

January 13, 2013

## After Decades, Cuba Eases Travel Rules to Maintain Ties

By VICTORIA BURNETT

HAVANA — The door slammed shut behind Gloria 11 months after she left [Cuba](#) for Miami in mid-2011. Close to her dream of obtaining American residency, she ignored her government's deadline to return home and gave up her rights as a Cuban.

"It was a terrible moment," said Gloria, 40, a former shop assistant, by telephone from Miami, who asked that her full name not be used because she feared publicity might jeopardize her [immigration](#) status. "I didn't know whether things here would work out or not, but there was no going back."

Until now, that is. New Cuban migration rules that take effect on Monday will allow islanders to spend more time overseas before they forfeit their Cuban residency, a concession that reflects the government's desire for closer ties with millions of Cubans who live abroad.

The rules, part of a package that loosens despised restrictions on the freedom to travel, could allow thousands of Cubans to shuttle between the United States and home in much the way that Mexican migrants do and could create a class of economic émigrés worlds apart from the exiles who oppose closer ties.

Since the 1960s, the Cuban government has strictly controlled travel, and most Cubans who moved overseas without special permission have lost their rights and property. The many who do return for visits — some 400,000 traveled from the United States last year — may stay on the island for only a month (or three, under the new regulations) and are not allowed to buy property or invest in private businesses here, though many do under the table.

The new rules — among the most anticipated changes introduced by President [Raúl Castro](#) — eliminate expensive, time-consuming paperwork for most Cubans, who will need only a passport to travel. And in a surprising development, the government will also allow some medical professionals to go abroad, though it will continue to limit travel by people who work for strategic sectors, and, most likely, dissidents.

It will also be easier to return to the island: Cubans who leave will no longer automatically lose their property, and those who wish to return for good can reapply for residency. The government has extended the period Cubans may spend overseas without losing their right to return to two years from 11 months, giving them more time to find jobs overseas and creating a window for those in the United States to apply for residency there — a process they can begin after a year.

"Over all, this speaks to a desire to move towards a more normal immigration policy and a more normal country where people go back and forth, work, send money," said Philip Peters, vice

president of the Virginia-based [Lexington Institute](#), which follows the United States' relationship with Cuba.

But Mr. Peters said the new Cuban rules raised new questions about United States immigration rules that were devised to give Cubans refuge from persecution and offered privileges that other immigrants could only dream of.

The United States offers a minimum of 20,000 visas each year to Cubans. In addition, 8,000 or so who present themselves at a border crossing or make it to American shores each year are also allowed to enter and can apply for residency under the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act. An increasingly popular route among the tens of thousands of Cubans granted Spanish citizenship in the past few years is to enter the United States on a Spanish passport, lie low for a year and then claim United States residency under the Adjustment Act.

"The whole policy is anachronistic," said Mr. Peters, who called for a review of the regulations in [a report](#) published in December. "The laws and procedures we have for victims of persecution are perfectly adequate — we don't need a special policy for Cubans."

The Adjustment Act has opponents of all stripes: the Cuban government objects to it, saying that it encourages people to make risky sea crossings. Cuban-American lawmakers argue that it should not apply to Cubans who go back to visit the island.

"One cannot claim that one would be persecuted in Cuba while at the same time going back for a visit," Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Republican of Florida, said in a recent interview published by the blog [Café Fuerte](#).

Even some moderate Cuban-Americans say the policy seems unsustainable, and several Cubans on the island and in Miami said there were fears the United States would eventually tighten its policies.

"I want to see my people coming here and getting residency and having a good life, but I do see that it's not fair," said Romy Aranguiz, 34, a physician from Cuba who settled in the United States in 2002 but returns often to the island.

A United States government official said in an e-mail last week that there were "no suggestions of policy changes on the Cuban Adjustment Act or immigration policy." In a statement issued on Friday, a State Department spokeswoman, Victoria Nuland, said the government "was working to ensure that mechanisms are in place to address any increase in visa applications or undocumented migration" as a result of the changes in the Cuban migration policies.

Dr. Aranguiz said the Cuban government should reach out more to the diaspora, allowing émigrés to inherit property and invest or work in Cuba. "They have treated us like we are not part of the nation," she said. "That is changing. But they should encourage us more. It's our land"

María Isabel Alfonso, a college professor who left Cuba with her family in 1995, predicted that United States migration policies would evolve only after the question of the economic embargo was settled.

"Everything is so abnormal in Cuba's relationship with the United States," Ms. Alfonso said. "It all needs to get sorted out together." In the meantime, she said, the Cubans who go back and forth

across the Florida Straits would continue to knit the two communities together.

“They are a generation that has moved beyond the ideological war,” she said. “They just want to live their lives.”

She added, “They’re the people Cuba needs to push the country forward”

For Gloria, the former shop assistant who left, Cuba’s new migration laws may have come in the nick of time. She has obtained American residency, worked several jobs, taken a course in alternative medicine and is starting a family — not bad for 18 months on American soil.

Now, she hopes that if she visits the island within two years of leaving she may retain her rights as a Cuban, too.

“To be able to go home, come back here, maybe have a business there one day,” she said from Miami. “That would be perfect.”