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The Obamas to make historic trip to Cuba, Argentina next month

By [Juliet Eilperin](#) and [Karen DeYoung](#) February 18 at 12:40 PM

President Obama and the first lady will make a historic trip to Cuba next month, the White House announced Thursday, before stopping off in Argentina to meet with its recently elected president.

The president and Michelle Obama will journey to the island nation on March 21 and 22, according to a statement from White House press secretary Josh Earnest, and will then stay in Argentina for two additional days. The move will mark the first visit to Cuba by a sitting U.S. president in the 88 years since a trip by President Calvin Coolidge. In a statement, Earnest described Obama's visit as one aimed at helping foster democratization and economic liberalization in Cuba, as well as hailing the recent progress made by Argentina.

"In Cuba, the president will work to build on the progress we have made toward normalization of relations with Cuba — advancing commercial and people-to-people ties that can improve the well-being of the Cuban people, and expressing our support for human rights," Earnest said. "In addition to holding a bilateral meeting with Cuban President Raúl Castro, Obama will engage with members of civil society, entrepreneurs and Cubans from different walks of life.

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Obama himself tweeted that "we've already made significant progress" in the normalization process he announced 14 months ago.

Earnest said in the statement that the trip "is another demonstration of the President's commitment to chart a new course for U.S.-Cuban relations and connect U.S. and Cuban citizens through expanded travel, commerce, and access to information."

Josefina Vidal, who directs U.S. relations at Cuba's Foreign Ministry and serves as the nation's lead negotiator in bilateral talks with the administration, tweeted Thursday that Obama's visit "will ratify

Cuba's willingness" to advance a better relationship between the two countries based on the foundations of international law.



She added in a separate tweet that Obama would be treated "with all respect and consideration during his visit to Cuba."

However, a slew of Republicans — including several of the party's leading presidential candidates — sharply criticized Obama's decision to travel to a country still under the control of an authoritarian regime. Two of them, Sens. Marco Rubio (Fla.) and Ted Cruz (Tex.), have parents who emigrated from Cuba to the United States.

"It's not just a communist dictatorship, it's an anti-American communist dictatorship," Rubio said on CNN on Wednesday night. "I want the relationship between the U.S. and Cuba to change, but it has to be reciprocal. Look what we did with Burma or Myanmar, where the U.S. opened up to them, but they made political changes."

Former Florida governor Jeb Bush was equally harsh, telling Fox News Channel's Megyn Kelly, "Well, it's a tragedy in my mind that we have diplomatic relations and the president's trying to build legacy here when, if you have a different view from the Castro regime, you're put in prison."

But some Republicans, who have pushed for closer ties with Cuba, welcomed the announcement.

"For Cubans accustomed to watching their government sputter down the last mile of socialism in a '57 Chevy, imagine what they'll think when they see Air Force One," said Sen. Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.), a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee who has traveled to Cuba in the past. "Just think of the progress that can come from one day allowing all freedom-loving Americans to travel to Cuba."

Prensa Latina, the official Cuban news agency, was restrained in its coverage, which largely quoted the official White House release.

The White House initially envisioned the Cuba visit as coinciding with the planned March 23 signing of a peace deal between the government of Colombia, a close U.S. partner, and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the guerrilla group it has battled at home for decades. Negotiations over the agreement have been conducted in Cuba over the past four years. But when Obama discussed his plans with visiting Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos here early this month, it was clear that the deadline would be missed. Rather than find another place in Obama's final-year schedule, the White House decided to go ahead with the Cuba stop, in coordination with the visit to Argentina.

The trip will come amid a mixed picture on human rights in Cuba. The independent Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation reported last month that 1,14 Cubans had been detained for political reasons in January, one of the highest monthly figures in recent decades. Of those, the commission reported, 56 peaceful members of the opposition were subjected to physical attacks.

Nearly all of the arrests occurred during regular Sunday morning opposition marches to Catholic churches and resulted in brief detentions of four to six hours. The Sunday marches have become a principal avenue of protest for growing opposition groups. At the same time, the number of political prisoners, many of them incarcerated for decades, according to outside human rights organizations, has dropped to about 40 to 60. The government has continued to deny repeated requests by the International Committee of the Red Cross to visit Cuban prisons.

Since normalization was first announced, Cuba and the United States have reopened their embassies in Washington and Havana, and the administration has removed Cuba from the list of state sponsors of

terrorism. Four members of Obama's Cabinet have visited Havana, including Secretary of State John F. Kerry, Commerce Secretary Penny Pritzker, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack and Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx. Dozens of other senior officials on both sides have exchanged visits.

The two countries have agreed to a resumption of postal service between them, and this week invited commercial airlines to apply for licenses to begin direct flights. A series of regulatory changes have eased banking, trade and travel restrictions under the ongoing U.S. embargo that can only be lifted by Congress.

Cuba, according to a list compiled by the U.S.-Cuba Trade and Economic Council, has authorized direct banking relationships with U.S. financial institutions, lines of U.S. credit for private Cuban businesses on the island, and roaming agreements between the government telecommunications service, Verizon and Sprint. It has also increased paid wireless access for Cubans.

Cleber LLC, a small U.S. tractor manufacturer, has received Cuban approval and an unprecedented U.S. Treasury license to establish a manufacturing plant on the island to produce up to 1,000 tractors annually.

After going to Cuba, the first family will meet with Argentine President Mauricio Macri, who took office in December.

The president will "discuss President Macri's reform agenda and recognize his contributions to the defense of human rights in the region," Earnest said, and work to "deepen efforts to increase cooperation between our governments in a range of areas, including trade and investment, renewable energy and climate change, and citizen security."

While the Cuba visit will be the subject of worldwide attention, the visit to Argentina is also significant. It has been nearly two decades since the last bilaterally focused visit by an American president to Argentina, and Latin America's third-largest country is the only Group of 20 member nation that Obama has not yet visited while in office.

Nick Miroff contributed to this report.

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