

Editorial

Mr. Obama, Cuba and the O.A.S.

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For 50 years, the Cuban people have suffered under Fidel Castro's, and now Raúl Castro's, repressive rule. But Washington's embargo — a cold war anachronism kept alive by Florida politics — has not lessened that suffering and has given the Castros a far-too-convenient excuse to maintain their iron grip on power.

So we are encouraged to see President Obama's tentative efforts to ease the embargo and reach out to the Cuban people. At the same time, we are absolutely puzzled and dismayed by this week's frenzied push by many Latin American countries to readmit Cuba to the Organization of American States.

Cuba, which says it has no interest in joining, clearly does not meet the group's standards for democracy and human rights.

The campaign was led by the O.A.S.'s least-democratic members (Nicaragua and Venezuela), which seemed intent on picking a fight with Washington — and deflecting attention from their own unsavory practices. The timing seems especially odd and counterproductive considering Mr. Obama's strong overtures to the region and to Cuba.

In April, Mr. Obama changed the regulations to allow Cuban-Americans to visit their relatives on the island as often as they want (the Bush administration had limited those visits to once every three years). And they can now send unlimited gifts and money. He has also cleared the way for American telecommunications firms to pursue licensing deals in Cuba in an attempt to expand access to cellphones and satellite television.

The more contacts Cubans have with the outside world — and the more they learn about the freedoms just 90 miles away — the more likely they are to question the privations of their one-family rule.

The White House also has offered to negotiate the first direct-mail service in decades and to resume talks with the Cuban government on migration, which were suspended by the Bush administration in 2003 along with most avenues of regular communication. This week, Havana agreed to the talks on migration and mail service as well as to possible cooperation on counterterrorism, drug interdiction and hurricane relief.

This is not a reward for the Castro government. Eliciting Cuba's cooperation is in this country's clear interest. We also suspect that if Cuban officials talk to their American counterparts regularly, then they, too, may end up questioning their political allegiances.

The Obama administration was right to resist the push to precipitously readmit Cuba to the O.A.S. It was right to insist that Havana first improve its treatment of its citizens and embrace the group's democratic standards. On Wednesday — after a hyperbole-filled debate that focused almost solely on past resentments of the United States, rather than Cuba's ongoing repression — the O.A.S., by acclamation, decided to lift Cuba's 1962 suspension from the organization.

Officials from the United States and the O.A.S. said that Cuba's re-entry will not be immediate. It will result only from a dialogue in line with O.A.S. "practices, purposes and principles." We're not sure exactly what that means, but we hope Havana will come under strong regional pressure to release political prisoners and make other democratic reforms.

We understand the desire to fully reintegrate Cuba into the main regional organization. But as Human Rights Watch argued this week: "Cuba is the only country in the hemisphere that repudiates nearly all forms of political dissent. For nearly five decades, the Cuban government has enforced political conformity with criminal prosecutions, long- and short-term detentions, mob harassment, physical abuse and surveillance."

Mr. Obama must go further and press Congress to lift the embargo. And the O.A.S. must press Havana to join the democratic mainstream — and its errant members to adhere to the organization's own democratic charter.

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