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Castro To Step Down; Interventionist Appetites Whetted

by LADB Staff

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"I am saying that I will neither aspire to nor accept, I repeat, I will neither aspire to nor accept the positions of president of the Consejo de Estado and commander in chief." With those words in a letter posted on the Web site of the official newspaper Granma, Fidel Castro told the island and the world he was stepping down after 49 years at the helm of the Republic of Cuba. The letter was addressed, "Dear compatriots," and, acknowledging the forthcoming elections, began with a recap of a near half century of statesmanship, noting the approval of the Socialist Constitution on Feb. 15, 1976, the establishment of the first Asamblea Nacional (AN) on Dec. 2 of that year, and his ascension to the presidency of that body.

Castro had spent the prior 18 years, he reminded readers, as prime minister. Castro then fast-forwarded to his provisional resignation on July 31, 2006, and his assignment of the presidency of the Consejo de Estado to First Vice President Raul Castro Ruz, his brother. He wrote of the reluctance of Raul and others in the leadership to consider him out of public life, and of his own reluctance. "It was an uncomfortable situation for me vis-a-vis an adversary that had done everything possible to get rid of me, and I felt reluctant to comply," he wrote. Left out was mention that he had seen ten iterations of that adversary, ten US presidents, come and all but one go during his time in office. The letter covered the long, slow recovery from the serious gastrointestinal disorder and subsequent operations that laid him low (see NotiCen, 2006-08-03) and of being "able to recover the full command of my mind as well as the possibility for much reading and meditation." He said he recovered enough strength to write for hours at a time as part of his rehabilitation and recovery.

Those reflections led him to recognize the need to avoid raising expectations of a return. "Thus," he said, "my first duty was to prepare our people both politically and psychologically for my absence after so many years of struggle. I kept saying that my recovery 'was not without risks.'" The handwriting was on the wall Castro was always keenly aware of the great interest, nationally and internationally, in deciphering his more cryptic utterances and analyzing pretty much his every sentence. He turned to that in the letter, telling readers that he had written letters to a trusted associate, Randy Alonzo, director of the Round Table national TV program, requesting they be made public, in which "I discretely introduced elements of this message I am writing today, when not even the addressee of such letters was aware of my intention." Revealing what appears to be a carefully scripted set of very obvious hints that most of the world's political analysts missed and most of Cuba's remained quiet about if they had gotten them, he quoted from the letters to Alonzo, "My elemental duty is not to cling to positions, much less to stand in the way of younger persons, but rather to contribute my own experience and ideas whose modest value comes from the exceptional era that I had the privilege of living in. Like Niemeyer, I believe that one has to be consistent right up to the end." The reference was to Oscar Niemeyer, the Brazilian architect about whom Fidel once famously said, "Niemeyer and I are the last communists on this planet."

In a later letter to Alonzo, Fidel observed, "I never forget that 'all the world's glory fits in a kernel of corn,'" and he went on to say that "it would be a betrayal to my conscience to accept a responsibility

requiring more mobility and dedication than I am physically able to offer. This I say devoid of all drama." He continued in that vein, expressing his confidence in cadres who were very young at the time of the revolution. Of them he wrote, "They have the authority and the experience to guarantee the replacement." Beyond that generation, "There is also the intermediate generation, which learned together with us the basics of the complex and almost unattainable art of organizing and leading a revolution." Here he was also expressing confidence in the continuity of the revolution. The intermediate generation that "learned together with us" has at its heart the grupo de apoyo (support group) and includes the most likely figures to rise to the head of government, Consejo de Estado Vice President Carlos Lage and Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque.

Reaction by world leaders to the Castro announcement was fairly predictably split into two camps, those who associate themselves with the US view that a foreign-led 'transition' is in the offing and those who do not. US President George W. Bush said from Africa that he foresaw "the beginning of a democratic transition for the people of Cuba." Signaling he has not budged from the idea that he is to be included in deciding the future of the island, Bush went on, "An interesting debate will arise. Some will say, 'Let's promote stability.' In the meantime, political prisoners will rot." Despite the fact that the Castro decision was prompted by an election, Bush insisted, "This should be a transition to free and fair elections. And I mean free and fair. Not these elections that the Castro brothers rig." In Central America, President Antonio Saca of El Salvador echoed Bush, saying, "A democratic transition is not occurring." And President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica echoed Saca, "We must understand that this is not a democratic transition. To pass the power from Fidel Castro to his brother is not democratic." Both these countries maintain relations with Cuba in the poor-to-awful range.

The words "democratic transition" resounded in some European capitals as well, particularly in London and in Rome, in seeming disregard of the fact that no transition has yet occurred, and, when it does, it will be the result of a vote, albeit not the kind of multiparty event favored in many countries (see NotiCen, 2007-12-06). Parenthetically, Italy has had about 61 of these democratic transitions since WWII. Elsewhere in Latin America, in Bolivia, Vice President Alvaro Garcia said, "The relations between our two countries will remain solid because, despite Castro's decision, the relationship does not depend on a single person. It is a state-to-state relationship, government to government. President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva of Brazil said he was "pleased that the process is happening in a calm way, by Fidel's own initiative, which is how I believe it should occur. Brazil is pleased that the process is tranquil." In Peru, a government statement said the resignation "will imply the end of an era," and it expressed expectations of a "peaceful and orderly transfer of power, oriented toward democratic life in Cuba." A government spokesman in Chile, Francisco Vidal, told the media, "The Cuban people are approaching a new horizon." In general, the Mexican press noted that these earliest statements measure, more than anything, a given country's proximity to the poles that the US and Cuba represent.

The Vatican has entered the discussion in a particularly emphatic way, which will include an exquisitely timed visit from Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone. He was invited by the Cuban government and by the Conferencia de Obispos Catolicos de Cuba (COCC). The visit commemorates the 10th anniversary of that of Pope John Paul II to the island. It is generally being seen, and the official newspaper Granma is playing it as, "an expression of the excellent relations and of the fluid, cordial, and respectful communication existing between Cuba and the

State of Vatican City." Relations between the two states have indeed been fine for a good while, ever since Pope John Paul II asked Cuba to open up to the world, a wish the present Pope, Benedict XVI, repeated in January 2007. "It now remains", said an editorial in the Mexican magazine *Por Esto*, "for Bush to let the world open up to Cuba." Bertone's visit is intensely scheduled, and he will very pointedly make a trip to the town of Guantanamo, 930 km from Havana. The visit is also very high level. Bertone is thought to be the second-highest person in the Catholic hierarchy, the person to immediately take charge in the even of the Pope's death. He is to be welcomed by Raul Castro.

Foreign Minister Perez Roque confirmed the two will meet together to discuss "all subjects."

Also calling for the "transitionists" to stay out of Cuba's business while it sorts out its leadership was Jose Miguel Insulza, secretary-general of the Organization of American States (OAS). Insulza said of Castro's move, "Such a decision is not a minor act, given the importance the Cuban leader has had for his country and for the region of Latin America for almost five decades." In a press release from OAS headquarters in Washington, DC, Insulza cautioned, "It must be the Cubans themselves, through free and peaceful dialogue, who find the most appropriate path for the welfare of their people." Insulza recalled that Cuba is a member state of the OAS, suspended in 1962, and expressed the hope that "changes are produced that permit the full incorporation of this sister nation into the heart of our organization." In truth, Insulza's kind wishes for the future participation of Cuba in the organization is as much an intrusion and call for change as is that of the US.

Cuba was suspended, according to the resolution adopted at the Eighth Meeting of Consultation in January 1962, because the 14 nations voting against the island found: 1) That adherence by any member of the Organization of American States to Marxism-Leninism is incompatible with the inter-American system and the alignment of such a government with the communist bloc breaks the unity and solidarity of the hemisphere. 2) That the present Government of Cuba, which has officially identified itself as a Marxist-Leninist government, is incompatible with the principles and objectives of the inter-American system. 3) That this incompatibility excludes the present Government of Cuba from participation in the inter-American system. The foregoing being the case, one of the changes that would need to be produced that would "permit the full incorporation" of Cuba would be OAS acknowledgment that the Cold War is over. But another, which could conceivably change, might be a rethinking on the part of whoever is chosen leader on Feb. 24 of Fidel's pronouncement on May 6, 2005, to the effect that Cuba would not "be part of a disgraceful institution that has only humiliated the honor of Latin American nations."

The proliferation of global speculation on the island's future, and its bimodal distribution, ought not obscure that there is speculation on the outcome in Cuba also. The speculation is bounded, however, by popular recognition that change is coming in an atmosphere of calm and general agreement, factors as crucial to the legitimacy of the next government as it has been to the one now ending, the nineteen-month interim government headed by Raul Castro, and that of Fidel before it. The speculation has been more organized than idle.

Under Raul's governance, citizens have been encouraged to become more vocal about their criticisms of the government, reaching back as far as the Quinquenio Gris of the 1970s to redress the state's archaic and repressive attitudes on homosexuality (see *NotiCen*, 2008-01-03). The Spanish publication *Rebellion* notes vast increases in public participation on matters of governance

starting with the open assemblies of July 26 last year that drew an estimated 4 million people. Rebellion observes that the international media, currently deep into "transition" rhetoric, nearly universally neglected to cover these events, or to herald future ones, like the call from the writers union during the Feria Internacional del Libro de La Habana for Raul Castro to "inaugurate paths to straighten out what is twisted." Says Rebellion, "None of this seems to be news for the great western communications media that, once more, revert back to transmitting a simplistic and markedly distorted vision of the complex Cuban reality." What is being missed, say the critics of the dominant reportage, is that on the island the call for change is palpable and clearly audible.

On Feb. 24, the result of a four-month process that is different from those of the western powers but nevertheless democratic, the Asamblea Nacional del Poder Popular will convene. It will elect the new leaders of Cuba. To be named are a president of the Consejo de Estado and the Consejo de Ministros, and a president and vice president of the Asamblea. The Asamblea will also take up a number of economic, social, and political measures. For Rebellion and other supportive media, the Asamblea elections of Jan. 20 (see NotiCen, 2007-12-06) confirm the continuity of the revolution. The Spanish publication sees the Cuban state as enjoying "an important and abundant consensus, and there is nothing about the coming changing of hands that diminishes that." At the same time, although the population confers legitimacy on the government, there are still high levels of discontent and dissatisfaction on many fronts.

Complaints have been freely aired in recent months. They include the severe housing shortage and general disrepair of the existing housing stock, problems of insufficient transportation, the declining spending power and incredibly low wages of the average worker. Related to the lack of money are high consumer prices and the existence of a discriminatory two-currency system (see NotiCen, 2005-05-05). Then there is corruption, poverty, the crushing quantity of rules and regulations about nearly everything, a restricted press, a dearth of leisure time resources, and so on. It is not easy to be Cuban. It will be even less easy to be a member of the parliament that has to deal with all this.

The western notion that somehow these are people who will enjoy some kind of free ride is a mistaken one. The Asamblea members know what they have to do, and the people know that they know, because they told them directly during the vetting period that led to their elections. How, and if, they go about dealing with these problems and demands will, say critics, be the real news to be covered in the international press. It will be "a reality that does not produce big headlines, spectacular actions, or surprising personnel changes." Rebellion makes the point that this has been the reality all along, and "in the final analysis, this is not a debate about Cuba, but rather in Cuba, and among Cubans." Interim President Raul Castro called the meeting of the Asamblea at which the new leaders will be elected for Feb. 24. The date coincides with the Feb. 24, 1895, start of the Cuban War of Independence, called by Jose Marti.

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