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Cuba's Fidel Castro Undergoes Surgery, Delegates Power Temporarily; International Tensions

by Mike Leffert

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After undergoing abdominal surgery for an undisclosed but complicated illness, Cuban President Fidel Castro delegated power temporarily to other officials. He enumerated the specifics of the temporary transfer in a post-surgery announcement on July 31, prefaced by a brief recap of events leading to the need for the surgery.

Castro said he had expended enormous energy during his recent trip to Cordoba, Argentina, to participate in the MERCOSUR meetings and in his hurried return to Cuba to attend the celebration of the 53rd anniversary of the attacks on the Moncada and Carlos Manuel de Cespedes barracks, the wellsprings of the Cuban Revolution. The stress of it all, he said, "caused an acute intestinal crisis with sustained bleeding that obliged me to undergo a complicated surgical operation."

The delegations, verbatim He then said, in the announcement published in the Cuban paper *Juventud Rebelde*, "As our country finds itself threatened in circumstances like this by the government of the United States, I have made the following decisions: 1. I delegate temporarily my functions as First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Partido Comunista de Cuba (PCC) to the Second Secretary, *companero* Raul Castro Ruz. 2. I delegate temporarily my functions as Commander in Chief of the heroic Revolutionary Armed Forces to the mentioned *companero* General of the Army Raul Castro Ruz. 3. I delegate temporarily my functions as President of the Council of State and of the Government of the Republic of Cuba to First Vice President *companero* Raul Castro Ruz. 4. I delegate temporarily my functions as principal driver of the National and International Program of Public Health to member of the Buro Político and Minister of Public Health *companero* Jose Ramon Balaguer Cabrera. 5. I delegate temporarily my functions as principal driver of the National and International Program of Education to *companeros* Jose Ramon Machado Ventura and Esteban Lazo Hernandez, members of the Buro Político. 6. I delegate temporarily my functions as principal driver of the National Program of the Energy Revolution in Cuba, and of collaboration with other countries in this sphere, to Carlos Lage Davila, member of the Buro Político and secretary of the Executive Committee of the Council of Ministers."

Castro had personally been administering the funds for these three programs, and he delegated these duties to Carlos Lage Davila, Francisco Soberon Valdes, president of the Banco Central de Cuba, and Felipe Perez Roque, foreign minister, the three to act as a commission for this purpose. They have all been serving in a similar capacity under Castro. He then gave instructions for the continuation of some upcoming events and ended, "I don't harbor the slightest doubt that our people and our revolution will struggle to their last drop of blood to defend these and other ideas and methods necessary to safeguard this historic process. Imperialism will never be able to crush Cuba. The battle of ideas will continue onward." Castro made these delegations of authority in conformance with Cuban law, which obligates him to do so in instances where he is unable to perform his duties.

Some in the international press noted that this fact and others seemed lost on the US mainstream media, which could hardly contain itself in making this a story about the US rather than about Cuba. The Spanish news agency EFE, whose wire stories are widely distributed in Latin America and throughout the world, noted with some disdain the US media's handling of the transfer of power, quoting especially headlines screaming about "euphoria in the streets of Miami" and "Cuban exiles celebrating the possible end of an era."

Distorted coverage in US

The US press coverage is heavily weighted toward speculation and street reaction in exile enclaves and away from factual coverage. Where factual stories were attempted, they tended to get them wrong, or incomplete. The New York Times, Washington Post, and Boston Globe were all faulted for stuffing the details on inside pages and relying on the wires. The Los Angeles Times, with its own reporting, got the timing wrong, claiming Castro turned over power before the operation, not after. It was not until Aug. 2 that The New York Times got it straight that Fidel did not turn over all his powers to his brother Raul but had made the designations more broadly. But those facts were buried in groundless speculation on whether he is worse than reported, terminal, didn't have surgery at all, or whether this was a minor episode that would have him bouncing back in days.

Fidel has said that he would, on advice of his doctors, be out of commission and recuperating for six weeks. There is some reason to suspect that he anticipated these speculative outbursts in the US press. In his announcement of the delegation of power, he inserted, "All the details of this health accident are featured in the x-rays, endoscopies, and filmed materials." The tone of the US coverage takes on importance internationally when paired with the last big Cuba-related news, the State Department report outlining US plans for transition in Cuba after the death of Fidel (see NotiCen, 2006-07-20).

Castro made clear in his statement, both at the beginning and at the end, that the context in which these events are playing out is the expectation of the threat of US intervention and the commitment to the principle that "imperialism will never be able to crush Cuba." The White House of US President George W. Bush has already begun the drumbeat, building on its transition plans. "If Fidel Castro were to move on because of natural causes, we've got a plan in place to help the people of Cuba understand there's a better way than the system in which they've been living under," said Bush on Miami's Spanish-language Radio Mambi on July 31. "No one knows when Fidel Castro will move on. In my judgment, that's the work of the Almighty."

In Havana, the US diplomatic mission was preparing the ground. The electronic billboard on the mission's building flashed the message, "All Cubans, including those under the dictatorship, can count on our help and support. We respect the wishes of all Cubans." At the White House, spokesman Tony Snow characterized events in Cuba, saying, "Raul Castro's attempt to impose himself on the Cuban people is much the same as what his brother did." Snow had no information to give reporters on the current state of affairs in Cuba, nor did he attempt to clarify that Raul's temporary ascendancy was a matter of Cuban law.

Underestimating Raul

The US government may know what it has to look forward to with Raul at the head of his nation, but it is not likely that the US public does, to the extent that they rely on the recent press coverage that paints him as "a low-key figure without the oratorical verve of his brother," or as "lacking his older brother's charisma and political flair," or as "a quiet loyal brother and successor." History, however, suggests otherwise. Had there been no Raul, there might well have been no Fidel. He may be even tougher than Fidel, warning the US in 2001 that it had better deal with Fidel before he dies, rather than wait and deal with him.

Raul brought Fidel to communism. It was he who first met Ernesto Che Guevara in Mexico City in 1955 and he who established contact with Soviet agent Nikoli Leoniv, whom he had met two years earlier during a trip to the Soviet bloc. During the war in the Sierra Maestra (1957-1958), Raul successfully opened the eastern front in the Sierra del Cristal mountains of northern Oriente and established a reputation for fierceness that, by some accounts, surpassed his brother's. He was personally responsible for uniting the disparate anti-Batista movements in the area.

Upon consolidation of the victory against the government of Fulgencio Batista (1940-1944, 1950-1959), Raul became head of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (FAR), under the motto, "At your orders, commander in chief, for no matter what, no matter where, and under all circumstances." It was Raul who accomplished the transformation from the Ejercito Rebelde to a professional fighting force that would later gain the world's respect for its effectiveness at the Bay of Pigs in 1961, Algeria in 1962, Angola in 1975, and Ethiopia and Somalia in 1977. This is quite clearly not the sad little second fiddler with a drinking problem that the US would like to confront in its march to transform Cuba.

Nor are his accomplishments limited to the military. He played a central role in shaping the Cuba of today. He organized the Partido Comunista de Cuba (PCC) in 1965, as well as the first Party Congress in 1975, and he coordinated writing the 1976 Constitution, as well as its revision in 1992. The key members of Fidel's inner circle were all trained by Raul, and it was he who made the military the crucial component of the economic transformation initiated in 1985. This would have been difficult, perhaps impossible, if Raul had not personally established the relationship between the FAR and the party, seeing to the membership in the party of military personnel.

The result of that political work is that the military is subordinate to the party and is a very unlikely candidate for subversion from without. Political education has been central to Raul's thinking. He has instilled within the military and the party the idea that "patria es humanidad (one's country includes all of humanity)," that revolution is not limited by national borders, that revolutionaries must be willing to go wherever they are called, and that "it is with this spirit that our youth must be educated."

On his 75th birthday, celebrated in June, a commemorative piece in the official organ Granma quoted him as having said years ago when the party was aborning, "To the historic leaders of the revolution, minute by minute, time inexorably passes, shortening our lives. And with this

work we are preparing that, with your participation, the great leader of our great revolution of today, tomorrow, and always will be our Communist Party." The temporary leader of Cuba is no personality cultist, no simple stand-in, and, of most interest to those with interventionist pretensions, no pushover.

How temporary Raul's tenure will be is, by Fidel's own design, difficult to assess. Fidel has said he is loath to give updates on his progress because the information has strategic value. Spotty information has come from countries allied with Cuba. The Venezuelan government has said that his recovery was "advancing positively," but gave no details. An Argentine deputy, Miguel Bonasso, has said Castro aides told him that the patient was resting peacefully.

The mood on the island was reportedly calm on Aug. 2, a situation not to everyone's liking in the US. Sen. Bill Nelson (D-FL), an author of the bill that would provide US\$80 million for the transition plan, told the media, "The message will be, the United States stands with you. Be ready to assert your independence." But Tony Snow did not want too much independence asserted too soon. His message for Cubans was, "Stay where you are. This is not a time for people to try to be getting in the water and going either way." Administration officials and like-minded legislators seemed focused on paying cash for insurrection.

Of the US\$80 million, half, say reports, is to be paid out almost immediately to dissidents and their organizations on the island. US Navy ships are in the area, "in range and ready to respond if the situation changed," said an anonymously quoted official. A weather situation could be deterring both boatlifts and naval maneuvering. Tropical Storm Chris is in the eastern Caribbean and expected to become the first hurricane of the Atlantic season.

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