

Negotiations with a Non-governmental Agency in a Socialist State

The people of Cuba with whom we worked on the Salty Dawg Rally to Cuba are passionate, honorable people...people with whom you'd be perfectly comfortable reaching agreement on plans and terms of a group visit.

However, when working with such people who represent non-governmental organizations in a totalitarian country, you must recognize that their intentions are sincere, but the reach of their authority is limited. Lurking behind their good intentions and reasonable decisions are ministers of the central government who can, and do, change rules and policies without notice and without recourse. In fact, it may be that the more entrepreneurial members of an autocratic society are those most apt to be subject to capricious and ill-considered governmental edicts.



The Salty Dawg Rally to Cuba was a success by any measure; I would recommend a similar Rally to anyone. That said, we did get to see the reach of central government on a couple of occasions and in the demeanor of those with whom we worked during our visit.

Beginning in August of 2016, Salty Dawg representatives began communicating with the Hemingway International Yacht Club (HIYC) to make arrangements for the Rally to Cuba.

Communications were formal, cordial, and fairly frequent. In October, HIYC accepted our request to visit and put in a request to the government to permit a 24-boat fleet visit.

Before Thanksgiving we were told that we were confirmed by Cuban authorities for a visit and the dates were on the calendar in Cuba at HIYC and at the government-owned Hemingway Marina in which HIYC has its clubhouse. Conversations continued to establish details of the visit. HIYC was anxious to provide arrival and departure parties at a fixed price per participant in the Rally. SDSA wanted somewhat less formal parties at lower costs. HIYC was responsive and agreement was reached on the details.

After terms were reached, SDSA organizers were asked to see if we could encourage Rally participants to join the Hemingway International Yacht Club of Havana. As an enticement all Rally participants would receive dinners and drinks for their crews at the farewell dinner without cost *if* at least one person per boat arriving in the Rally joined the Yacht Club. Further, each boat would receive a 15% discount on their berthing fees as a benefit of club membership. This offer would prove to be problematic for HIYC and the new club members from the Rally.



Rally participants warmed to the membership idea, so we gathered money for HIYC memberships and handled interactions with the Yacht Club. With memberships completed from 22 boats, and but one to go, we learned that the government had changed the 15% discount policy; it was cancelled effective immediately.

This was a surprise to everyone. HIYC representatives were embarrassed as their efforts to appeal the decision were rebuffed. The Club offered refunds to those new members who wanted to resign. Boat captains who had joined the club began recalculating their berthing fees without the discount. The Salty Dawg Rally to Cuba sailors responded with grace and understanding as nearly all retained their memberships and enjoyed the gala departure party thrown by the Yacht Club at no cost to the crews of boats with members aboard.

A lesson was learned. In this case, the two negotiating parties, SDSA representatives and HIYC leadership, had acted in good faith for the benefit of all, but the Yacht Club did not have control over a benefit it offered. The government, for its own reasons, had unilaterally withdrawn one of the major terms of the agreement. Government control over activities we would commonly consider beyond government interest was reportedly common.

The contract that visiting captains received on sign-in to Marina Hemingway was quite thorough and explicit. Those planning future rallies to Cuba will be wise to understand who the authority is for the services that are being sought and to request a contract for those services from that authority. I doubt that would guarantee immunity from unanticipated governmental policy changes, but it might lessen the likelihood.

While these precipitous changes seemed to cause no particular distress for Rally participants, they did add substantially to the administrative burden of rally management, so minimizing them will be helpful in future rallies to Cuba.