

Regime readies path for Raúl Castro's rise

Fidel Castro's younger brother Raúl is taking on a more public persona in what experts say is a clear effort aimed at ensuring a smooth transition in leadership.

The Miami Herald.
Jul. 14, 2006



ADALBERTO ROQUE/AFP FILE

RAUL CASTRO was born June 3, 1931. He spent 22 months in prison for his role in a 1953 attack on the Moncada army barracks in Santiago de Cuba to topple Fulgencio Batista.

A recent string of Cuban media reports highlighting Defense Minister Raúl Castro has U.S. analysts saying that Havana is preparing the way for life after Fidel and suggesting that his younger brother already has begun taking on more governance responsibilities.

Raúl, long designated as successor to his 79-year old brother, was the subject of a fawning 6,300-word profile on his 75th birthday, and the government media has reported on his visits to military bases and comments on the island's politics.

While a database search showed the number of media mentions of Raúl has remained constant, one expert Cuba-watcher said the scope and depth of the coverage has changed dramatically -- from close-cropped photos of him at official functions, for example, to wide-angle "almost heroic" shots of him reviewing troops in the field.

When the Granma newspaper announced a high-level shake-up of the Communist Party last week, Raúl's quotes were prominently featured. And a speech he gave last month is still posted on Granma's website (www.granma.cu), in what Cuba-watchers view as another sign of Raúl's sudden importance.

Some Cuba experts say Raúl may be offering himself as the face of the future -- perhaps to detract contenders keen on taking that spot when Fidel is no longer in power.

"They are preparing the process. Fidel is in control and directing this process of change. As Fidel slowly becomes more debilitated, you'll see Raúl and [National Assembly President Ricardo] Alarcón becoming more visible," said Tony Rivera, editor of the online Cuba news site, La Nueva Cuba.

At a recent military celebration, Raúl addressed the issue of succession. His job as first vice president of the ruling Council of State makes him first in line to succeed Fidel under the constitution, and Raúl also is No. 2 to Fidel as second secretary of the Cuban Communist Party.

"Only the Communist Party -- as the institution that brings together the revolutionary vanguard and will always guarantee the unity of Cubans -- can be the worthy heir of the trust deposited by the people in their leader," he said earlier this month at a ceremony observing the 45th anniversary of the Western Army. "Anything more is pure speculation."

But the Castro brothers themselves have suggested that a newer and younger generation of leaders need to be tapped. In an interview published recently by French writer Ignacio Ramonet, Fidel quipped that at 75, his brother isn't getting younger.

Cuba watchers say that comment did not go unnoticed, and that it's no coincidence that it was followed by a swell of positive media coverage.

"The propaganda media of today's capitalist world has tried for many years to paint a picture of Raúl as an extremist, sullen and gruff in his human relations, lacking in sense of humor and devoid of sensitivity. The enemy does it like that because it knows very well what Raúl represents for the Revolution, for our people and for the future of our nation," Granma wrote in the June 2 story marking his birthday the next day. The story also described him as "tireless, systematic, intelligent and decisive."

That softer persona reflected in the story, titled *Proximity of Raúl*, is meant to ease fears of the Cuban people and convince the international community, experts said.

"Raúl has never been a person people really like. He's not so popular. Now they need to protect their leader," said Rivera, editor of the online Cuba news site.

JAILED AND EXILED

Five years younger than his brother Fidel, Raúl was also educated at Jesuit schools in Havana and helped plan and execute the failed attack on Moncada military barracks on July 26, 1953. Along with Fidel, he was jailed and exiled to Mexico but returned in 1956 to incite the revolution that ultimately toppled dictator Fulgencio Batista.

He assumed command of military operations in Oriente province in the east, and one of his first acts was the summary execution of 100 Batista soldiers. Raúl spent the next 47 years as minister of defense and head of the army, where he developed a reputation as a pragmatic, solid leader who lacks the charisma and fiery oratory of Fidel.

He has been described as a brusque heavy drinker, but one more open to economic reform and negotiations with the United States.

In 1993, The Miami Herald reported that federal prosecutors in Miami were preparing to charge Raúl and 14 other top Cubans with smuggling Colombian cocaine through Cuba to the United States, but the indictment was never brought before a grand jury.

As head of the military, Raúl today oversees a military force of up to 55,000 people, significantly smaller than 15 years ago, when Cuba enjoyed hefty Soviet subsidies. But while his forces may have shrunk, his position as head of the military took on increasing importance in the 1990s, as the armed forces started taking over profitable chunks of the Cuban economy.

Top positions running the island's tourism industry, ports, transportation and other key sectors are now held by generals.

"There is no other force in Cuba right now that is so organized or powerful," Oscar Espinosa Chepe, a dissident economist and journalist in Cuba, said in a telephone interview. "Raúl is an important figure. He doesn't have the charisma with the people, but within the army he does have a lot of prestige. I'm a dissident, but I'm not a fool or unobjective: Raúl is esteemed."

Brian Latell, a former top CIA analyst and Raúl biographer who now works at the University of Miami's Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies, said the media blitz shows a "probable acceleration of succession planning." The reporting is, more importantly, trying to distinguish him from Fidel.

'*Proximity of Raúl* could be saying, 'Get ready, the change could be coming,' " said Latell, author of the book *After Fidel*. "His role in decision-making has been expanding. When you start seeing Raúl playing a prominent role in foreign policy -- Fidel's bailiwick -- that will be an unmistakable signal that Raúl is playing a very central role."

LAGE'S ROLE GROWS

As an aging Fidel -- who is believed by the CIA to suffer from Parkinson's disease, a progressive condition that causes stiffness, shaking and problems with balance -- takes fewer trips abroad, Vice President Carlos Lage has been taking on the role as intercontinental emissary. This suggests the government is also grooming him for a future position of power, Frank Mora, a Cuba expert at the National War College in Washington, said in a phone interview.

"What has been happening in the last month is that forces are coalescing to let it be known the party is doing its job and is ready to assume responsibilities when the time comes," Mora said. "I'm intrigued by this bolstering of Raúl's image, letting people know: 'We are in good hands. We have nothing to fear when Fidel goes.' "