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## **Fidel Castro Nominated To Cuba's National Assembly, Unleashing Speculation On Return To Power**

*by LADB Staff*

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Cuban President Fidel Castro has not made a public appearance in Cuba for more than a year, following a series of surgeries that left him weakened and placed him on a very long, slow path to recovery. While on that path, he ceded temporary leadership to others, with the top post going to his brother Raul (See NotiCen, 2006-08-13). These events have led to intense speculation in the US and elsewhere on the probability of his return to office and to power.

On Dec. 2, a first small step in the direction of answering the question of the revolutionary leader's return to power was taken, with the nomination of Fidel Castro to the list of candidates for election to the Asamblea Nacional. The nomination does not in itself signal Fidel's return to active duty as head of the Cuban government, but his exclusion from the list would have meant, said analysts, his formal separation from power for the first time in 50 years.

Asamblea Nacional president Ricardo Alarcon said, not surprisingly, that if Castro were elected on Jan. 20 he would be the best candidate for president, and, "I would vote with two hands for Fidel to return to be president of the Council of State (Consejo de Estado)." Alarcon was also nominated to the assembly. Also not surprisingly, Cuban dissidents were not pleased with the nomination.

Elizardo Sanchez of the Comision Cubana de Derechos Humanos y Reconciliacion Nacional (CCDHRN) said the nomination "reflects the decision to continue reproducing a totalitarian model of government in Cuba." He told reporters, "I did not see possible changes, but this is going to nourish the immobility for the regime because, without a doubt, Comandante Fidel Castro for years has been the main obstacle to modernizing reforms in our country." Sanchez said that most government officials want modernizing reforms, but, with the return of Fidel, "their influence is going to diminish."

Sanchez brought up Castro's health as well, suggesting that the 16 months of recovery have not restored the 81-year-old leader to the physical condition necessary for a return to duty.

Elsewhere among the dissidents, Miriam Leiva, co-founder of Las Damas de Blanco (Ladies in White) movement agreed that change is afoot and the nomination represents a "brake on those who want to make very necessary reforms in Cuba at this time." Eloy Gutierrez Menoyo of the more moderate Cambio Cubano took the position that the nomination was expected and real change is not contemplated in any event. "While he's behind the curtain he will continue directing things, say what they will," he said, adding, "Fifty years is enough."

But it won't be Gutierrez who decides when Fidel's tenure will be "enough." The first decision is his own, and it was not immediately known whether he would even accept the nomination. If he does,

the next set of decision makers would be the electorate, who would almost certainly re-elect him. Then, the members of the Asamblea Nacional would vote, in March, to return him as president of the country's highest governing body, the Consejo de Estado, the office he has occupied since it was created in 1976.

Before the creation of the office, from 1959, Castro was prime minister. More than 70% of Cuba's population have never known another president. The March meeting of the Asamblea Nacional will be the first of the new assembly. It will also elect members to the 31 other positions on the Council of State.

### *Significant change under Raul*

While the dissidents assert that there has been no change, other observers have noted a good deal of change under the leadership of Raul Castro. Some believe that a likely scenario would be one suggested by Vice President Carlos Lage, in which Fidel would continue "as president of the Council of State, because there is no more important task in the world of today than to raise consciousness. A world threatened by wars, by climate change, by exhaustion of natural resources like fuel, requires responsible citizens, and Fidel is dedicated to this most important job of raising awareness."

Lage's is a different scenario than that of the dissidents, and even that of Alarcon, who sees a return of Castro as a return to the status quo. In Lage's view, Fidel functions as an elder statesman, consistent with his diminished physical capacities, while Raul continues on the path of change he has been signaling for much of his tenure, most visibly by calling for greater public criticism of government. These signals appear to have been taken seriously, as the official media have taken to writing exposes of corruption not seen before as well as criticisms of institutional performance and of individual elected officials.

Most recently, a piece in *Juventud Rebelde* took on the Asamblea Nacional, complaining, "When following the sessions of the Asamblea Nacional, or other organs of state power, there seems to exist overwhelming unanimity, debates are scarce even when issues do not involve national defense or strategic principles or objectives." It has been reported that, in this election cycle, as Asamblea Nacional candidates make the rounds of voter groups in neighborhoods and workplaces, there will be discussion of a July 26 speech by Raul, in which he outlined reforms to the system that have raised popular expectations for change. Raul, too, has been nominated for an assembly seat, making him eligible for permanent office.

In addition to the 614 assembly candidates, the 169 municipal city councils also chose 1,201 candidates to stand for election to provincial assemblies. All were selected from a list of some 55,000 pre-candidates. The Cuban electoral process mandates that the candidates post biographies and photos and begin to hold the meetings with voters in their districts. This stage of the process will continue until Jan. 15, according to Hector Raul Fajardo of the National Candidacy Commission.

Other than the close contact between candidates and voters in the local meetings, there is no campaigning or advertising in Cuba. Asamblea Nacional elections are held every five years.

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