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Easing Path Out of Country, Cuba Is Dropping Exit Visas



Desmond Boylan/Reuters
People in line outside Spain's embassy in Havana on Wednesday.

By DAMIEN CAVE -- October 16, 2012

MEXICO CITY — In a country of limits, it is the restriction that many Cubans hate the most: the exit visa that the government requires for travel abroad, discouraging all but the favored or fortunate from leaving the island.

Now that bureaucratic barrier is on its way out. The Cuban government announced on Tuesday that it would terminate the exit visa requirement by Jan. 14, possibly letting many more Cubans depart for vacations, or forever, with only a passport and a visa from the country where they plan to go.

The new policy — promised by President Raúl Castro last year, and finally announced in the Communist Party newspaper — represents the latest significant step by the Cuban government to answer demands for change from Cubans, without relinquishing control.

Like some recent economic openings in Cuba, it allows the government to carefully calibrate the flow of change.

Even Cubans with passports will need to have them renewed, and the law says that applicants can be prevented from leaving for several reasons, including “national security”; enough, experts say, to keep dissidents from traveling.

Cuba's doctors, scientists and other professionals, who have long faced tight restrictions on movement, might be held back as well because the new policy includes a caveat allowing the government to limit departures to "preserve the human capital created by the Revolution."

And yet, the new migration law also gives Cubans latitude to stay abroad longer, letting them remain outside the country for two years, and possibly longer, before losing their rights to property and benefits like health care — an increase from 11 months under the current policy.

Analysts say the government is encouraging a larger class of Cubans to travel, partly so that they can earn money elsewhere and return, injecting capital into the island's moribund economy. The benefits of such an arrangement are already clear: remittances to the island have grown to an estimated \$2.3 billion a year, from \$1 billion in 2004.

But whether the new law will create a temporary or permanent mass exodus, Cubans and experts say, will be determined by how many people have the means and passports to leave, and which countries welcome them.

"The decision to lift the exit visa is a significant one for several reasons, although like most of the new reforms, it depends a great deal on how it is implemented," said Robert Pastor, professor of international relations at American University. "Nonetheless, by removing a state barrier to leave, this reform could lead to a large outflow — many of whom will eventually want to come to the United States — or it could begin to allow a circular flow of people that could enhance the economic opening of the island."

The Cuban government's earlier steps toward a market economy have mostly fallen short of expectations. There are now hundreds of thousands of small business owners on the island of 11 million people, but not nearly the numbers the government initially said it needed to cut back on the nation's bloated public payrolls.

Experts say fears of instability have often hampered the push for a rapid economic opening, leading celebrated new laws — allowing for property sales and entrepreneurship, for example — to be later larded with restrictions and taxes.

Cubans in Havana and Miami say they are convinced the same dynamic will apply to travel. They mostly greeted the end of the exit visa after 51 years with their usual stance of "we'll see."

On Tuesday, there were no long lines at the passport office in Havana or at foreign embassies, and many Cubans said they still faced hurdles to a legal departure.

"It's all very good," said Laydis, 30, an employee at a bank in Havana who gave only one name to avoid government reprisals. "But which interesting country is going to give me a visa?"

Her colleague Maricel, 44, who is eligible for a Spanish passport because her grandparents were from Spain, identified another problem. "Sure, I can go," she said, "but where am I going to get the money?"

After all, the new law, despite cutting a bureaucratic hurdle, might not mean lower costs to leaving: Yoani Sánchez, the well-known Cuban blogger whose exit visa requests have been repeatedly denied, said on Twitter that the cost of a Cuban passport will nearly double, to just over \$100.

American officials said they were still studying Cuba's new rules to determine what the impact might be. Immigration is one of the few issues that Cuba and the United States regularly discuss, having occupied a spot at the top of their agendas since at least 1980, when hundreds of thousands of Cubans took to the sea during the Mariel boatlift.

That human flood — encouraged by the Cuban government — eventually contributed to a series of migration accords in the mid-'90s, with an annual quota of 20,000 resident visas for Cubans emigrating to the United States.

The United States then adopted a policy known as “wet foot, dry foot,” in which any Cuban who reaches American soil is given legal status. It is a constant source of anger for the Cubans, who say it leads people to make the perilous journey across the Straits of Florida, but American officials say they have no plans to change the policy because of the new travel rules.

“We remain committed to the migration accords under which our two countries support and promote safe, legal and orderly migration,” said Victoria Nuland, a State Department spokeswoman.

The impact may be felt first by newly arrived Cuban immigrants. Because the new law will let Cubans live abroad for two years, they could obtain American legal residency, which takes at least a year, without giving up their rights in Cuba. “Many recent Cuban immigrants will jump at this chance,” said **Ted Henken**, a professor of Latin American studies at Baruch College in New York, adding that the change “will allow for a more normal back and forth.”

Other countries are also likely to see an immediate impact.

Spanish officials have said there are 200,000 Cubans with rights of dual nationality, meaning they can apply for Spanish passports and citizenship. Many of them travel already, but others who had been discouraged by the exit visa requirement — including a 50-year-old peddler named Juan Carlos — said Tuesday that the new law might lead them to Central America, to buy jewelry or other items to sell in Cuba.

Mexico, which has already let in more than 30,000 Cubans this year, could also face a surge in Cuban arrivals, many heading north to cross the border.

Mr. Pastor, a former Latin America adviser for President Jimmy Carter, said the new travel rules for Cubans could “put indirect pressure on the United States to adjust its immigration policies either to reduce the level of Cuban immigrants or to allow other immigrant groups to obtain as positive treatment as the Cubans get.”

Or the new rules may be an effort to release pressure for change on the island itself.

“Every once in a while they open up the pressure cooker and let out some steam,” said Raul Hernandez-Morales, 65, a lawyer in Miami who left Cuba at 15. He added: “It’s ‘Show them the cheese, but don’t actually give them the cheese.’ They raise hope, then they kill off that hope — it’s very tragic.”