

January 7, 2008

## Cuba's Transition Begins

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Without a hint of irony, Fidel Castro asserted twice last month in columns in Cuba's Granma newspaper, that he is not one "to cling to power." The truth is that few world leaders in modern times have ruled as long as he has. On New Year's Day he began the 50th year of his dictatorship.



**Raul Castro**

But now, at the age of 81, handicapped and incapable of providing coherent leadership, the end of his historic reign is imminent. He has not been seen in public for more than 17 months after ceding authority "provisionally" to his brother Raúl, Cuba's defense minister.

During his incapacitation there have been no reports of Communist Party officials seeking his counsel, carrying out his directives, or even taking initiatives in his name. When pressed to comment on Fidel's condition and role in the leadership, Cuban officials lately have been saying mainly that he continues to inspire them and provide ideas.

So it seems all but certain that, voluntarily or not, he'll vacate the Cuban presidency early this year, though he may symbolically hold onto some new, wholly honorific title.

The transition at the top will probably set in motion cascading reassignments of civilian and military officials. Raúl Castro will call the shots, but mostly from behind the scenes. With his own bases of support in the armed forces that he has run since 1959, the security services he has controlled since 1989, and the Communist Party he manages, he has the power and legitimacy to preside over the succession. He has been the designated heir since January 1959. And at the age of 76, with many years of hard drinking under his belt, he is probably viewed by most in the leadership as a transitional figure, better to be courted than challenged.

Raúl's style guarantees that Cuba will be governed differently. He'll rule more collegially than his brother, consulting trusted subordinates and delegating more. During the interregnum he has worked with officials of different generations and pedigrees, even promoting one long-time archrival to create a united front after his brother's initial withdrawal.

On his watch, Raúl has broken some previously sacred crockery as well. He has admitted that Cuba's many problems are systemic. In his disarmingly accurate view, it is not the American embargo or "imperialism" that are the cause of problems on the island, as his brother always insisted, but rather the regime's own mistakes and mindsets. He has called on Cubans, especially the youth, to "debate fearlessly" and help devise solutions for the failures. Candid discussions at the grassroots level have proliferated.

Yet like his brother, Raúl has no intention of opening Cuba to free political speech or participation. While the number of Cubans willing to voice their discontent publicly is on the increase, so too is the brutality of government reprisals against would-be leaders of the dissident movement. By acknowledging state failures, Raúl is playing with fire, and if the lid is going to be kept on, those challenging the regime have to pay a price. As to his own future, in the leadership realignments he plans, he will probably move up one rank and assume command of the Communist Party as first secretary.

In an address last July dedicated primarily to massive failures in agriculture, Raúl called for "structural and conceptual" change. Given his past sympathetic references to the laws of supply and demand, his advocacy of liberalizing economic reforms in the 1990s, and the many for-profit enterprises his military officers have been encouraged to run, he probably plans to introduce market incentives in the countryside. That might prove the first step toward adopting something akin to the Chinese or Vietnamese economic development models.

It has been Raúl's preference since the earliest days of his partnership with Fidel to work inconspicuously in the background. As they have been doing since Fidel's confinement, others will represent Cuba abroad and preside at holiday events. Someone who is not named Castro will likely become Cuba's next president. There has never been a "third man" in the running for leadership. But legitimizing the longer-term succession is surely now one of Raúl's highest priorities. Politburo member and Vice President Carlos Lage is the leading candidate. A medical doctor 20 years younger than Raúl, Mr. Lage is widely considered an advocate of economic reform.

After nearly a half century of Fidel's suffocating control, the transition will be daunting. His successors are inheriting a bankrupt and broken system, a profoundly disgruntled populace, and acute economic problems. The worst of these are the dysfunctional public transportation and agricultural sectors, a housing shortage, decrepit infrastructure, unemployment and the widening gap in living standards between Cubans with access to hard currency and the more numerous poor who must subsist on worthless pesos.

And there is Hugo Chávez. Unlike Fidel, Raúl has no personal rapport with the mercurial Venezuelan president, and surely no desire to be subordinated to another narcissistic potentate just as he is finally close to escaping his brother's grip. But Cuba has become highly dependent economically on Venezuela. The value of the Chávez dole, mostly oil, reached between \$3 billion and \$4 billion last year, approaching the amounts once provided by the Soviet Union. Raúl would be loath to provoke the Venezuelan. Without his support, the Cuban economy would soon plunge into deep recession.

There is no way to know how skillfully Raúl Castro will lead and deal with inevitable crises once his brother is gone. He clearly wants to begin rectifying economic problems but knows that, for some time at least, he cannot broadly repudiate his brother's legacy. A powerful backlash could come from *fidelista* hard-liners in the leadership -- and perhaps from Mr. Chávez. In the end, however, it is the gamble Raúl will have to take.

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