

Opinion article: Inside Cuba's blackout: what the blockade narrative leaves in the dark.

By Mariangel Garcia Seijas.

When the U.S. cut off Cuban oil, activists flew in with solar panels. Both sides missed the point.

When the lights went out across Cuba in early 2026, the world had a ready explanation: the United States had cut off the oil. And that was true. But it was not the whole truth. And the difference between a partial truth and a complete one matters enormously when geopolitics is involved. Within weeks, a flotilla of international activists and influencers, Greta Thunberg, Jeremy Corbyn, and Pablo Iglesias among them, arrived in Havana under the banner of humanitarian solidarity, delivering solar panels and media content in roughly equal measure. What they did not deliver was an honest account of how Cuba got here. Thunberg closed her public statement with the slogan "Cuba yes, blockade no," while Jeremy Corbyn, former leader of the U.K. Labour Party, declared that "the U.S. is suffocating the Cuban people with its criminal and inhumane blockade." What both forgot to mention is that the Cuban government itself carries a significant share of the responsibility for what Cubans had been living through for decades.

Cuba's energy collapse did not begin in January 2026, when U.S. forces captured Nicolas Maduro in Caracas and Executive Order 14380 blocked oil tankers from reaching Havana. It began in 2000, with a handshake between Hugo Chavez and Fidel Castro. Venezuela would supply Cuba with up to 100,000 barrels of crude per day at discounted prices. Cuba would send doctors, teachers, and advisors in return. It was framed as socialist solidarity. It worked, in practice, as a deep dependency that Cuba never tried to leave.

What almost no one noticed when Petrocaribe, a regional initiative launched by Venezuela in 2005 to supply Caribbean and Latin American countries with subsidized oil in exchange for political alignment, was that Cuba was repeating the same mistake it had made with the Soviet Union: trading one external lifeline for another, without building anything of its own in between. When Soviet support collapsed in the early 1990s, Havana declared a "Special Period in a Time of Peace" and blamed the crisis entirely on U.S. tightening of the embargo. The lesson was never learned. A new partner appeared, and Cuba embraced it with the same total reliance and the same refusal to build something more solid underneath it. This is what dependency theory in International Relations would predict: unequal arrangements create a reliance that is nearly impossible to leave without serious cost. As a study published in ScienceDirect on Petrocaribe describes it, the arrangement was built on "petropolitics," oil used as a tool of political influence. Cuba was not just buying fuel. It was buying into a political project.

This distinction is not a detail. It is the entire argument.

The Collapse That Came Before the Blockade

By the time the U.S. intervention happened, the system was already falling apart. When global oil prices crashed between 2014 and 2016, dropping from over \$100 to below \$35 per barrel according to the World Bank, PDVSA, Venezuela's state oil company, was exposed as a deeply weakened institution. Already drained of expertise after Chavez fired thousands of experienced engineers following a 2002 strike, it could no longer keep production going. The IMF recorded Venezuelan inflation reaching approximately one million percent in 2018.

The crisis was already there. The world just was not paying attention.

The Narrative That Arrived Ready-Made

What made the dominant narrative so lasting is that it was not purely the result of bad journalism. It was built into the system. Cuba and Venezuela rank 165th and 160th respectively on Reporters Without Borders' 2025 World Press Freedom Index. In both countries, the

information most available to international media is the information the state wants shared. Al Jazeera ran the headline "How the US plunged Cuba into darkness." TeleSUR described "economic suffocation" by Washington, with no mention of the decade-long internal collapse of PDVSA that had gutted Venezuela's oil supply long before any blockade came into force.

From a constructivist point of view in International Relations, the choice between "blockade" and "sanctions" is not simply a matter of words. As media framing theory explains, a frame works as "a central organizing idea that supplies context through selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration." When "blockade" becomes the main idea, the PDVSA collapse, the Petrocaribe breakdown, and the deep dependency all fade into the background. The frame does not change the facts. It chooses which facts matter. There is also an ideological layer rarely named directly.

A large part of the international media covering Cuba works within an anti-imperialist view that sees U.S. foreign policy as the main cause of suffering in the Global South. Applied to Cuba in 2026, this produces a clear blind spot. Writing in *Time*, Cuban economist Ricardo Torres argued that Cuba faces "a double crisis: an internal crisis of rules, incentives, and legitimacy, and an external crisis of shrinking support and harsher pressure." Kiele Alessandra Cabrera, a Cuban-American student at the University of Florida, posted a video on Instagram responding directly to Thunberg that gathered nearly 39,000 views in days: "The suffering of the Cuban people is a direct result of the Cuban state's mismanagement. The Castro regime and its military are worth billions, while the average Cuban struggles to find food." These are not the voices that tend to appear in flotilla coverage.

Solidarity as Spectacle

The flotilla did not just reveal a contradiction. It performed one, live, in front of the world. A government that had spent years forcing over a million of its own citizens into exile, and blocking many from ever returning, suddenly opened its doors to foreign celebrities carrying solar panels and cameras. Cuban artist Salome Garcia Bacallao captured the absurdity directly: "After causing more than a million Cubans to leave in just five years and denying many the right

to return to their own country, they are now open to a foreign humanitarian expedition." The question no one on the flotilla seemed to ask is why. The answer is not difficult: the convoy's narrative served the regime's interests perfectly.

Ramon Saul Sanchez, president of Cuban exile organization Movimiento Democracia, stated it plainly: "The flotilla is organized by the daughter of Raul Castro and groups supportive of the regime. What are they going to do if they give it to the regime? The regime is going to sell it." Havana Times noted that "the electricity debacle did not originate with the recent pressures from the Trump administration, although these have worsened an already deteriorating situation." A paediatric surgeon in Havana, speaking anonymously to The New Humanitarian, said simply: "The flotilla members are staying in luxury hotels, a world away from the realities the people are facing." This is the deeper problem with solidarity tourism of this kind. It is not that the participants are dishonest. It is that they arrive with a conclusion already formed, move through a country on a government-curated itinerary, and leave having confirmed what they already believed.

They did not just miss the story. They actively made it harder to tell.

What the Dominant Narrative Cannot See

From a Marxist political economy perspective, this pattern makes sense. This framework argues that the economic decisions states make are never purely practical, they are shaped by ideology, by a particular vision of how society should be organized and who should control its resources. In Cuba's case, that ideology held that socialist solidarity between states could replace the need for internal economic development. The relationship with Venezuela was not just an energy arrangement. It was proof that the Bolivarian project worked, that revolutionary friendship could substitute for market resilience. Admitting that it could not would have meant admitting that the ideological foundation of the Cuban state's economic strategy was flawed. So no alternative was built, no diversification was pursued, and no contingency plan was prepared. As economic analyst Marc Vidal has argued, the Cuban model "was designed to survive crises

through external support rather than address its structural failures, first the Soviet Union, then Venezuela." When that external support collapsed, there was nothing underneath it, not because Cuba lacked the resources to build alternatives, but because building them would have required a political honesty the system was not capable of.

The realist dimension of 2026 makes the external crisis impossible to dismiss: Executive Order 14380 turned control over Venezuelan oil into direct pressure on Cuba without a single U.S. soldier setting foot on Cuban soil. But realism also demands honesty about the weakness that made that pressure possible. Countries that depend entirely on a single external partner for half their energy needs are not simply unlucky. They are the result of choices.

The lights in Cuba went out because the grid was never updated, because its fuel supply depended on a collapsing external system, and because political decisions placed ideological loyalty above practical planning. And yes, because the United States took advantage of that weakness with precision. Dependency theory explains the structural trap. Marxist political economy explains the ideological thinking that built it. Realism explains how it was used against Cuba. Constructivism explains why most of the world only sees the last part of the story. The challenge is accepting that no single explanation is enough on its own. That is what serious analysis demands. And it is, so far, what much of the international coverage has failed to provide.