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Huge Costs Confront Cubans Who Seek To Travel Under New ‘Migration Law’ Going Into Effect Today

By MARIA WERLAU, Special to the Sun | January 14, 2013

Updates to Cuba’s “Migration Law” introduced to great fanfare last October, go into effect today. But, they are merely a bankrupt dictatorship’s latest scheme to fund its failed economy and confuse world public opinion with so-called “reforms. Soon after seizing power in January 1959, Fidel Castro decreed that Cuba’s citizens would need an exit permit from the revolutionary government. More than half a century later, Cubans are still not free to leave at will.

Among the law’s changes taking effect today, Cubans will only need a valid passport and a visa from the destination country to be allowed out. Until now, those hoping to travel had to submit a letter of invitation, processed for around \$200 and, if approved, obtain an exit permit for \$165, with requisite extensions for any overseas stay over one month costing \$150 each month. That these requirements have been eliminated will save Cubans a minimum of US\$321 in fees plus repeated bureaucratic hassles.

The cost of a Cuban passport obtained in Cuba, however, has doubled. The fees are even more exorbitant given the average monthly salary in Cuba is around \$19 (455 pesos). Previously, a passport in Cuba, issued for six years, cost the equivalent of \$55 with required extensions every two years for \$20. Beginning today, it rises to \$100, representing 5.3 months of wages or 44% of the entire average annual peso salary. Extensions every two years will cost \$20, or over one month of salary.

These fees are prohibitive to the average citizen. In Cuba’s centrally planned socialist economy, access to hard currency is almost exclusive to members of the ruling elite and those working in the small foreign sector. Most citizens cannot and will not be able to obtain a passport or travel overseas without financial assistance from family or friends abroad.

In the United States, a comparable passport fee would be \$19,836.84. In relative terms, U.S. citizens would have to pay the government approximately \$20,000 to obtain a passport, then pay an additional \$4,000 every two years plus renew on year six, again paying \$20,000. Currently, U.S. passports for adults are valid for ten years and cost \$165 the first time, \$110 for renewals.

Cuba’s new law keeps in place the usual impediments to leaving the country. Article 216 of the Penal Code penalizes leaving “without complying with the legal requirements” with one to three years of prison and high fees. The political police — that is, the ministry of the interior — will continue deciding who travels, just issuing at its discretion passports instead of exit permits. Passports will only be issued to those who meet all requirements of the new law and may be denied among others “for reasons of public interest,” “defense and national security,” or to “preserve human capital.” Strict restrictions remain for doctors and healthcare workers, high-performing athletes, professionals, government officials, military officers, and those with official information or considered “vital” to the state.

That some will soon pay less is welcome, but overall, the regime will likely collect much more while preserving the same level of control. Compliant citizens will be able to travel abroad for less money and aggravation if granted a passport. They may even work overseas and stay abroad for up to 24 months — up from 11 — before being designated an émigré, having all property confiscated and restricted from returning (if allowed back, only for a maximum of 90 days). Passport validation every two years may be denied for all the reasons listed above plus any “reason of public interest defined by the authorities.” Accustomed to exploiting its citizens, the totalitarian state designed this clever extortion to keep obedient serfs replenishing its coffers.

Some were quick to laud these essentially procedural changes. But congratulating the Castro dynasty for this gimmick reeks of battered wife syndrome — the victim, intent on escaping more blows, remains subservient, focused on placating the abuser rather than standing up to the abuse.

Leaving from and returning to one’s country is a right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and respected by all countries save the worst repressors. Anything less than Cuba’s citizens full exercise of this and all other fundamental freedoms should be forcefully denounced as the abomination it is.

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