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New Cuban Leadership Reflects Revolutionary History, Is More Representative Of Society

by LADB Staff

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Raul Castro has been elected to succeed his brother Fidel as Cuba's leader. On Feb. 24, as a first order of business for the new Asamblea Nacional de Poder Popular (ANPP), Raul was confirmed for a five-year term to the post he has held in an interim capacity since Fidel fell ill nineteen months ago. The vote for the top spot went as expected, but Raul's choice for second in command, Jose Ramon Machado Ventura, came as a surprise to many observers. The 614 members of the ANPP were just elected on Jan. 20.

At this, the first session, they fulfilled their statutory responsibility by first re-electing Ricardo Alarcon as ANPP president, and then electing a slate of 31 members of the Consejo de Estado. This council is the highest executive body, composed of a president, a first vice president, five other vice presidents, and 24 members. Thus, in the Cuban system, the legislative elects the executive, more like a parliamentary system than a presidential republic like the US. Raul Castro is chief of government by virtue of being president of the Consejo de Estado and also of the Consejo de Ministros, whom he designates. According to the official news agency Prensa Latina, the Constitution confers on the president of the Consejo de Estado and chief of government the duties of representing both the government and the state, directing general policy, organizing and directing legislative agenda, and presiding over the councils of state and ministers. With respect to the ministries, the president can determine them and assume the direct management of any ministry or central department of the administration. The president can also, through a proposal to the ANPP or to the Consejo de Estado, remove any members of the council of ministers and name their replacements.

The Cuban president is also commander in chief of the military. He can declare a state of emergency in constitutionally permitted circumstances, with the proviso that the ANPP or Consejo de Estado be advised of the decision. It is not about personality. The first vice president of the Consejo de Estado is the person who succeeds in the event of incapacity of the president. That is how Raul, as first vice president, came to provisional power when Fidel got sick a year and a half ago. That is the reason for the surprise at the choice of Machado Ventura for the position of first vice president.

At age 78, he is two years older than Raul. He is known as a hard-liner. But Machado's history runs deep. He was one of the Council's vice presidents, secretary of the Cuban Politburo, and has for years been seen as Raul's right hand. He is one of the *historicos*, a member of the original revolution against the Batista government. As Politburo secretary, he oversaw the integration of socialist ideology in Cuban education and culture. In the same act that gave Raul temporary power on Aug. 1, 2006, Fidel made Machado head of all national and international education projects (see NotiCen, 2006-08-03). The choice means, say analysts, that the generational shift to new leadership will be gradual.

The new Consejo de Estado is made up of two generations of leaders, with only three members going back to its inception in 1976. Two of those are Raul Castro and Machado, and the third is Juan Almeida Bosque, an old comandante de la revolucion, now one of the five vice presidents. The Consejo de Estado is now formed around a nucleus of veterans with 10 or more years of service. It will have become apparent by now that Cuba does not waste its elders. As a system, revolutionary Cuba grew up around scarcity, and it values long, effective experience over change for its own sake. Such is the case with Machado. The surprise generated by his selection is in part because of the availability of a much younger man, Carlos Lage, and the supposition that a youthful backup for the aged Raul would be most prudent.

Nelson Valdes, a Cuban-American and professor of sociology at the University of New Mexico (UNM) and founder of the Latin America Data Base (LADB) who has long observed and taught Cuban politics, noted in a recent article, "The question, in the final analysis, is not what role each person plays but in what direction the Cuban revolutionary state moves. Such tasks will not depend on just a few individuals, but on their inter-connections and effectiveness. To search for the 'leading personalities' that promote 'openings' and 'liberalization' will fail to perceive the real revolution in the revolution that has been announced."

Abbelardo Colome Ibarra is another of the vice presidents. He is a military man who goes way back. He was a recruit in the Sierra Maestra, later rising to command Cuban troops in Angola. He is thought to be the military officer closest to Raul. Carlos Lage is another. As secretary of the Consejo de Ministros, Lage's powerful position has been likened to that of a prime minister. The final vice president is Army Gen. Julio Casas Requiero. Two other soldiers, equal in rank to Casas, are members of the Council, Leopoldo Cintra Frias and Alvaro Lopez Miera. Together with Colome and Casas, they form a core of four from the generation that joined the guerrilla in the 1950s, fought in the revolution, studied in the Soviet Union, and commanded troops in Africa.

Representation mirrors history of the revolution, social sectors Members of the oldest guard blended in the new Council with members of an intermediate generation that included Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque, Central Bank president Francisco Soberon, and other well-known names from political, cultural, and scientific sectors. The tradition of electing representatives of popular sectors was followed this time around as well. Orlando Lugo Fonte from the small farmers, Yolanda Ferrer, a women's advocate, Juan Jose Rabilero from the neighborhood committees, and Salvador Valdes from the unions were all re-elected, and there were several newly elected members, most from the popular sectors.

In his acceptance speech to the Asamblea, Raul Castro began by acknowledging that change would be gradual and that he saw himself as a transitional figure in a historic process that would slowly hand over to a new generation. "I take on the responsibility entrusted to me deeply convinced that, as I have often said, there is only one commander in chief of the Cuban Revolution." He made clear that it would not be he, or any individual, but rather the Partido Comunista de Cuba (PCC) that would become "the sole worthy heir to our people's confidence in its leader." This was what the gradualism was about. He reminded his audience that it was this principle that was "the top leading force of our state and society as provided in Article 5 of our Constitution approved by referendum

by exactly 97.7% of the voters." People were to understand, therefore, that the transition was from individualism to communism.

Fidel is to be the last charismatic leader. "This conviction will become especially significant when as a fact of life the generation that founded and forged the Revolution is no longer present," he said. But, in the meantime, and for as much of the five years of his presidency as he can, he said, he would continue to consult with his brother on "the decisions of special transcendence for the future of our nation, basically those associated with defense, foreign policy, and the socioeconomic development of the country."

Raul said an analysis of the composition of the government is in the offing, to make decisions about changing the "system of institutions pertaining to the central administration of the state." He recalled that, in the first 15 years of the revolution, the government continued to use structures inherited from capitalism that "were adjusted as we went along to undertake the tasks imposed by the radical economic, political, and social changes." Those incremental changes went on until the 1994 crisis when considerable adjustments were made "with the rush imposed by the necessity to quickly adapt to a radically different, very hostile, and extremely dangerous scenario." Raul told the ANPP he now wants smaller government. "A more compact and operational structure is required, with a lower number of institutions under the central administration of the state, and a better distribution of their functions." He said this would cut down on "the enormous amount of meetings, coordination, permissions, conciliations, provisions, rules and regulations, etc., etc." He wants efficiency.

Raul said he wants a continuation of the trend toward more representative government, noting that the makeup of the Asamblea has changed, with women now making up 43% of the body, up more than 7% from the last assembly. The number of members between the ages of 23 and 36, and between 18 and 30, has also increased, "although we also have a high number of deputies over sixty." A higher number of deputies are "directly linked to production and services, that is, workers, farmers, and other laborers," and more members of the armed forces, athletes, artists, writers, journalists, student leaders, "and the comrades working in the people's councils make up over 50% of the assembly." Raul told the new assembly that, while it is a basic premise for the legislature to be ever more representative of the population, "it cannot by itself guarantee the fulfillment of the parliament's mission." He told them an "intelligent, organized, creative, and strong performance" is required of them, particularly while working in committees. He said he wanted all assumptions questioned in order to improve outcomes because "if the people are united behind a single party, this must be more democratic than any other, and so must be the entire society." Raul made a strong pitch for questioning, saying, "There is no reason to fear discrepancies in a society such as ours, where its very nature precludes the existence of antagonistic contradictions, since the social classes that make it up are not antagonistic themselves."

The new president also hit upon an issue that has plagued Cuban society and economics for years, the tendency for Cubans to make demands of a socialist government without linking consumption to production. This has been seen as a consequence of the long period during which the Soviet Union provided just about everything. Now, says Raul, people are and need to be "convinced that the only source of wealth for the society rests with the productive work, above all when people and

resources are efficiently employed." Although all this happened under Fidel, Raul was careful to mention that Fidel was just as incensed about people who "claim rights without ever mentioning duties. As Fidel put it in his Reflections of Jan. 16, "They expect miracles from our determined and dignified revolution." Fair is fair, however, and if the state requires efficient deployment of effort, Raul acknowledged that a fundamental structural inequity, the two-currency system, is up for revision.

Cuba has a peso that is convertible to hard currency and one that is not. That results in some people, who earn convertible pesos, having access to imported goods, while others, earning nonconvertible pesos, are significantly disadvantaged. Revision of this system is an economic minefield, however, and Raul hedged as to how quickly the inequity could be redressed. The monetary system is mired in "entitlements and the subsidies running in the millions presently required by numerous services and products distributed on an egalitarian basis, such as those provided by the ration card, which, under the present conditions of our economy, become irrational and unsustainable," he said.

Toward the end of his speech, Raul returned to the "excess of prohibitions and regulations" with the assurance that his government would start removing the simplest of them within weeks but that others would take longer, particularly those "influenced by measures taken against our country by successive US administrations." But part of the solution to the problem of senseless rule making lies in centralization, "the tendency to apply the same recipe everywhere." Raul said that many believe the solution to every problem demands a national measure, while he believes that "local initiative can be effective and viable." He gave as an example changes in rules about milk distribution that resulted in a program that "allowed us to save more than 6,000 tons of powdered milk that would have cost US\$30 million." Dropping the regulations on direct distribution of milk also saved millions in hard-currency expenses and 600,000 liters of fuel.

Raul ended his speech to the deputies reminding them that the day, Feb. 24, was the 113th anniversary of the War for Independence, the Necessary War, about which Fidel commented, "For every Cuban, Marti's frowning countenance and Maceo's withering look point to the arduous path of duty, not to a more comfortable life." In all, President Raul Castro sketched out a tenure centered on structural change, some of which is needed to solve old problems and some to prepare for future social change. He also encouraged perceptual change, encouraging citizens to speak their minds. It looks like he has a pretty full agenda in mind. But none of this change is the kind the US and some of its allies were looking for, a change in the constitutional requirement for a single party, a change toward a capitalistic economic system that mimics and meshes with their own. Nor does it accommodate the US wish for freeing "dissidents" and others whose rights they believe have been trampled.

So, if Cuba is not going to change, the White House appears to have concluded, neither will US policy nor the blockade it has imposed and maintained for so many years. "The only thing that changed yesterday was a new leader emerged but there is no indication that the Cuban people are going to be allowed to pursue a free and prosperous future," said White House press secretary Dana Perino, adding, "We are going to continue to support their aspirations for a better life but the president's position on the embargo has not changed." The statement put the US president at odds with Pope Benedict XVI and with Pope John Paul II before him. Vatican Secretary of State

Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone said in Havana, "The Holy See confirms the precise words of Pope John Paul II," who called the blockade unjust and ethically unacceptable. Bertone said the blockade now "is an oppression of the Cuban people" and "a violation of their independence." He said the Vatican "encourages the United States to end the blockade." Bertone said he welcomed Raul's election as a continuation "of the development of Cuba, of the development of Cuba's international relations with the world.

As John Paul urged, for Cuba to open to the world, and for the world to open to Cuba, above all that the world open to Cuba." Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque said the cardinal's very full agenda during his stay on the island was "to see the enormous effort made by the Cuban people to confront difficulties, to build a better and more fair country for all, and, in particular, the effort of our people to overcome the great hardships stemming from economic, commercial, and financial blockade imposed on us." Perez Roque said the greatest danger Cubans face "stems from the threat from abroad, from the threat of external pressure, the economic blockade, the policy of aggressions against our country."

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