HAVANA, Cuba. – “We are full,” “we are filled to capacity,” “we are expecting a very large delegation,” “only guests are being served,” “no vacancy,” are some of the justifications that Cubans hear these days when they try to register at any of the large hotels in Havana.

For weeks now, complaints abound in social media, but the Ministry of Tourism and the hotel chains, foreign as well as domestic, have said nothing officially about what are, undoubtedly, discriminatory practices, if not directly against Cubans who live in the island, definitely against the national currency with which no business wants to conduct transactions due to its total devaluation.

We are not talking about rumors, it’s not about a circumstantial scandal on social media, it’s, unfortunately, a reality that we could corroborate “in the field” when we set out to investigate the veracity and reach of this “new norm” which is not covered by any of the ghost resolutions that govern day-to-day life –whether Cubans notice or not- and is blatantly unconstitutional.
This is a violation that takes no one by surprise in Cuba, not only because it’s another one of many unconstitutional practices of the same dictatorship that drafted the actual Constitution, but also because several generations already endured them for decades when Fidel Castro, seeing that tourism was “a necessary evil”, denied Cubans access to hotel facilities, a prohibition that would include the entire commercial circuit meant for foreigners but that did not apply to high-ranking military officers, top-level state officials and their relatives.

According to what we have been able to learn from people who work in such hotels as Nacional, Capri, Manzana Kempinsky, Grand Aston, Paseo del Prado and Grand Packard - the hotels about which people complaint the most on the Internet- these facilities are forced to trade a minimal number of services in Cuban pesos, for domestic clients, but only to keep up appearances that favor the official discourse, a discourse that does not admit publicly that the national currency is like a hot potato.

Staff, directors and officials that CubaNet talked with agree on one explanation: in luxury establishments, it is not profitable to do commercial transactions in Cuban pesos, at an exchange rate that is far from realistic, lower than the rate in the informal market, least of all when supplies are purchased in hard currency, including those purchased in Cuba either from state providers or from private producers.

According to several sources, the agreement with the Cuban government to conduct commercial transactions in Cuban pesos stems from strictly political objectives, and the Cuban side has not complied with its commitment to pay in hard currency the totals generated in Cuban currency, at a fixed exchange rate agreed upon by both parties.
“A debt is accumulating, and as (the Cuban bank) has informed us on several occasions, it is not possible to settle it at this time,” states on condition of anonymity the director (on the foreign side) of one of the hotels most criticized for discrimination against domestic clients.

“It’s not about discriminating Cubans, not at all (...). My wife is Cuban, it’s a protective measure, because if not, we would end up closing shop (...), we have requested from the government to update the agreement, but to date, there is no answer; neither have we been able to adjust prices to an exchange rate similar to that on the street, because we are waiting for an answer (...), today, although our prices are high, they are below prices charged in any paladar (private, home-based eatery) in Havana. People have done the numbers. We have, too, and it’s not cost-effective,” adds the director.

Una queja publicada en Facebook (Captura de pantalla)

An official of the Ministry of Tourism interviewed by CubaNet on condition of anonymity, stated that, up to now, no prohibition has been issued by the government ministry, but he admitted that various establishments on their own have instituted actions aimed at preventing loses for conducting transactions in Cuban pesos.

“That there is no prohibition does not mean that it isn’t happening, and in addition, the government knows about it,” states our interviewee. “The government has preferred to look the other way and not pay its debts or allow an adjustment of prices. They insist on demonstrating that the national currency has
value, when reality is telling us that it does not (...). The ministry (of Tourism) has made recommendations about the need to determine exceptions with selected luxury establishments; in fact, none of those hotels sells its services to Cubans at the reservations bureau.

However, another source we consulted at the same ministry informed us that said “recommendations” seem more like clear suggestions; they are the ones that become internal decrees and are responsible for giving the green light to the practice at specific hotel facilities of barring access to Cubans without fear of reprisals from the regime.

“It’s not only the foreign side that is affected, everyone loses,” states this official on condition of anonymity. “One cannot purchase and import goods in hard currency to then sell these goods in Cuban pesos. It’s just not possible. If the ministry (of Tourism) didn’t respond to the requests (for settling debts and adjust the exchange rate), it did authorize to make exceptions. (...) We cannot continue delivering services in Cuban pesos at some 12 hotels, eight of them in Havana, including Hotel Nacional where at the Nacional alone, package offers will be maintained for a limited number of Cuban clients, preferably those that make their reservations abroad.”

With the rise of Raúl Castro to power in 2008, the prohibition established by Fidel Castro was soon eliminated, although not in full; in some places and in a manner that wasn’t limited to the high prices that even a highly qualified professional worker could not afford, they implemented a group of “internal rulings” which the government chose to tolerate, with the aim of limiting access to Cuban clients, one ruling in particular that is used today at bars, restaurants and hotels under the alleged “right of admission.”
Now it seems that Miguel Díaz-Canel, with his “continuity” policy, wants to restore the “splendor” to a discriminatory gem of the past, although it doesn’t seem he’ll decide to turn into law what looks like becoming an open practice.

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