



## WASHINGTON OFFICE ON LATIN AMERICA

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### **The United States and Post-Castro Cuba**

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#### **Hardliners in the Exile Community**

For more than forty years, Fidel Castro's opponents in the Cuban exile community have hoped, prayed, and worked for the day when Castro would leave power. They have pursued a variety of strategies to achieve their goal. Assuming that his departure would trigger major changes in Cuba, they have hoped that illness or assassination would remove him from office. They danced in the streets of Miami when Castro suddenly announced that he would cede power to his brother Raul while he recovered from surgery in the summer of 2006 (although their optimism proved unfounded, as the subsequent transfer of power proceeded smoothly and without major changes in the Cuban political regime.)

Over the years, much of their effort has been focused on the U.S. embargo on Cuba, and the hope that the embargo would squeeze the country's economy, and thereby hasten Castro's downfall. In the early years, exiles groups hoped that the economic disruption caused by the embargo would weaken the Castro government's ability to defend itself, making an exile invasion more likely to succeed. After the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion, and the Cuban government's eventual defeat of counter-revolutionary forces on the island, exiles contented themselves keeping the embargo in place, harassing Cuba with occasional raids, and waiting for the day when a hardline U.S. Administration might once again consider the invasion option. They had a brief moment of hope when Ronald Reagan was elected, and again after the collapse of the Soviet Union when George Bush, Sr. refused to rule out invasion as an option. But both Administrations had other foreign policy priorities, and the invasion option was not long on the table.

The Cuban economic crisis of the 1990s spurred hardliners once again into thinking that the Cuban economy might collapse, and might bring the government down with it. In response, they sought to further tighten the U.S. embargo on Cuba, lobbying the Congress and Presidential candidates for new restrictions that they hoped would intensify the pressures on the struggling Cuban economy. The Cuban Democracy Act, passed in 1992, forbade the foreign subsidiaries of U.S. companies to trade with Cuba. Then the Helms-Burton bill in 1996 sought to discourage foreign investment that might help revive the Cuban economy. It threatened foreign firms that did business in the United States with lawsuits if they invested in Cuba. (Technically, the law authorized Cuban exiles who had become U.S. citizens to file civil lawsuits in U.S. courts against non-U.S. companies making investment deals in Cuba that involved property that had been expropriated from those exiles. But the intent of the legislation was to force foreign companies considering investing in Cuba to face the risk of litigation and claims against their assets in the United States.)

These measures succeeded in hurting the Cuban economy. They reduced the Cuban government's room to maneuver, and imposed additional hardships on the already hard-pressed Cuban people. But they did not lead to collapse. Despite an economic crisis more severe than the Great Depression of the 1930s in the United States, the Cuban government maintained enough domestic legitimacy to prevent serious internal challenges, and began a slow process of economic re-structuring and recovery.

By 2006, most hardliners had abandoned the idea that the Castro government could be driven from power. Although they pressured the Bush Administration to take measures to tighten the embargo yet again -- particularly to restrict hard currency flows from the United States by limiting Cuban American family visits -- most hardliners had stopped believing that U.S. economic measures against Cuba would lead to the government's collapse. The Cuban economy appeared to be recovering (in fact, Cuban macro-economic growth rates have picked up substantially in the last several years), and while many Cubans continued to be unhappy about their personal economic situation, there was little evidence of a significant or growing internal opposition that could challenge the Cuban government and provoke a political crisis.

Strategists in the hardline exile community came to believe that the next real opportunity for change in Cuba would come when Castro died. Having abandoned the notion that economic problems and internal unrest might lead to Castro's overthrow, they supposed that Castro's death would create a political opportunity for change. They assumed that whatever post-Castro government emerged in Cuba would be interested in negotiations to improve relations with the United States, and would be willing to bargain over political and economic changes in Cuba in return. This view presumes that a post-Castro government will be substantially different than the current Castro government, for whom national sovereignty and independence are extremely important, and who are very unlikely to ever negotiate internal political and economic change for the sake of better relations with the U.S.

Given this view, hardline exile groups sought to maintain the embargo not to weaken or attack the Castro government but so that it could be used as leverage for negotiations in the post-Castro period.

A Presidential Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba was established by the Bush Administration and charged with developing plans for assistance to a post-Castro Cuba, based on this assumption. The reports released by the Commission in 2004 and 2006 are based on the premise that, after Castro, the Cuban people would reject their entire social and political framework, and welcome U.S. assistance and advice. As a result, the reports provide no useful framework for thinking about U.S. engagement with Cuba after Castro. The events of the last few months, in which a smooth transfer of power took place in Cuba when Fidel Castro voluntarily ceded power to his brother Raul while he coped with emergency surgery and serious illness, illustrate how incorrect these assumptions are. The United States government remains an irrelevant actor during this critical time in the history of Cuba.

### **What will a post-Castro government be like?**

Many discussions about Cuba begin with the assumption that Fidel Castro's departure will begin a process of rapid political change in the country. The examples of the Soviet Union and of the countries of Eastern Europe are often cited, where transitions happened when governments collapsed, or when sharp divisions among the political elite provoked ruptures, and led to regime change. Less traumatic transitions, such as those in Spain after Franco, or Chile after the referendum on Pinochet, are sometimes cited, as well. But Cuba is unlikely to follow any of these models.

Most serious observers, whether sympathetic or hostile to the Castro government, argue that, in the immediate period after Castro's retirement or death, a relatively stable succession will take place. Popular discontent will not boil over; internal differences among elites will not explode. Continuity, not change, will be the hallmark of the new government. For example, Mark Falcoff, a conservative political analyst and scholar at the American Enterprise Institute has written "What follows Castro is not likely to be a free-market democracy, but rather a blander and more bureaucratic version of the system they have now."

Events seem to vindicate this point of view. President Fidel Castro had long ago named his brother, Raul Castro, as his successor. When he announced in the summer of 2006 that he was temporarily ceding power while he recovered from surgery, he followed this plan, and appointed Raul to stand in for him. Raul, an army general and the longtime Minister of the Armed Forces, does not have the charisma or the popularity that Fidel does. But he has become head of state. Key centers of power in Cuban society-- the military, the

Communist Party leadership, and senior state officials – have accepted him as the country’s interim leader, and whenever Fidel Castro’s departure becomes permanent, in the interest of political stability, it seems likely that the Army, the Party leadership, and government ministers will unite to endorse Raul as head of government.

But if Raul Castro will lead the country, he will not do so in new circumstances. When he permanently assumes power, Raul Castro will not rule as unilaterally as did his brother, Fidel. Fidel Castro is First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party, President of the Council of State elected by the National Assembly, and, by virtue of his position as President of the Council of State, head of the Council of Ministers that runs the government bureaucracy. He is the dominant figure in each of these governing institutions. While Raul may be elected to all three positions, he will not dominate them all in the same way. He will depend on the support and the counsel of a number of key figures and institutions, and will probably not be able to act without them. These probably include the Minister of the Economy, the Minister of Foreign Relations, the head of the National Assembly, and senior members of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party. (Significantly, when Fidel Castro announced the temporary transfer of power, he named the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of the Economy, and the Ministers of Education and of Health, as individuals who would have key responsibilities, along with Raul Castro.)

In addition, given the fact that Raul Castro is only a few years younger than his brother Fidel, his tenure in office will be significantly shorter. Other political leaders will perceive this, and Raul is unlikely to accumulate the kind of decision-making power that Fidel had. He will be more dependent for support on other political actors. In a post-Fidel government, Raul Castro will lead, but in a political environment where other actors have become more powerful.

In the first few months of its tenure, the successor government led by Raul Castro will seek to both consolidate and demonstrate its popular support and legitimacy. There will certainly be differences among the leadership. But whatever those differences are, they will likely be managed privately; the public façade will be one of unity.

### **Legitimacy and the Succession in Cuba**

The post-Castro government will need to take measures to establish itself, both domestically and internationally, as the popular and legitimate government of Cuba. Displays of national unity and of popular support will be critical in the early days, but other issues will surface.

The Cuban economy has improved since the very difficult years of the 1990s, when the economy struggled to adjust to the end of Soviet subsidies, and had to suddenly seek new markets for its exports. But Cubans still continue to suffer through relatively difficult economic times. The *libreta*, the coupon book for state subsidized food stuffs, only provides enough to cover basic needs for two to three weeks out of the month. For the other one to two weeks, most Cubans have to purchase food at non-subsidized prices, or in hard currency. On a state salary, this is very difficult; Cubans who do not have remittances from relatives abroad, or some form of earnings in hard currency, have a hard time making ends meet. And while transportation and electricity supplies have improved from the most difficult times, many Cubans continue to suffer through badly overcrowded public transportation, and occasional electrical outages. The result of these continuing economic difficulties is dissatisfaction. That dissatisfaction has not boiled over, and is not likely to when Fidel Castro leaves the scene. Most Cubans continue to accept and support their government. But dissatisfaction is a factor in the background, and a post-Castro Cuban government will have to take that into account. While it will have legitimacy in the eyes of the population, a government led by Raul Castro will not be able to count on the level of support that the charismatic Fidel enjoyed. The next government will have to recognize the discontent, and will have to take some measures to respond to it and maintain popular acceptance and support.

The government will seek to re-enforce its popular legitimacy in several ways. It may take short term steps that seek to spread the benefits of the macro-economic growth of the last few years to the “micro” level more

aggressively, taking measures to increase salaries, or improve public services, perhaps even expanding once again some of the options for self-employment, while maintaining a vigorous campaign against corruption.

The government may also consider political measures that would boost its legitimacy, including modest and carefully controlled measures that would open space for some dissidents, and efforts to reach out to and seek support from the churches in Cuba.

In addition to pursuing measures that will bolster its domestic legitimacy, a post-Castro government may seek to quickly demonstrate its international acceptance, urging visits by government leaders ranging from Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez to Spanish President Jose Luis Zapatero, and from leaders in developing nations not perceived as closely aligned to the United States. While those governments are unlikely to demand political or economic change in Cuba as a condition for recognition, they will all -- from the centrist and center-left governments of Europe, to Chavez and the government of Iran -- be in a position to urge the new Cuban government to move in one direction or another.

The new government will certainly capitalize on any efforts by the exile community or the United States government to re-assert influence in Cuba, uniting the population in a nationalist rejection of U.S. and exile interference in Cuban affairs.

Thus, in the immediate post-Castro period, a relatively smooth succession seems likely on the level of the Cuban leadership; it will reach out to the international community to affirm its legitimacy, and it will take some measures to consolidate its domestic support.

## **The Role of the United States**

This relatively smooth succession in Cuba could be significantly complicated by the actions of the U.S. government and the hard line sectors of the Cuban American community.

Some hardliners have always believed that the Cuban population is waiting to throw off the yoke of Communist tyranny, and has always imagined they would return to Cuba at the time of Fidel's departure to help establish a new government, or to support dissident groups. The power transfer of the last few months has taken place without any signs of internal unrest, or the emergence of a political opposition, and this has made the thought of returning to Cuba seem less realistic. But it could still happen that groups in the hardline exile community will try to return to Cuba by boat or by air when Fidel Castro is finally gone.

Others, moved more by humanitarian concern than by politics, could decide to try to return to Cuba to pick up relatives eager to leave the island, at a time when they are less likely to be stopped by the Cuban military, which will be pre-occupied with the succession.

It is thus easy to imagine a relatively chaotic scenario in which Cuban-Americans in boats or small planes, attempt to return to Cuba at the time of a definitive succession. This is a recipe for disaster. Most Cuban citizens, whatever they may think of the Castro government, are not eager to see exiles who left over forty years ago return to take over the country. The Cuban government and the Cuban military would see any large scale attempt to return as a political challenge and a national security threat. Conflict, in which U.S. citizens were arrested, or hurt, or killed, would be likely, and that would be very dangerous, as it would threaten to bring both governments into confrontation.

In part because of this scenario, the U.S. Coast Guard has, for many years, had standing orders to prevent small boats from leaving South Florida and heading toward Cuba in the period immediately after Castro's death or departure. This is a simple and common sense measure, designed to prevent uncontrolled movement that could generate a crisis at an already tense moment. Whether the Bush Administration and subsequent U.S. governments maintain this order, and assure that the Coast Guard fully and effectively implements it, is a major issue. (It is an encouraging sign that the both federal and Florida state authorities

made a serious and effective effort to dissuade Cuban exiles and Cuban-Americans from trying to return to Cuba in the days after the temporary transfer of power.)

If the succession in Cuba is less stable than expected, an exodus of Cubans could take place with significant numbers of rafters heading toward Florida. The hardline community in Miami would likely contribute to this exodus through its radio stations and other contacts in Cuba, encouraging people to take advantage of a relatively weak government and border patrol. The U.S. government would have to decide how to respond to this, in ways that did not encourage a further exodus that would overwhelm U.S. resources and produce a huge political backlash in the United States (which is already in the midst of a polarized immigration debate).

Even if the Administration in power maintains the order to prevent small boats from traveling to Cuba as well as a rafter crisis, it will still face a number of other issues in how it responds to Castro's departure from the scene.

The Helms-Burton Law, passed in 1996, requires a set of changes in Cuba before the United States can normalize relations or extend economic assistance to Cuba. This severely limits the scope of potential action for the current administration. The Bush Administration has made it clear that it wants to see significant political and economic change in Cuba as a pre-condition for improved relations. And, as noted earlier, hardline sectors envision offering to ease the embargo in return for these changes in Cuba.

This hardline position is unlikely to achieve results. Assuming that the successor government has come into office, and that a rafter and emigration crisis has been avoided, no post-Castro government is likely abandon the nationalism and independence that have been the hallmark of Cuba for the last four decades in return for negotiations on U.S. terms. While the Cuban government may feel the need to take economic measures designed to boost popular support, it will not be in such difficult economic circumstances that it will be desperate for U.S. aid, or tourism, or trade to keep it afloat. In fact, U.S. demands for political and economic change are likely to provide the government an opportunity to rally public support in nationalist opposition to U. S. interference.

### **What should the U.S. do?**

Any discussion about how the U.S. should act toward Cuba ought to begin by recognizing that Cuba is a sovereign nation, and that the United States neither can nor should dictate to Cuba the details of its own economic and political life. It should also recognize the real and significant advances that Cuba has made in education, health care, and social equality over the last forty years, advances that the Cuban people are likely to want to keep in the future.

U.S. discourse about Cuba has long emphasized Cuba's serious problems with democracy, respect for the rule of law, and human rights. The U.S. should not drop these concerns as it looks toward the post-Castro future. But they can only meaningfully be raised as one part of an extensive and ongoing dialogue with Cuba, rather than being cast in stone as pre-conditions for a more constructive relationship. U.S. policy ought to broadly engage with Cuba, and in that context, focus on encouraging a post-Castro Cuba to move toward greater political opening, while respecting its sovereignty and recognizing its achievements.

Of course, any discussion about the U.S. role in promoting democracy and human rights around the world today has to recognize that the history of U.S. intervention in Latin America (much less the recent U.S. role in the Middle East) leaves many people, both in the U.S. and in Latin America, deeply suspicious about U.S. motives when talking about democracy and human rights in other countries.

Given those two caveats, how should the United States act toward a post-Castro Cuba, if what it hopes to do is encourage movement toward greater political opening?

The most important point is that a policy of keeping the embargo in place, and waiting till Castro dies is short-sighted and ineffective. Cubans, from Fidel Castro on down, are already thinking about and preparing for the future. In fact, the succession has already begun. Sitting on the sidelines and waiting for the future to happen means having no meaningful role.

Efforts by the Bush Administration, through the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, to lay out how the U.S. would relate to a post-Castro Cuba are all based on the assumption that a dramatic change in Cuba's governing structures will take place after Castro leaves the scene. But events have shown that assumption to be unrealistic, and so the work of the Commission has almost no value.

A more sensible policy would start with the recognition that a post-Castro Cuba is likely, at least initially, to look much like the Cuba of today. Relations with a post-Castro Cuba will be shaped therefore by the relations we have today, and will develop in the near future.

We should recognize that the Cuban American community is going to be a major force in shaping U.S. relations with Cuba in the post-Castro future, and a major force in relation to Cuba itself. In the long run, the grievances that many Cuban-Americans feel will have to be addressed, as part of some process of reconciliation. (Such a process will also have to recognize the grievances that many Cubans harbor against the exile community.) The U.S. ought to begin now to take measures that encourage contact between the Cuban American community and Cubans on the island, both because it will make future relations easier, and because contact encourages and strengthens the moderate sectors of the community and tends to isolate the hardliners. Family, business, cultural, and religious contact between Cuban American and Cubans can only reduce tension at the moment of transition.

Similarly, a sensible policy would recognize that the post-Castro leadership is likely to draw on the advice and expertise of academics, technicians, government officials and others in Cuba who are young and open-minded. Any strategy that wants to encourage political opening in Cuba ought to be interested in developing relations and maintaining contact with that younger set of Cubans. Such a strategy need not be based on the idea that younger Cubans should be cultivated because we can "infect" them with our ideological beliefs, or can influence them to fundamentally alter their government. It should simply recognize that contact and communication between those individuals and sectors in Cuba and people in the United States cannot but be constructive in the long term.

It should be evident that, apart from any discussion of the post-Castro future in Cuba, the U.S embargo against Cuba should be ended. It was originally driven by Cold War fervor, and was never justified in terms of any realistic appraisal of the human rights situation in Cuba itself. A policy of engagement with Cuba, in which the United States raises its human rights and democracy concerns in the context of an ongoing diplomatic relationship, is the right thing to do from both a moral and political standpoint.

But in the context of discussions about the post-Castro future, it is clear that we should be taking measures now to increase contact between Cubans on the island and the Cuban American community, and increase contact between academic, religious and other sectors likely to be in touch with those who will actually shape the post-Castro future in Cuba. As we take those measures to increase contact, we should also work to lock in our efforts to use the Coast Guard to prevent a crisis when Castro dies or finally retires.

If we take these steps, we have a chance to encourage a succession in Cuba that would avoid a crisis and might over time lead toward greater political opening on the island.