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CUBA NO LIBRE

Cuba's new President is anything but, and the much expected change in power will bring only minor modifications for Cuba's long-suffering citizens.

by Gary Marx and Cecilia Vaisman



On February 19th, Fidel Castro made it official: he was resigning the presidency and ending his 50-year reign over Cuba.

Many exiles, U.S. officials and Cubans on the island had been waiting for this historic day, confident that it would not only mark a new beginning but signal that fundamental change was coming to the hemisphere's only communist nation. Some experts predicted that Cubans, fed up with shortages and hardship, would rise up and demand freedom. Others suggested change would come from within the government—that a younger generation of leaders would ascend to the top and recognize that Cuba's economic and political system was bankrupt and needed radical reform.

But what happened following Fidel's announcement was the opposite.

Rather than taking to the streets demanding change, Cubans are going about their daily lives—queuing for

hours at bus stops, collecting monthly food rations at neighborhood bodegas, and showing up at government jobs—as if nothing unusual has happened. Rather than a new generation of leaders taking over, Raúl Castro, Fidel's younger brother, was named Cuba's new president, and a cadre of aging communist loyalists continue to dominate the leadership structure in the newly named Council of State, the nation's top policy-making body.

U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice once again urged the Cuban government “to begin a process of peaceful, democratic change.” But Rice's words ignore evidence that strongly indicates Cuba's economic and political system, with minor modifications aimed at improving daily life, is unsustainable for the foreseeable future. Here's why.

The Power of Socialist Orthodoxy

We begin with the premise that Raúl Castro and his allies will only accede to radical change if they are forced into it, that is, if the regime's survival is at stake. A close look at what has occurred since the 1990s, which saw the introduction of limited reforms, reveals that Cuba's ruling elite remains committed to socialism.

In 1991, Cuba's economy went into a freefall following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the resulting loss of \$3 billion in annual subsidies. Hunger and power blackouts were widespread. Public transportation disappeared, while crime and prostitution soared. Almost overnight, Cuba became a sex tourism destination for Spaniards, Italians and Mexicans. After a brief riot in 1994, tens of thousands of Cubans took to the seas in flimsy rafts in a desperate attempt to reach U.S. shores.





Until the end, Fidel Castro was a regular host to sympathetic world leaders. Among them Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, right.



Fidel responded to the crisis by adopting reforms such as legalizing the U.S. dollar and issuing thousands of licenses to private businesses like restaurants, taxis, florists, mechanics, and carpenters. Farmers were allowed to sell their produce for profit at newly created agricultural markets and, for the first time since the 1959 revolution, authorities opened energy, tourism and other key sectors to foreign investment in partnership with state entities. Hundreds of millions of dollars also flooded into the economy in the form of remittances from Cubans living abroad.

By the late 1990s, the Cuban economy was in recovery. Food production increased and hunger eased. Tourism became a key source of hard currency. Foreign investment also helped Cuba boost production of nickel, now one of Cuba's top exports, and heavy oil.

The reforms, however, inevitably created inequalities between Cubans with access to dollars and Cubans

who lived solely on their peso salaries, which then averaged about \$15 a month. A new class of wealthy Cubans, labeled disparagingly as *los nuevos ricos* by Fidel, began shopping at expensive dollar stores and holding elaborate *quinceañeras* at Havana's luxury hotels, complete with party favors, glitzy dresses and decorations flown in from Miami.

Complicating matters further was a controversial government tourism policy—amounting to a form of apartheid—that barred Cubans but not foreigners from enjoying the island's best beaches, hotels and resorts.

Fidel grudgingly tolerated these limited market reforms and

everything that came with them until five years ago, when Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez appeared on the scene. Chávez' petroleum-backed generosity allowed Fidel to breathe life back into Cuba's socialist project.

Over the last few years, Chávez has provided Cuba with several billion dollars a year in discounted oil and financing. His support allowed Cuba to undertake state welfare projects on a scale not seen since the era of Soviet subsidies. Fidel declared 2006 the Year of Cuba's Energy Revolution (*Año De La Revolución Energética En Cuba*) and launched a program to hand out new electrical appliances to every Cuban household—from

rice cookers to electric burners to refrigerators. Venezuela's largesse paid for hundreds of Chinese buses and trains to ease Cuba's transportation woes and the installation of new power plants across the country, all but putting an end to the chronic blackouts. After years of bad news and belt-tightening, these measures were widely seen as offering signs of hope to average Cubans still struggling to make ends meet.

While Cuban authorities haven't explained the details of Cuba's reliance on Venezuela's largesse to the average citizen, the island's state-run media has elevated Chávez to a position once held by Soviet leaders during the heyday of the Cuba-Soviet alliance in the 1970s. There were few signs of Chávez when we first arrived in Cuba in 2002. Today, the Venezuelan leader appears on the front page of *Granma*, Cuba's Communist Party daily, almost as often as Fidel and Raúl.

But perhaps nothing drove home Chávez' extraordinary place in Cuba

more than the day the charismatic and youthful Venezuelan leader appeared on Cuban state-run television in August 2006, gently holding Fidel's arm as the Cuban leader lay in his sick-bed two weeks after undergoing emergency surgery.

Market Crackdown

Bolstered by Venezuela's massive assistance, Cuban authorities seized the opportunity to roll back market reforms and recentralize the economy. The U.S. dollar no longer circulates as a form of currency in Cuba and the government has drastically cut the number of licenses issued to small business owners. One sector especially hard hit by this retrenchment was private food services. Vendors had sprung up everywhere in the 1990s, selling everything from pork sandwiches to pizza to ice cream. They have disappeared. At the same time, new regulations on foreign investment have squeezed out scores of small and medium-scale foreign

business ventures by making it difficult to earn profits in Cuba.

But unlike the Soviet era, when Cuba relied on a single benefactor, Cuban authorities today are looking beyond Venezuela and aggressively cultivating ties with major foreign corporations and governments in strategic areas such as mining, energy and tourism. East of Havana, along Cuba's rocky northern coast, Canadian and Chinese flags fly atop oil installations pumping heavy crude.

Many of the oil facilities are managed in partnership with Cuba by Canada's Sherritt International Corp., whose chairman, Ian Delaney, visited Cuba last year and boasted that the island "is one of our favorite places to work." Delaney pledged that the company, which is also heavily invested in Cuba's natural gas and mining sectors, would spend \$1.25 billion in Cuba over the next two years.

Cuba's trade with China grew by 23 percent to more than \$2 billion in 2007. And in January, Brazilian

BLACK SPRING, WHITE PROTESTS

by Carolina Pasquali

In what has become known as the *Primavera Negra* (Black Spring), Cuban authorities arrested 75 dissidents on March of 2003. Charged with "disrespect toward the Regime" and "facilitating information to the enemy," many were sentenced to prison terms up to 28 years. Five years later, 55 remain in jail. Those who have been released suffer health problems and now live in fear of being arrested again. Miguel Valdés Tamayo, 50, one of the prisoners, died in January 2007. The families of those men count on foreign aid to survive. Many face long journeys to visit them, with the difficulties that Cuba's decrepit infrastructure presents.

But the wives and mothers of the prisoners have refused to stay home. Every Sunday, dressed in white, they march in silence through a Havana neighborhood, carrying pictures of their husbands and sons. Each picture is labeled with a number representing the years of sentence. It is a forbidding toll: the numbers range as high as 15, 20, 22 years. The so-called *Las Damas de Blanco* (or Ladies in

White) end their march with a mass in a local church.

The picture of Laura Pollán's husband, Héctor Maseda Gutiérrez, has the number 20 attached to it. An independent journalist and the president of the *Partido Liberal de Cuba*, Héctor had to face hard choices in prison. "They intentionally allotted him awful times for visits," remembers Laura. Sundays, from 10 am to 12 pm, precisely when the Ladies meet. "Héctor told me: go to church and protest. That's more important," she recalls. They passed six months without speaking, until the visiting day was changed.

Now Laura can go every two weeks. In one of these visits, she told Héctor that the *Partido Nacionalista Democrático de Cuba*, a party founded in Florida by exiled Cubans, had awarded him the prize "*Paladín de la Libertad*" (Champion of Freedom) in 2008, for "his willingness to suffer persecution for his principles." According to Laura, "this is the strength we represent. As long as there are prisoners of conscience in Cuba we will continue our march."



Havana Cardinal Jaime Ortega and (right) Catholic layman Dagoberto Valdés, with a copy of his now-sanitized journal *Vitral*



president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva visited Cuba and signed accords extending hundreds of millions of dollars in credits for food, roads, medicine, and hotel repairs. Brazil's state oil corporation also joined companies from India, Spain, Malaysia, and other nations in a high-stakes gambit to explore for crude oil in Cuba's Gulf waters.

Still, despite the central government's improved economic situation, food production, transportation, housing, and massive under-employment remain huge problems and a source of widespread discontent. During his 19 months as interim leader, Raúl Castro acknowledged the need for some reforms, and he gave Cubans the green light to air their concerns in meetings with officials held at community organizations, work sites and university campuses across the country. Cuban authorities claim 3 million people participated in the forums.

A brief glimpse into one of these meetings surfaced in February, when a secret videotape of an encounter between university students and National Assembly President Ricardo Alarcón was leaked to the international media. The short clip showed two students asking

Alarcón why authorities prohibit most Cubans from traveling overseas, staying at tourist hotels on the island, and accessing the Internet. The students complained basic goods such as toiletries are too expensive for Cubans on meager state salaries. They were echoing in fact, an appeal from Cuban folk-music legend Silvio Rodríguez, a staunch defender of the revolution, who asked authorities to eliminate restrictions on travel and hotel stays.

The students' criticisms, common among young Cubans, coupled with Rodríguez's comments, indicate the types of reforms Raúl Castro may need to carry out to boost his legitimacy among Cubans while not threatening the island's socialist system.

"It has always been my dream to stay at the Habana Libre hotel," a young Cuban told us, referring to one of the city's most exclusive hotels. "Cubans need some change. And

if this changes, it gives us hope that other things can change even if this measure doesn't benefit everyone."

To address food shortages, Raúl Castro recently doubled and tripled the prices the government pays to farmers for milk, cattle and other farm products, and authorities indicate they may seek foreign investment in agriculture to boost production and reduce expensive imports of such items as rice, wheat and corn. Cuban authorities are reportedly reviewing proposals from Argentina, Venezuela and other Latin American as well as European countries to grow grains and cereals in Cuba. There has also been talk in government circles about distributing vast tracts of idle state-owned land to farmers.

It is important to note that these measures, while encouraging to Cubans, do not represent a move toward democracy or widespread free-market reforms. Cuba's economy is far more centralized now than it was

Raúl Castro has further fused the leadership of the Revolutionary Armed Forces, the Communist Party and Cuba's governing institutions.

even in the mid-nineties. And the airing of concerns by average Cubans is not taking place in opposition to the government, but in highly controlled settings where citizens do not challenge the primacy of socialism or the revolution.

In his February 24 acceptance speech to the Cuban National Assembly, Raúl Castro reiterated his call for streamlining government,

eliminating some restrictions and implementing minor reforms to improve living standards. But he said any changes would be slow and measured and emphasized that the basic principles of Cuba's socialist revolution would remain unchanged. "The people's mandate to this legislature is very clear: to continue strengthening the Revolution at a historical juncture," Raúl Castro said.

Agents of Change

Despite Raúl Castro's pronouncement, some experts have suggested pressure from the grassroots will inevitably force him to abandon socialism. But unlike Eastern Europe under Communist rule, Cuba's religious institutions, opposition activists, intellectuals and other actors often mentioned as agents for change have been unable to effectively challenge the government and its massive security apparatus.

Cuba's most important independent institution is the Catholic Church, but it remains under tight government control a decade after the late John Paul II's historic visit to the island. Catholic officials in Cuba are still not allowed to build new houses of worship or open schools, and they have no regular access to the state-controlled media.

These limitations, coupled with the belief that political change in Cuba is far off, has caused the island's top cleric, Cardinal Jaime Ortega, to avoid pressing the government on human rights and other issues.

Cardinal Ortega has become even more cautious since Fidel fell ill. Last year, he appointed a conservative cleric to replace the retiring progressive archbishop of Pinar del Río. This, in turn, led in April 2007 to the resignation of Dagoberto Valdés, a Catholic layman from Pinar del Río who edited and contributed to *Vitral*, the boldest pro-democracy publication on the island.

Vitral has been gutted of political content since Valdés' departure and the new archbishop also cancelled Valdés' pro-democracy workshops, demonstrating that Cuba's Catholic hierarchy is more concerned with protecting the Church's long-term interests in Cuba than in pushing for change.

Even the visit by Cardinal Tarcsio Bertone, the Vatican's number two official, to Cuba in late February ended with few promises. After

THE PAIN OF SEPARATION

In Cuba, as in any repressive state, the life of a political prisoner is grim. Yet even in uncertain, cruel conditions the human spirit prevails. What follows are fragments from the diary of political prisoner Normando Hernández González, 38, arrested during the "Black Spring" and sentenced to 25 years on charges of counter-revolutionary activity. Normando is now in a military hospital in Havana, and "continues to battle acute diarrhea that prison doctors and officials refuse to acknowledge," says Yaraí Amparo, who made his diary public. Yaraí often brings their daughter Daniela, 5, on the nine-hour long trip to Hospital Militar Carlos J. Finlay, in Havana, more than 500 kilometers from her home in Camagüey.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 14, 2007

"The prisoner knows where he gets up, but not where he lies. I've lived this prisoner's sentence many times since I've been imprisoned. This Friday, I awoke in the Prisión Provincial de Kilo 7, in Camagüey, and after nine hours in a cage-like car, I find out I'm in the Hospital Militar Carlos J. Finlay, where I was transferred due to my critical health condition..."

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 9, 2007

"(...) According to the gastroenterologist, the biopsy showed a

sub-total atrophy of the intestinal papillae, infiltrations in the first section of the small intestine, chronic jejunitis, and intestinal mal-absorption syndrome. The doctor told me about new anti-parasitic treatments...I told her I'd already used that treatment in 2004 and 2005, and that I'd taken much more than what she was now prescribing to me, and the only thing I'd gotten is chronic gastrointestinal illness, body weight fluctuation, and increased pain..."

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 23, 2007

"It was an emotional day, more than anything because I could be with my darling princess for an hour. She's so beautiful! Daniela, like always, got nervous, but she kissed and hugged me... As in all the visits, her questions began immediately: Papá where are you? Papá when are you coming home?...A poisoned arrow pierces my soul every time I hear these questions, just like when I think of the sad look on my daughter's face when she says goodbye at the end of the visit. With a broken heart, I heard Daniela tell me how she had to sleep all night in a bus terminal in Camagüey, to be able to come, and how her mother had to spend the whole night killing cockroaches so they wouldn't crawl on her while she slept..." —CP

Cuba's economy is far more centralized now than it was even in the mid-nineties.



meeting with Raúl Castro, Cardinal Bertone told reporters he had raised the issue of Cuba's political prisoners but did not go so far as to demand their release. "It would look like interference," Cardinal Bertone was quoted as saying.

Stifled Opposition

In recent years, President George W. Bush has poured tens of millions of dollars into supporting Cuba's internal opposition movement. While the "pro-democracy" funds are allocated with great fanfare in Washington, the program has had little success in boosting the strength, profile and legitimacy of dissidents on the island.

The Cuban government continues to harass and imprison dissidents—the Havana-based Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation says there are about 230 political prisoners in Cuba—and the opposition has been further weakened by the steady flow of its leaders into exile and government infiltration.

The extent of Cuban state security's penetration of the dissident movement was laid bare in the so called "Black Spring" of 2003, when 75 opposition activists were arrested, tried and imprisoned. During the crackdown, at least three individuals thought to be prominent dissidents revealed themselves as Cuban government spies. Among them was Manuel David Orrio, who for a decade pretended to be an independent journalist and received thousands of dollars in U.S. government funds for writing articles critical of Cuba posted on a Miami-based website. Orrio's testimony led to the imprisonment of writer Raúl Rivero and several other activists.

Denied freedom of assembly and access to the island's state-controlled media, opposition activists also have no effective way of spreading their message. Dissidents are often interviewed and quoted by foreign media outlets, but they are barely known in Cuba and have shown little ability to channel discontent into a political movement that could challenge the government.

In contrast to the Catholic Church and dissident community, Cuban intellectuals and artists became emboldened following Fidel Castro's illness. Long restrained by limits on freedom of expression, dozens of writers, musicians and other cultural figures took the unprecedented step last year of launching a cyberspace exchange that dealt with issues considered taboo in any public area. The debate was triggered by the collective outrage over a televised

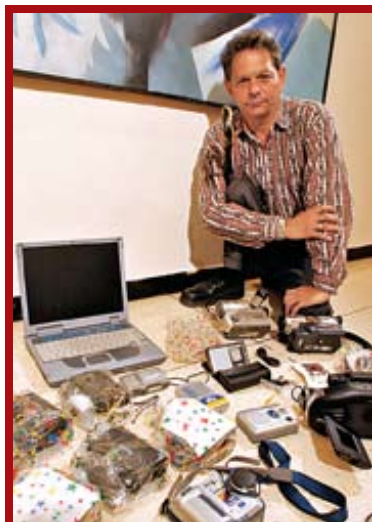
government tribute to Luis Pavón Tamayo, a man vilified within the island's intellectual community for leading the Stalinist-style purges of the 1970s known as *El Quinquenio Gris*, the five gray years.

In one e-mail, Enrique Colina, a well-known film critic, listed 30 Cuban films that had never been broadcast on Cuban television, including the classic "Strawberry and Chocolate," and lamented that most filmmakers acquiesce rather than fight "censorship that has unwritten taboos and codes of silence." Colina proposed that the debate be broadcast on national television and expanded to include the general public.

In response, Cuban Culture Minister Abel Prieto held several closed-door meetings in which invited intellectuals were allowed to air their concerns. Since then, authorities have demonstrated some flexibility by broadcasting "Strawberry and Chocolate" and "Out of This League," a documentary released in 2004 but not previously shown on Cuban television because it includes interviews with Orlando "El Duque" Hernandez and other baseball stars who defected to the U.S.

The debate invigorated many Cuban intellectuals who continue to call for an easing of government restrictions. But it has left many others frustrated because authorities ignored Colina's proposals and kept the intellectual debate out of the public arena. Furthermore, beyond showing a couple of banned films and staging a few plays that had been previously censored, Culture Minister Prieto and other authorities have given no indication that they will give in to one fundamental demand: easing state control over the mass media.

As in the economic sphere, Raúl



The March 2003 arrests were orchestrated in part by informants that the government had planted among dissidents. Here, one, Manuel David Orrio, shows the materials he collected.

Not the crossing guard: a police officer patrols old Havana



Castro and other leaders appear willing to accede to some reforms to ease the discontent of intellectuals. But the complaints surfacing among intellectuals in Cuba today hardly represent the kind of bold and radical challenge to government authority that led to toppling communist regimes in places like Czechoslovakia.

One question related to Cuba's future that we are repeatedly asked is why Cubans don't rise up in protest against the government. Could it be that living conditions are just not bad enough for people to lash out? The answer is complicated.

The hundreds of millions of dollars flowing into Cuba in the form of remittances play an enormous role in helping Cubans survive. The government also provides health care, education, subsidized food, and other benefits. But the fact remains that subsidized food including beans, rice and sugar distributed through the government's monthly ration card system often doesn't last the first ten days of each month.

The ration card also doesn't include many basic items such as milk, meat, vegetables, or fruit. To fill the gap, Cubans living on their \$19 a month government salaries must shop at expensive farmers' markets where a pound of pork cost \$1.45, a pound of tomatoes is \$.40 and a single avocado goes for \$.50. Many Cubans resort to cheating government enterprises and other illegal activities to make ends meet.

So while things have improved since the economic crisis of the 1990s, daily life for the vast majority of citizens remains extremely precarious. Most Cubans watch every *peso* to put food on the table. Yet Cubans say

there is little they can do. They have learned to live with the feelings of frustration and powerlessness.

Army of Chivatos

One major reason for this civic paralysis is the police state. Not only are uniformed cops seemingly on every street corner, but the state security apparatus is buttressed by an army of civilian informants known as *chivatos*. Cubans often know who these people are, but in other cases their identities are revealed in heart-stopping ways. One friend told us that he only learned a life-long neighbor was an informant after the man died and a Cuban flag was ceremoniously draped over the coffin in recognition of his service to state security.

In another incident, police grilled our Cuban babysitter for posting fliers seeking the return of our lost puppy. The flier included a photograph of the puppy and our phone

number. During the interrogation, the police insinuated the flier contained coded messages of dissent. Our sitter came to us sobbing and feared she could later be hauled away to prison. The police never returned, but experiences like these illustrate the power of state security and the fear that keeps Cubans in line.

In a closed society like Cuba, state-run mass media also serves as an effective tool of control. Excluding Havana and Santiago de Cuba, where tourists circulate and pirated satellite television is available, most Cubans have little information other than what the government serves up over the airwaves and in newspapers. Cuban authorities also tightly control access to computers and the Internet.

For almost half a century, the state media has never publicly challenged Fidel Castro. Needless to say, independent investigative reporting does not exist. At the same time, authorities use the media to repeat the mantra that Cuba's problems are caused by the U.S. embargo. Another common theme of the media is the notion that Cubans are far better off than the rest of the world, which is portrayed as mired in poverty, injustice and violence (with the exception of Cuba's close allies such

Not only are uniformed cops seemingly on every street corner, the state security apparatus is buttressed by an army of civilian informants known as *chivatos*.

Cuba's Catholic hierarchy is more concerned with protecting the Church's long-term interests in Cuba than in pushing for change.



as Venezuela and Iran).

In a series of cartoons broadcast on Cuban television, James Cason, the U.S.'s former top diplomat in Cuba, was lampooned as a delusional flying wizard out to privatize Cuba's schools and health care system and introduce liberal democracy. The cartoons, which associate these types of changes with Nazi swastikas and police brutality, end with loyal revolutionaries chasing Cason as he turns from a wizard into a rat and scurries back to the safety of the U.S. mission in Havana. Although childish, the cartoons' message that change is to be feared is one more theme that leaves Cubans wondering whether Cuba without socialism could be worse.

Of course, many Cubans privately ridicule the state-run media and know they are not getting the whole story. But it's difficult for them to construct an alternative explanation for why their lives are so difficult without access to other sources of information.

So how do discontented Cubans let off steam? Humor, partying and grumbling about the pain of daily life. Others simply leave the country and thereby inadvertently contribute to the stability of the current system. In fact, throughout the past five decades, authorities have allowed the most disaffected Cubans to leave the island en masse—the Mariel boatlift of 1980 and the rafters' crisis of 1994 are two examples—in what has served as a huge safety valve. The U.S. has played a critical role in this exodus by offering a safe haven to Cubans. The result is that an estimated two million Cubans have left the island since the triumph of the

revolution rather than staying and possibly working for change.

It is likely that Cuba's political landscape would look different than it does today if this mass exodus had not occurred.

Possible Scenarios

While we argue that Cuba's current system with modest reforms is sustainable for years to come, there are a number of events that could threaten the regime. One scenario is the lifting of the U.S. economic embargo and the ban on U.S. citizens traveling to Cuba. Ending these sanctions would strengthen Cuba's economy by boosting trade, investment and tourism with the world's largest economy, but such an onslaught would make it harder for Cuban authorities to maintain control. Canceling the U.S.-Cuban migration accords could also endanger Cuba's stability by making it more difficult for discontented Cubans to leave the island legally.

But none of the major Republican or Democratic presidential candidates support lifting the embargo unilaterally. Illinois Senator Barack Obama goes farthest among the candidates, vowing if he becomes president to begin direct talks with Raúl Castro only after both sides came up with an agenda that included human rights, the release of political prisoners and freedom of the press. He also said he would allow Cuban Americans unrestricted travel to the island and eliminate the current limits on the amount of money they can send to family members.

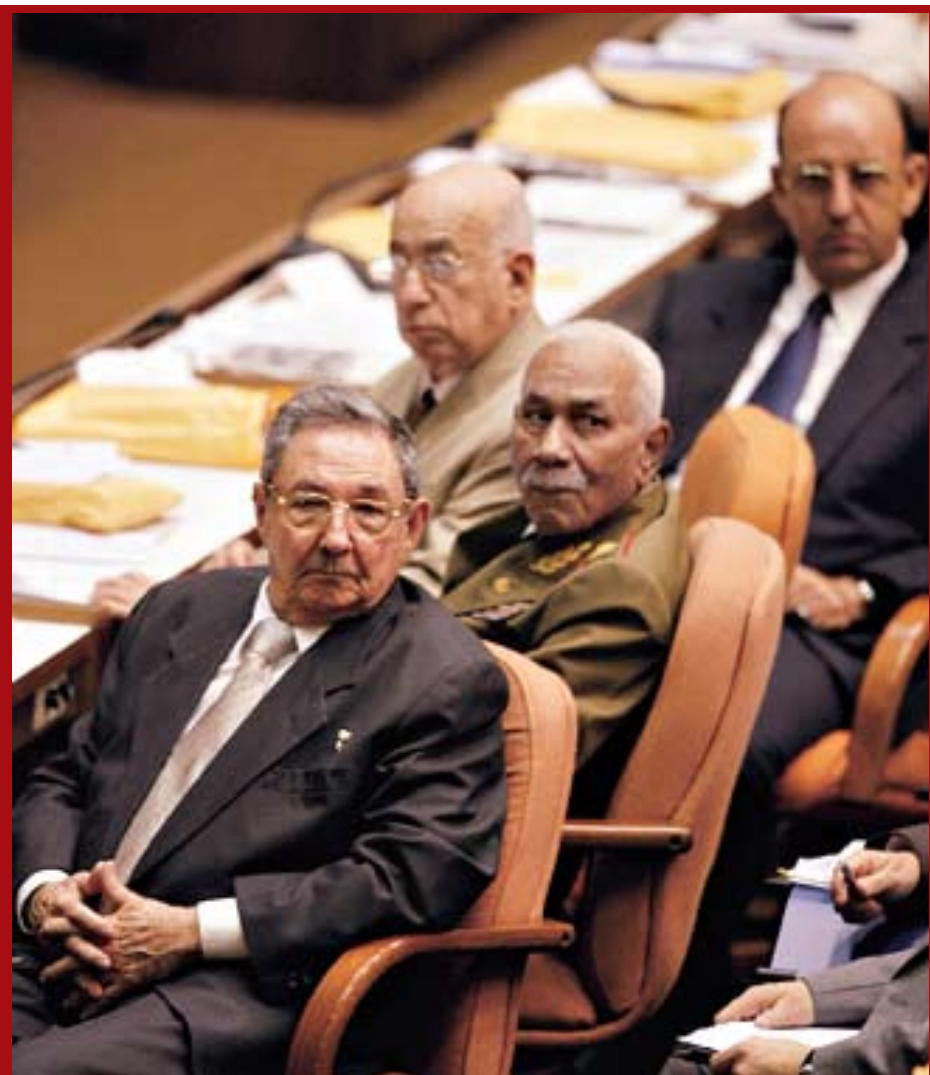
While Cuba has diversified its economic and political ties, an end to

Venezuela's massive support would cripple Cuba's economy and perhaps force Raúl Castro into more radical reforms. Without the 100,000 barrels of discounted Venezuelan oil Cuba receives each day, the island's public transportation system would grind to a halt, power plants would be forced to ration electricity, and industrial and agricultural production would be decimated. President Chávez' recent defeat in the referendum to expand his powers should give Cuban leaders further incentive to reduce their over-reliance on Venezuela.

But the alliance appears safe for now. President Chávez was the first head of state to congratulate Raúl Castro after his appointment as president and the two leaders held a live telephone conversation broadcast on Venezuelan television. "Only united we will move forward," Chávez said.

One factor that could provide a huge boost to Cuba's socialist regime is the discovery of commercially viable quantities of crude oil in the deep waters off the island's northwestern coast. Geological studies are promising, and a large discovery of crude oil would not only be a bonanza to the Cuban government but it would also increase pressure from the U.S. business community to end the embargo.

Of course, the greatest unknown is how the Cuban leadership and Cuba's 11 million people will react to Fidel's death. While Fidel is no longer the president, he remains first secretary of the Cuban Communist Party, arguably the nation's most powerful position. And Raúl Castro said in his speech before the National Assembly that he would consult his brother on



Meet the new boss. Same as the old boss. From left: Cuba's President Raúl Castro, Vice Presidents Juan Almeida Bosque, José Ramón Machado Ventura and Carlos Lage, attend a session of Cuba's National Assembly in Havana, Sunday, Feb. 24, 2008.

all major decisions. So Fidel will remain a powerful presence even if he doesn't appear in public, and the government could still be shaken when the supreme commander is finally put to rest.

But as we have shown, there are deep structural impediments to change that will outlast Fidel.

Certainly there are divergent views among Cuba's ruling elite about whether the island's socialist

system should be reformed and, if so, how far the reforms should go. However, Raúl Castro has carefully prepared for this moment by placing close allies in key positions so that he, not others, will set Cuba's course in the post-Fidel era.

On February 24, Raúl Castro demonstrated his preeminence—and the primacy of continuity over change—when the new 31-member Council of State was announced. Only one

of the top six leadership positions was changed and that position was filled by Gen. Julio Casas Regueiro, a 72-year-old revolutionary war veteran and long-time confidant of Raúl Castro who was also appointed by the new president to succeed him as head of Cuba's armed forces. José Ramón Machado Ventura, 77, a hard-line Communist Party official and another comrade of Raúl dating back to the revolutionary war, was selected as the Council of State's first vice president, the government's second most powerful post.

Gen. Abelardo Colomé Ibarra, 68, Cuba's Interior Minister, Juan Almeida Bosque, 80, one of the few living revolutionary commanders, and Esteban Lazo Hernández, 63, a long-time Communist Party stalwart, also were reappointed as vice presidents of the Council of State.

Through these and other appointments, Raúl Castro has further fused the leadership of the Revolutionary Armed Forces, the Communist Party and Cuba's governing institutions under his command.

The biggest surprise in the new Council of State is that Machado Ventura rather than Carlos Lage Dávila was appointed second-in-command. A 56-year-old physician who championed Cuba's limited economic reforms in the 1990s, Lage was touted by some Cuba-watchers as a shoo-in for the number two post and a possible candidate for the presidency. The failure of Lage and other younger officials to move up the political hierarchy is further evidence that those hoping for a democratic and capitalist Cuba will have to wait.

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