

US embassy in Cuba formally reopens: 'A day for pushing aside old barriers'

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1 John Kerry formally reopened the US embassy in Cuba
2 with a flag-raising ceremony on Friday, issuing a call for
3 "genuine democracy" in the country.
4 It was the first visit to Cuba by a US secretary of
5 state since 1945, and the ceremony at the newly
6 recommissioned US embassy in the Cuban capital
7 marked the return of an American presence to a
8 building the US had vacated in 1961.
9 "We remain convinced that the people of Cuba would
10 be best served by a genuine democracy," Kerry said.
11 The main thrust of his speech, sections of which he
12 delivered in Spanish, however, played up the promise
13 of a new chapter in Cuban-American ties as the two
14 countries begin to normalization relations following
15 Barack Obama's historic announcement that diplomatic
16 ties would be restored last year.
17 "For more than half a century, US-Cuba relations have
18 been suspended in the amber of cold war politics,"
19 Kerry said. "It's time to unfurl our flags and let the world
20 know we wish each other well."
21 The secretary of state was welcomed to the country
22 by foreign minister Bruno Rodríguez Parrilla, who
23 dispatched a delegation to attend the ceremony at
24 the seaside facility. Groups of Cuban onlookers, some
25 holding US flags, gathered on adjacent sidewalks and at
26 overlooking windows.
27 Adding symbolic weight to the proceedings was the
28 presence of three US Marines who had taken the flag
29 down at the site 54 years earlier. Kerry greeted each by

30 name before they stepped forward to stand with three
31 younger counterparts hoisting the banner.
32 Even as the flag went up, however, the diplomatic
33 promise heralded by Kerry revealed its limits. Excluded
34 from the crowd in the embassy courtyard were the
35 political dissidents who, until Obama announced the
36 diplomatic thaw last December, had been among the
37 most influential voices in the United States on the
38 subject of US-Cuba relations.
39 The opposition had warned, with each stage of the
40 "normalization" – the release on both sides of political
41 prisoners; a deal to allow telecom companies to
42 strengthen the internet on the island and for US banks
43 to do business there; a US agreement to expand
44 remittances and ease travel restrictions – that too many
45 opponents of the Castro regime remain in prisons, or
46 remain sentenced to silence under threat of retribution.
47 "Cuba needs freedom. And freedom will not be brought
48 by the US or any other country," Berta Soler, leader of
49 the Ladies in White, a dissident group composed of
50 wives and relatives of former political prisoners, said
51 in an interview published on their website. "Freedom
52 can only be established by Cubans themselves. We are
53 worried that while [US officials] are making concessions
54 to the Castro government, the regime is getting
55 stronger all the while."
56 Pressure for a denouement proved to be greater. Since
57 Obama's re-election in 2012, influential voices from
58 Pope Francis to a growing number of US legislators to