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Castro Prepares Cuba for Transition at a Time of International Readjustments

by Daniel Vázquez

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Raúl Castro, who is scheduled to retire as Cuba's president in April, is preparing his government for a transition along with working to name a successor and to help the country adapt to changing international dynamics.

Castro will not be retiring from government entirely, because he will continue to be first secretary of the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC), which is endorsed by the Cuban Constitution as the "organized vanguard of the Cuban nation," and "the highest leading force of society and of the state, which organizes and guides the common efforts towards the high ends of the construction of socialism and the advancement of the communist society." The PCC's next congress will be in 2021, when Castro will be 90 years old.

Castro took the reins of government in the summer of 2006, when his brother Fidel Castro, the former prime minister and president (1959-2008), suffered a health crisis that prevented him from reassuming his governing role. At first, Raúl Castro's title was "acting president," but he has been president since 2008. For almost half a century, he had been the head of the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR), in control of strategic sectors such as tourism and telecommunications. Fidel Castro died in November 2016 ([NotiCen, Jan. 26, 2017](#)).

Although his initial date of retirement was to have been this February, on Dec. 21, Castro told the annual session of the unicameral National Assembly of People's Power that he would postpone his retirement until April, because of the setbacks caused by Hurricane Irma in September. The storm left 10 dead, and damage in towns, tourist facilities and agricultural areas in several provinces was estimated at US\$13 billion. Numerous tourism facilities were closed for repairs for several weeks after the storm ([NotiCen, Oct. 5, 2017](#)).

The elections process

The authorities have called for general elections on March 11, when the provincial delegates and the deputies to the National Assembly will be finishing their current five-year terms. The process will end on April 19, when the new National Assembly is installed and the 31 members of the Council of State are selected. From this group, Castro's successor for president, a first vice president, and five vice presidents will be chosen.

Critics of the Cuban government believe that the electoral system overseen by the PCC, starting with last November's municipal elections, is not reliable because it creates obstacles for the nomination of dissidents and in essence prevents the population from directly electing the president of the country.

Although Castro has not explicitly named him as the favorite, the figure that has emerged as the presidential successor is Miguel Díaz-Canel, a 57-year-old engineer who has acted as the country's first vice president since 2013 and has had a long career in administration and partisan positions. He

has recently made statements about the need for the country to maintain continuity in its policies and has spoken forcefully against opposition groups.

The transition of power in Cuba is coming at the same time as the deaths of historical leaders linked to the 1950s insurrection that brought the Castro brothers to power. In addition to Fidel Castro, other leaders, including Minister of Culture Armando Hart, have died recently after being in power for decades.

In recent years, Raúl Castro has warned about the need to promote younger people into management positions, to always maintain loyalty to the communist process and the single party, and to reject capitalism.

The national economic situation remains difficult. Cuba experienced a recession in 2016 (a 0.9% contraction), the first in two decades. In 2017, GDP growth was 1.6%. For 2018, the government predicts 2% in economic growth, although the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) has predicted that it will be around 1%.

The country's great economic locomotive continues to be tourism, an industry that is advancing steadily and reached more than 4.7 million visitors in 2017, despite the impact of Hurricane Irma.

International tourism continues to flow into the country, with an increase in US visitors despite warnings issued by the US government to discourage travel to the island ([NotiCen, June 23, 2016](#)). Bilateral relations between Cuba and the US have been deteriorating since Donald Trump's arrival in the White House ([NotiCen, Aug. 10, 2017](#)), and further damaged by the more recent charges of alleged sonic attacks on two dozen employees at the US Embassy in Havana starting in December 2016 ([NotiCen, Nov. 9, 2017](#)).

The return to old allies

Castro's retirement as the head of government coincides with changes in the island's geopolitical relations. His tenure ends as hopes end for new investments and joint projects with the US. The Cuban people's expectations for a flowering of relations with the US, born in 2015 during the administration of US President Barack Obama, when Washington and Havana showed a willingness to work together, have been dashed ([NotiCen, Jan. 29, 2015](#)).

Despite the reforms proposed by Castro in the last 10 years, Cuba still has problems with transportation, housing, agricultural production, food, and infrastructure. There have not been enough measures put in place to truly support self-employment, small private businesses, and cooperatives. The reforms clash with the shortage of raw materials, the lack of a solvent clientele, and the government's reluctance allow its most skilled and enterprising citizens to build wealth.

Meanwhile, trade between Havana and Venezuela, Cuba's once-reliable ally, has dropped sharply as the political and economic turmoil in the South American country has increased ([NotiCen, June 15, 2017](#)). And Cuba is getting friendlier with Russia, which has forgiven part of the debt it was owed, and has promised millions in financing. Russia is increasing exports, sending cars and oil, and is collaborating in the modernization of the rail system. In 2017, around 100,000 Russian tourists visited the island. Russian President Vladimir Putin has taken Cuba, once the political satellite of the former Soviet Union, under his wing ([NotiCen, June 15, 2017](#)).

Havana has benefited by a rapprochement with the European Union (EU), which last November ceased the two decades of policy sanctions that restricted bilateral dialogue on human rights. Now, a

new chapter of investments and businesses begins. During a two-day visit to Cuba last January, the EU's top diplomat, Federica Mogherini, reaffirmed the EU's willingness to work together.

The talks between Cuba and the EU have already resulted in agreements on cooperation on renewable energies, sustainable agriculture, and culture. The European bloc has become Cuba's number one commercial partner, with an exchange between the parties that exceeded 2.4 billion euros (US\$2.98 billion) in 2016.

Castro family holds on to power

In spite of Castro's announced retirement, other figures in the Castro family maintain a presence in Cuba. Alejandro Castro Espín, Raúl Castro's only son, is a colonel in the Army and responsible for intelligence and counterintelligence services. In addition, Brigadier General Luis Alberto Rodríguez López Callejas, president of Gaesa, the business administration group of the armed forces, was once married to Castro's eldest daughter, Deborah, and is the father of Raúl Guillermo, Castro's favorite grandson and his personal escort.

Another visible face is that of Castro's daughter, Mariela Castro Espín, a psychologist by profession, the director of a national center for sex education in Havana, and an activist for LGBT rights. The homosexual community on the island suffered intimidation and harassment for decades and was considered irreconcilable with the values of the communist "new man" advocated by Fidel Castro. Mariela Castro has always reaffirmed her political support for her father and the PCC.

Beyond the generational changes, the Cuban government faces the unsatisfied expectations of Cuban youth, who prefer to emigrate, are indifferent to the usual political discourse, and are attracted by the market economy.

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