

# GOVERNMENT-CONTROLLED TRAVEL COSTS TO CUBA AND COSTS OF RELATED CONSULAR SERVICES: ANALYSIS AND INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS

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Over the last half century, the Castro-led Cuban government's relationship with the émigré community, while antagonistic, has included accommodating interludes as Havana has sought to take advantage of or drive wedges within the various components of the latter. The deep polarization that accompanied the early years of the revolution, the intransigence of policies anathema to would-be emigrants, and the iron fist with which radical policies were implemented, produced profound and lasting cleavages between the early exiles and Cuba's ruling political elite. With time, as the regime's hold on power was consolidated and the nature of the emigration flow evolved, Havana and segments of the émigré community began making reciprocal overtures to soften some of the most acrimonious elements of the relationship.

Motivated primarily by humanitarian and family concerns, the more accommodating émigrés acted based on their assumption of the irreversibility of the revolutionary process. As most other émigrés, they were deeply rooted in the United States—and other countries—and were primarily motivated by a desire to maintain contact with or reconnect with their families in Cuba. For more recalcitrant émigrés, notwithstanding family concerns, compromising with the regime was tantamount to betrayal, although they were willing to accept limited measures to mini-

mize hardships of relatives and regime opponents still in the country.

With the passing of time, as economic motivations began to overshadow political dissent as a driver of emigration, family and cultural ties were strengthened with the continued arrival of new emigrant cohorts. While equally disenchanted with Cuba's situation, most recent emigrants are generally averse to involvement in political activities. Their preoccupation is centered in the pursuit of economic opportunity. The regime, facing continued domestic problems—and as means to deal with them—historically has actively encouraged permanent emigration of disaffected Cubans. Abruptly at times (e.g., Camarioca, Mariel, the 1994 *Balsero* crisis), systematically at others (e.g., the negotiations leading to the "Freedom Flights, the post-*Balsero* Cuba-U.S. Migration Accord), Havana has brazenly relied on the emigration safety valve to promote political stability.

Facing the collapse of its Soviet Union patron and confronting a severe economic crisis in the early 1990s, the regime decided to take financial advantage of the once-shunned émigré community. Encouraging family visits was but one way to kindle remittances flows. The strategy came to full fruition with the 1994 U.S.-Cuba Migration Accord, which resulted

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1. I am grateful to Mario González-Corzo and Jorge Pérez-López for their valuable comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper and to Ricardo Puerta for bibliographical references.

in the largest emigration outflow since 1959, with corresponding increases in émigré remittances and return visit receipts. Cuban authorities capitalized on enhanced relations between the island and its citizens abroad by charging very high fees for consular services and other services to émigrés. With the relaxation by the Obama Administration of travel restrictions in 2009, émigré-related state revenues further rose to achieve historically high levels.

### ESTIMATED SIZE AND DESTINATION OF THE EMIGRATION FLOW

Since the early 1990s, close to half-a-million Cubans have settled in the United States, with several thousand more travelling to other countries, particularly Spain. Table 1, drawn from official U.S. statistics, provides information on Cuban nationals admitted as permanent residents in the United States between 1989 and 2009. Table 2, in contrast, provides net emigration figures from the island between 1989 and 2009 according to Cuba's official statistical institute. There is a close correspondence between both sets of figures: the higher number of emigrants depicted in Table 2 represent emigration to countries other than the United States. In 2007 alone, nearly 10,000 émigrés reached Spanish shores (Suárez 2008). The number of Cuban émigrés is expected to rise in years to come pursuant to the *Ley de Nietos* (Grandchildren Law), approved by the Spanish Parliament, which extends citizenship rights to foreign-born grandchildren of Spaniards. Estimates vary, but it is assumed that between 150,000 and 250,000 Cubans may be eligible to apply for and receive Spanish passports ("Cerca de 24,000" 2009; Vicent 2010a, 2010b). Many beneficiaries, and their families, are expected to eventually migrate to Spain.

The migration flow to the United States continues unabated and it is likely to increase further as recent arrivals become naturalized citizens and take advantage of family reunification provisions in U.S. immigration law to bring additional family members. Smaller migration flows to other countries continue to be reported in the press. Marriages of convenience with visitors to Cuba or arranged with willing nationals by Cubans reaching other countries are frequently reported (Agence France Press 2010). Emi-

**Table 1. Cubans Obtaining U.S. Legal Permanent Status, 1989–2009**

Fiscal Year	Number of Immigrants
1989	10,046
1990	10,645
1991	10,349
1992	11,791
1993	13,666
1994	14,727
1995	17,937
1996	26,466
1997	33,587
1008	17,375
1999	14,132
2000	18,960
2001	27,453
2002	28,182
2003	9,262
2004	20,488
2005	36,261
2006	45,614
2007	29,104
2008	49,500
2009	38,954
1980–2009	474,463

**Source:** Office of Immigration Statistics, Office of Management, Department of Homeland Security, *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, 2003 and 2009, Persons Obtaining U.S. Legal Permanent Status, [www.dhs.gov/files/statistics/publications](http://www.dhs.gov/files/statistics/publications).

**Table 2. Net Emigration from Cuba and Emigration Rates, 1993–2009**

Year	Net Emigrants	Rate
1993	3,303	-0.03
1994	47,844	-4.4
1995	33,648	-3.1
1996	20,552	-1.9
1997	21,000	-1.9
1008	26,799	-2.4
1999	31,224	-2.8
2000	29,322	-2.6
2001	33,043	-2.9
2002	30,985	-2.8
2003	28,674	-2.6
2004	35,429	-3.2
2005	33,348	-3.0
2006	35,275	-3.1
2007	32,811	-2.9
2008	36,903	-3.3
2009	36,564	-3.3
1980–2009	516,724	

**Source:** Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas, *Anuario estadístico de Cuba* 1998, Table II.19, p. 69; 2000, Table II.21, p. 81; 2001, Table 21, p. 83; 2002, Table 21, p. 86; 2003, Table II.21, unnumbered; and 2009, Table 3.21, unnumbered.

grants also take advantage of legal loopholes, as is reported to be the case in Ecuador when Quito, to encourage international tourism, eliminated visa entry requirements. As many as 50,000 Cubans are said to have taken advantage and entered the country since June 2008 (Solano 2010). Also contributing to the migrant hemorrhage are frequent defections by Cubans participating in internationalist missions around the world (for a review, see Díaz-Briquets 2006).

The growing Cuban presence abroad has given rise to another émigré income-maximizing revenue source for the Cuban government. Contrary to the practice of most other countries, rather than reducing transaction costs to facilitate maintenance of transnational contacts between home country and emigrant communities, the Havana regime views the emigrant community as a cash cow. It shamelessly maximizes what it extracts from the emigrants, charging exorbitant fees for routine consular services. The regime in Cuba, likewise, levies considerable sums for emigration and foreign travel-related services that citizens of other nations seldom, if ever, have to pay to visit or settle in other countries, such as permits for return visits.

Returning Cuban visitors abroad and Cuban residents visiting the country are forced to pay steep fees for exceeding arbitrarily-established limits on the importation of consumer goods, a practice unknown in most countries unless the imports are intended for commercial purposes. Moreover, a particularly onerous burden Cuban émigrés face when visiting Cuba or forwarding remittances to relatives and friends is the 10% fee that must be paid when converting US dollars into convertible Cuban pesos (CPs). The conversion fee is very high and is totally out of line with what visitors must pay when exchanging dollars into local currency when traveling elsewhere in the world. The conversion fee amounts to a discriminatory tax as it is only levied for conversion of U.S. dollars into CPs, a practice not associated with the exchange of

any other national currency for CPs. Since most Cuban émigrés reside in the United States, the U.S. dollar/CP exchange fee was specifically designed to increase the transaction costs of the émigré community with the homeland.

Several press articles have called attention to this situation (Cepero 2008; Cires Dib 2008; Chardy and Tamayo 2010; and “*Costos y mitos*” 2010). This note seeks to more fully document the nature of these excessive charges mainly with reference to fees charged by the Cuban Interest Section Consulate in Washington, DC. Information posted in the Consulate’s website ([www.embacu.cubaminrex.cu](http://www.embacu.cubaminrex.cu)) is compared with data culled from websites of other Latin American consulates in the United States or obtained through telephone interviews with consular officials. A secondary objective of the note is generating a general order of magnitude regarding the aggregate cost to the émigré community of these consular and foreign travel fees and, conversely, what they contribute to Cuba’s coffers.<sup>2</sup>

## CUBAN CONSULAR FEES IN THE UNITED STATES

Tables 3 and 4 provide information on the services provided by the Cuban Consulate in Washington and the fees for each. Table 3 brings together travel-related services (e.g., passport renewals, consent decrees for minors to travel abroad) and the fees charged for each, whereas the second provides a list and fee schedule for other types of services (e.g., legalization of documents, certifications for the repatriation of human remains). As shown in Table 3, some travel-related fees run into the hundreds of dollars, the highest being for new passport requests and renewals. The Consulate also charges sizable fees for travel-related requirements unique to Cuba, such as \$150 per month for residents of the country wishing to extend their temporary exit permits while visiting the United States.

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2. Visitors to the island—whether of Cuban or of any other national origin—as well as Cuban visitors traveling abroad, must pay airport fees (currently 25 CP). Airport fees are used quite extensively around the world to finance construction and operation of international airports and therefore are not considered in the rest of this note.

**Table 3. Cuban Travel Consular Service Fees, by Type of Service**

Service	Fee (US dollars)
Request for new passport	350
Passport renewal	350
Passport extension (2 years)	160
Visa permit for Cubans residing abroad	100
Extension of foreign visa permits for residents of Cuba (per month, up to 11 months)	150
Extension of permit for temporary travel (official trips, one time charge only)	40
Humanitarian entry permit	60
Official entry permit	60
Entry permit for naturalized U.S. citizen (who departed Cuba before December 31, 1970)	150
Indefinite Exit Permit (PSI) application	80
Entry permit for Cuban nationals holders of Indefinite Exit Permits (PSI)	80
Adjusting to PSI status	80
Application for permanent repatriation	20
Approval of permanent repatriation application	60
Invitation letter for a Cuban to visit abroad	136
Consent decree for a minor to travel abroad <sup>a</sup>	150
Legalization of consent decree notarized abroad for a minor to travel abroad	140

**Source:** Cuban Interest Section Consular Website ([www.embacu.cubaminrex.cu](http://www.embacu.cubaminrex.cu)).

a. "In addition, for each page or part thereof, \$20 more" (*por cada hoja o parte 20.00 dólares más*).

A unique Cuban requirement is the \$136 charge for processing a "Letter of Invitation" when a U.S.-based person requests from Havana a temporary exit permit for a family member in Cuba to visit. Naturalized U.S. citizens of Cuban birth who departed the country prior to 1970 are not required to use a Cuban passport when visiting the island, as do all others, but must pay a \$150 fee for the privilege. Other requirements, and the fee for each service, are shown in Table 3. Generally speaking, lower fees are levied in connection with official visits, repatriation procedures, or for travel related to "humanitarian" reasons.

Table 4 provides non-travel related services and the fee schedule for such services. Some fees run into the hundreds of dollars, in particular those associated with the authentication of foreign birth, marriage and divorce certificates. Fees for two types of services are especially onerous. Requests for academic transcripts are usually honored, but petitioners must pay a \$460 fee for each transcript, inclusive of a \$180

**Table 4. Fees for Other Cuban Consular Services, by Type of Service**

Service	Fee (US dollars)
Legalization and certification of Cuban documents <sup>a</sup>	80
Birth authentication of children born abroad of Cuban parents	280
Authentication of marriages performed abroad	280
Authentication of death certificate	280
Shipment of human remains to Cuba <sup>b</sup>	1,120
Cuban marriage certificate request	20
Issuance of Cuban marriage certificate	180
Cuban birth certificate request	20
Issuance of Cuban birth certificate	180
Cuban death certificate request	20
Issuance of Cuban death certificate	180
Cuban divorce certificate request	20
Issuance of Cuban divorce certificate	180
Cuban bachelorhood certificate request ( <i>soltería</i> )	20
Issuance of Cuban bachelorhood certificate ( <i>soltería</i> )	180
Legal capacity certificate request	20
Issuance of legal capacity certificate	130
Penal background certificate request	20
Issuance of penal background certificate	180
Years of work in Cuba certificate request	20
Issuance of years of work in Cuba certificate	210
Academic transcript certificate request <sup>c</sup>	20
Issuance of academic transcript <sup>d</sup>	460
Citizenship certification request	20
Issuance of citizenship certification (or opposite) document	260
Emigrant certification request	20
Issuance of emigrant certification document	260
Nationality certification request	20
Issuance of nationality certification document	260
Other special notarization requests	150

**Source:** Cuban Interest Section Consular Website ([www.embacu.cubaminrex.cu](http://www.embacu.cubaminrex.cu)).

a. The \$40 fee is for documents previously legalized in Cuba; if not, there is an additional \$40 charge.

b. Exclusive of shipment cost. Combined fee is for the legalization of 8 separate documents (\$140 each).

c. Presumably for each transcript, if more than one is requested.

d. Includes \$280 for issuance plus \$180 for legalization.

charge for legalizing the document. Medical transcripts are currently not been issued by Cuban consulates, it has been reported, as a means to dissuade medical personnel from defecting while posted abroad in internationalist missions (Tamayo 2010). This policy is consistent with other punitive measures aimed at professionals who often seek to defect in these instances (Fernández 2008; Robles and Woods 2008). By far the highest fee is required for shipping human remains to Cuba, a total \$1,120 for

legalizing 8 separate certificates (at \$140 each). These are a death certificate, a cremation or embalming certificate, a sanitary certificate, and a burial or transit certificate. Each document must be notarized and submitted to the Consulate in English and Spanish.

### A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The extent to which Cuban Consulate fees are out of line with those from other Latin American countries can be appreciated by comparing fee schedules for selected services offered by consulates from these countries in the United States. The fees gathered in this note are those listed in consulates' web sites; they therefore may not reflect overcharges alleged to be levied, whether legally (supposedly to cover administrative costs) or illegally by some consulates in the United States as documented for Honduran consulates in Atlanta, Georgia and Dallas, Texas ("*Cobros ilegales*" 2010; "*Piden al Nuevo*" 2010). The number of comparisons that can be made is limited as the types of consular services offered vary significantly from country to country. Moreover, as a general rule, consulates of most Latin American countries do not offer many of the services offered by the Cuban Consulate. Coming from countries with more open and accessible political systems and standard border control procedures (e.g., nationals or emigrants are not required to apply for and receive exit or entry permits), these travelers do not have to seek the documentation services handled by the Cuban Consulate. Emigrants from these countries, furthermore, usually can obtain most legal documents directly or through the good auspices of relatives still in their countries.

Comparative data for one of the services most often requested by émigré communities, the issuance or renewal of a passport, are shown in Table 5. At \$670, the Cuban Consulate charges 6 to 20 times more than any other country in the table, with Costa Rica charging the least (\$31) and Colombia the most (\$117) outside of Cuba. On an annualized basis, the cost of a Cuban passport remains very steep, 5 to 22 times higher than in other countries in the region listed in Table 5. The extraordinarily high fee charged by the Cuban Consulate for obtaining or renewing a Cuban passport is a product of two separate fees: (1) a \$350 payment considered an application fee; and (2) an additional \$320 to maintain the passport's validity for its six years duration, two two-year

renewals being mandatory (at \$160 each). Moreover, in order to visit Cuba, Cuban-origin naturalized U.S. citizens must travel on a Cuban passport (except, as noted, those who left Cuba before 1970), a requirement no other naturalized Latin American emigrant must satisfy.

**Table 5. New Passport Consular Fee, Years of Validity and Annual Cost, by Country**

Country	New Passport Fee (\$)	Validity (Years)	Cost per Year <sup>a</sup> (\$)
Cuba	670	6	112
Argentina	60	5	12
Bolivia	85	6	14
Brazil	80	5	16
Chile	103	5	21
Colombia	117	10	12
Costa Rica	31	6	5
Dominican Republic	60	6	10
Ecuador	110	6	18
El Salvador	60	5	12
Guatemala	65	5	13
Honduras	75	10	8 <sup>b</sup>
Mexico	101	6	17 <sup>b</sup>
Nicaragua	50	5	10
Panama	54	5	10
Peru	35	5	7 <sup>b</sup>
Uruguay	84	5	17
Venezuela	80	5	16

**Source:** Various Latin American countries Consular websites in the United States.

a. Rounded

b. In several countries the annual cost for a new passport is lower if requested for a longer time period. The annual fee for an additional five-year passport in Honduras is \$12, for an additional three-year passport in Mexico it is \$25; and for an additional two-year passport in Peru, \$10.

Comparative fee data are also available regarding consent decrees for minors to travel abroad, a universal requirement these days to prevent a disgruntled parent from taking a child overseas absent the other parent's authorization. In this case, as shown in Table 6, Cuban consular fees are well above what is charged by other countries' consulates, as much as 16 times higher than Bolivia's. At least one country, Mexico, offers this service gratis as a service to its nationals residing overseas.

From a comparative perspective, by far the most excessive and onerous Cuban fee is the one charged for

**Table 6. Consent Decree Fee for Minor to Travel Abroad, by Country**

Country	Fee (US dollars)
Cuba	150
Argentina	50
Bolivia	9
Brazil	40
Colombia	25
Dominican Republic	35
Ecuador	20
El Salvador	20
Mexico	No charge
Nicaragua	25
Peru	20

**Source:** Various Latin American countries Consular websites in the United States.

repatriation of human remains, as indicated in Table 7. In all cases, consular fees for repatriation of remains are exclusive of actual transportation costs, which are a function of distance and other factors. In absolute terms, the Cuban Consulate charges nearly \$1,000 more than the other two countries levying the next highest fees, the Dominican Republic and Honduras. For humanitarian reasons, most other countries only either collect a nominal fee, or no fee at all. Not even in death are Cuban emigrants capable of escaping the confiscatory hand of the regime.

**Table 7. Fee for Shipment of Human Remains, by Country<sup>a</sup>**

Country	Fee (US dollars)
Cuba	1,120
Brazil	40
Colombia	No charge <sup>b</sup>
Dominican Republic	140
Ecuador	No charge <sup>b</sup>
El Salvador	No charge <sup>b</sup>
Guatemala	No charge <sup>b</sup>
Honduras	160
Mexico	No charge <sup>b</sup>
Nicaragua	75
Panama	30
Peru	100
Venezuela	100

**Source:** Various Latin American countries Consular websites in the United States.

a. Most consulates contacted indicated that fees, if required at all, were mostly nominal and simply required for the authentication of U.S.-issued certificates.

b. May require additional authentication fees.

## CONTRIBUTION OF CONSULAR AND RELATED TRAVEL FEES TO CUBA'S TREASURY

While it is difficult to estimate how much revenue accrues to Cuba from the consular fees levied for travel and other purposes, it is clear that the amount is significant. With close to 300,000 Cuban-Americans visiting Cuba in 2009 (*"Casi 300,000"* 2010), with an even higher number expected in 2010, the figure must approximate \$30 million a year just from the issuance of passports. The estimate assumes one-third of visitors, out of a pool of roughly one million post 1970 U.S.-based Cuban emigrants, renew their passports and request extensions each year. Somewhat less must be the amount of fees collected for processing exit visas (150 CPs for a *Carta Blanca*) paid in Havana (Pérez Pulido 2008), or for permits for visits by relatives of Cuban-origin families in the United States paid to the Consulate. In 2009 for the *Carta Blanca* item alone, Cuban-Americans must have paid \$8 million (in CPs) assuming the 36,564 Cuba emigrants reported in the 2009 *Anuario Estadístico* paid the fee the same year they left the country.

With fees charged for processing foreign visit exit permits and extension requests for the reported 17,047 non-immigrant Cubans who visited the United States in 2009 (Office of Immigration Statistics 2009), plus consular fees for many other types of services, revenues begin to add up. Always looking for further ways to increase revenues collected from its natives abroad (as well as tourists), the Cuban government announced that from May 2010 onwards, visitors to the country must purchase health insurance from one of several domestic authorized agencies (*"Detallan costos"* 2010; *"Cuba exigirá"* 2010). As a rationale for the insurance requirement, the government alleges, probably correctly, that some visitors were taking advantage of Cuba's free health care system. The cost of the insurance is \$46 to \$48 per month, for a maximum annual coverage of \$7,000 (Chardy 2010). With more than 2 million visitors a year, the mandatory medical insurance should bring in more than \$90 million annually, some \$14 million from the émigré community.

Even though the precise amount paid in fees by the émigré community to the Cuban Consulate in Washington (and in Havana) for travel-related (and other) services cannot be precisely estimated, it is certain to be in the tens of millions of dollars (perhaps in the \$60–\$80 million annual range). Comparable fees are levied by Cuban consulates in other countries, further increasing the financial burden on the émigré community. The wide range of requirements and hefty fees associated with each are evidence of the willingness of the Cuban government to financially squeeze the country's citizens that, for one reason or another, left the country for good. As noted, these onerous consular practices are consistent with the requirement to convert U.S. dollars into CPs at a disadvantageous exchange rate for emigrants of limited means. The same applies to the unwarranted taxes levied on consumer goods imported into the country when alleged to exceed maximum requirements. These punitive charges represent an extension, beyond Cuba's confines, of the confiscatory practices implemented domestically as emigrants are dispossessed of material possessions upon leaving Cuba. Contrary to other countries' practices that maintain consular fees low to serve poor compatriots abroad, the Cuban government regards emigrants as a font of revenue to be exploited at every opportunity.

## CONCLUSIONS

The practices of the Cuban government to charge emigrants excessive fees for routine consular services as well as for services not required by any other na-

tion, together with many other abusive policies implemented over the years—as described by Ojito (2005), among others—help explain the sharp dichotomy alluded to by Jorge Domínguez in a recent Havana seminar paper. A 2007 Florida International University (FIU) Cuba poll found, Domínguez notes, that while only 43% of emigrants who left the country between 1959 and 1964 were in favor of a national dialogue among Cubans, almost 80% of those emigrating between 1995 and 2007 were in favor. In contrast, nearly equal percentages in both groups (74% and 72%, respectively) supported military action by exiles to replace the Castro government (Domínguez 2010). The inescapable inference is that a vast majority of Diaspora Cubans, regardless of when they left the country, are frustrated with the situation there. The greater willingness of the most recent arrivals to support a national dialogue reflects their concern about the well-being of and desire to remain in contact with and financially support their families. This accounts for their acquiescence to pay the excessive fees charged by Cuba's government. Finally, the abusive treatment to which Cuban émigrés are subjected in the form of extensive requirements and high fees calls into mind whether consular fees should be seen as a sovereign issue or a matter that ought to be regulated through international agreements. Such agreements could prevent abuses while promoting equitable and reciprocal treatment of émigrés regardless of source country.

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