAID have spent about \$200 million on these programs over the past 10 years. The programs have achieved next to nothing on the island, but they have been a boon to a wide array of "democracy promotion" groups and the contractors who work with them.

The Catholic Church's approach to change in Cuba is anathema to these U.S. government-directed operations. The church embraced the people-to-people contacts initiated by the Clinton administration in 1998 -- which are not secret operations directed or funded by the U.S. government. Through a broad range of contacts with the U.S. Catholic Church at the national, diocesan, and parish levels, the Cuban church has benefited tremendously from American citizens' donations of money, technology, food, medicine, and other support. That aid goes to the Cuban people without political litmus tests.

But U.S.-sponsored NGOs and contractors do not support this kind of people-to-people contact because, frankly, they do not make hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars from these encounters. (Alan Gross, a USAID contractor serving a 15-year sentence in Cuba for his secret operations, was operating on a one-year contract worth [more than \\$500,000](#).) The Obama administration has continued to fund democracy-promotion activities even after the Cuban government publicly demonstrated how easily its counterintelligence units penetrate the groups that the United States supports on the island.

It's the Obama administration's prerogative to ally itself with whomever it wishes in Cuba -- with the church and its noble cardinal, or with the dissidents it often organizes and subsidizes with taxpayer funds. But, in the final analysis, the United States will have to accept that Cuba's future will be written on the island, and not in Washington or Miami. Our choice today is whether to support a peaceful, democratic future in Cuba, or continue to be irrelevant.

Fulton T. Armstrong has worked on Cuban affairs at the National Security Council, National Intelligence Council, CIA, and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He is a senior fellow at American University's Center for Latin American and Latino Studies.