

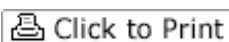
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Cuba embraces open-source software

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By John Rice, The Associated Press

HAVANA — Cuba's communist government is trying to shake off the yoke of at least one capitalist empire — Microsoft ([MSFT](#)) — by joining with socialist Venezuela in converting its computers to open-source software.

Both governments say they are trying to wean state agencies from Microsoft's proprietary Windows to the open-source Linux operating system, which is developed by a global community of programmers who freely share their code.

"It's basically a problem of technological sovereignty, a problem of ideology," said Hector Rodriguez, who oversees a Cuban university department of 1,000 students dedicated to developing open-source programs.

Other countries have tried similar moves. China, Brazil and Norway have encouraged the development of Linux for a variety of reasons: Microsoft's near-monopoly over operating systems, the high cost of proprietary software and security problems.

Cuban officials, ever focused on U.S. threats, also see it as a matter of national security.

Communications Minister Ramiro Valdes, an old comrade-in-arms of President Fidel Castro, raised suspicions about Microsoft's cooperation with U.S. military and intelligence agencies as he opened a technology conference this week.

He called the world's information systems a "battlefield" where Cuba is fighting against imperialism.

He also noted that Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates once described copyright reformers — including people who want to do away with proprietary software — as "some new modern-day sort of communists" — which is a badge of honor from the Cuban perspective.

Microsoft did not return calls seeking comment. Cuba imports many computer preloaded with Windows and also purchases software in third countries such as China, Mexico or Panama.

Valdes is a hard-liner who favors uniforms and military haircuts, but the biggest splash at the conference was made by a paunchy, wild-haired man in a T-shirt: Richard Stallman, whose Free Software Foundation created the license used by many open-source programs, including Linux.

Middle-aged communist bureaucrats and ponytailed young Cuban programmers applauded as the computer

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scientist from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology insisted that copyright laws violate basic morality; he compared them to laws that would threaten people with jail for sharing or modifying kitchen recipes.

Stallman also warned that proprietary software is a security threat because without being able to examine the code, users can't know what it's doing or what "backdoor" holes developers might have left open for future entry. "A private program is never trustworthy," he said.



Cuba also has trouble keeping proprietary software current. Its sluggish satellite link to the outside world makes downloads of updates agonizingly slow. And U.S. companies, apparently worried about American laws restricting trade with Cuba, are increasingly blocking downloads to the island.

Cubans try to get around the problem by putting software updates on a server located on the island. But many computers wind up unpatched and vulnerable.

Cuba's Cabinet also has urged a shift from proprietary software. The customs service has gone to Linux and the ministries of culture, higher education and communications are planning to do so, Rodriguez said.

And students in his own department are cooking up a version of Linux called Nova, based on Gentoo distribution of the operating system. The ministry of higher education is developing its own.

Rodriguez's department accounts for 1,000 of the 10,000 students within the University of Information Sciences, a five-year-old school that tries to combine software development with education.

Cuba is also training tens of thousands of other software and hardware engineers across the country, though few have computers at home. Most Cubans have to depend on the slow links at government internet cafes or schools.

Rodriguez shied away from saying how long it would take for Cuba to get most of its systems on Linux: "It would be tough for me to say that we would migrate half the public administration in three years."

But he said Linux use was growing rapidly.

"Two years ago, the Cuban free-software community did not number more than 600 people ... In the last two years, that number has gone well beyond 3,000 users of free software and its a figure that is growing exponentially."

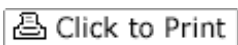
Even so, most of the computers at this week's technology conference showed the red, green, blue and yellow Windows start button in the bottom left-hand corner of their screens.

And the start of the open-source sessions was delayed as organizers fiddled with the computer running their projector. The conference room screen had been displaying the words "Windows XP."

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