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Obama and Castro shake hands: could this indicate a new rapprochement?

The genial meeting at Mandela's memorial matched the mood of the moment, but is Cuba right to think 'US aggression' is ending?

Jonathan Watts, Latin America correspondent
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The handshake between [Barack Obama](#) and Cuba's president, [Raúl Castro](#), was undoubtedly one of the most memorable images from the memorial service for [Nelson Mandela](#), but could it also prove to be the most significant?

The encounter, at the Soccer City stadium in Johannesburg, was brief – [a nod of respect, a slightly lengthier-than-needed clasping of hands, a few brief words](#) – but iconic. This was the closest that leaders from the two countries had come in more than 10 years.

For many it matched the mood of the moment. What better way to respect the legacy of Mandela than to open a new chapter of rapprochement at the ceremony for him?

The Cuban government certainly seemed to think so. In a statement, it said the handshake may show the "beginning of the end of US aggressions".

Such hopes may put too much weight on a gesture that Obama may not have been able to avoid given the circumstances. The US state department claims the handshake, the first of many Obama made on the way to his seat, [was "unplanned"](#).

But recently there have been other political and economic developments that suggest the opportunity for a thawing of relations is as good now as at any time since the Cuba revolution of 1959.

Castro has recently introduced several significant reforms that indicate that his government is moving towards a gradual opening up, like China.

[Overseas travel restrictions were eased last year](#) to allow many Cubans to leave without an exit visa. More than 200 new licences have been issued for private businesses, and there has been [an explosion of small-scale entrepreneurial activity](#), evident in the "paladar" restaurants and small shops in almost every neighbourhood in Havana. And half a million Cubans are now self employed.

The government has also eliminated some salary caps for workers, and allowed farmers to buy their own supplies and lease unused state land. It announced that it would phase out the dual currency system. Additionally, in the country's biggest move to attract foreign investment, the authorities are building a new free-trade zone in Mariel Port, with Brazilian assistance. It will be the biggest development project in the country's history.

Computer and cell phone use is now legalised, and this year the government announced the opening of 118 "internet rooms". Despite the high expense for most Cubans, connection speeds that are low and home internet access still being forbidden, the moves represent an opening of information and cultural channels that were previously tightly closed.

Even baseball, the country's favourite sport, is showing signs of change. For the first time this year state TV channels started showing US Major League games. These days in Havana you are more likely to see a New York Yankees baseball cap than the green military kepi made famous by [Fidel Castro](#).

These are tentative steps. Castro's government retains a firm grip on the economy and shows no signs of willing to share or cede political power. But European diplomats in Havana say the Cuban leader is committed to a path of reform.

Obama has also hinted at the need for change. In [a speech in Miami last month](#), he said: "We have to be creative and we have to be thoughtful and we have to continue to update our policies ... Keep in mind that when [Fidel] Castro came to power I was just born, so the notion that the same policies that we put in place in 1961 would somehow still be as effective as they are today in the age of the internet, Google and world travel, doesn't make sense."

But despite the warming words, there has been little concrete progress. The US maintains a tight embargo on Cuba although 188 nations, including every EU state, voted for it to be lifted at the UN.

America-Cuba talks to normalise mail services between the two countries were called off after Cuba's 2009 detention of Alan Gross, [a US contractor who was providing internet access to the Jewish community on the island](#).

The main obstacle is the Cuban exile community in Miami, whose influence is magnified by the importance of [Florida](#) in US domestic politics. They have made very clear just how much they loathed Obama's recent public encounter with Castro.

"Sometimes a handshake is just a handshake, but when the leader of the free world shakes the bloody hand of a ruthless dictator like Raúl Castro, it becomes a propaganda coup for the tyrant," said Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, the Republican Congress member in Florida, told the US secretary of state, John Kerry. "Could you please tell the Cuban people living under that repressive regime that, a

handshake notwithstanding, the US policy toward the cruel and sadistic Cuban dictatorship has not weakened."

The US senator [John McCain](#) compared the handshake at Mandela's service to [Neville Chamberlain shaking Adolph Hitler's hand](#) before the second world war.

Fox News, meanwhile, had the temerity to run a segment asking whether the handshake "was disrespectful to the spirit of Mandela", apparently unaware that the South African leader considered Fidel Castro an ally in the struggle against apartheid.