

EDITORIAL

Change in Cuba?

Fidel Castro's surrender of power may not be permanent, but his successors are more than ready.

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WE DON'T know yet whether Fidel Castro's unprecedented delegation of power to his brother and would-be successor, Raul Castro, on Monday heralds the end of his 47 years of dictatorship in Cuba or is merely a brief interregnum while he recuperates from intestinal surgery. One of his sidekicks said yesterday that the 79-year-old tyrant's "last moment is very far away." If so, unfortunate Cubans will have to go on waiting for the opportunity to move beyond a failed communist regime that is as gray, unkempt and anachronistic as the old man's beard.

Either way, there are plenty of people in and outside of Cuba waiting to jump into the vacuum Fidel Castro will leave -- one that is unlikely to be filled for very long by his dissolute 75-year-old brother. Most conspicuous these days is Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, a budding autocrat who has been propping up the Cuban regime with as much as \$1 billion a year in oil deliveries and other subsidies, and who aspires to inherit Mr. Castro's role as symbol and cheerleader for all who despise the United States. Mr. Chávez was unable to be at Mr. Castro's side yesterday because the apparently sudden medical emergency came up while he was beating his anti-Yanqui drum in Hanoi.

There is also the Bush administration, which released a report last month on how to bring about a free Cuba, just in time for the upcoming 2006 elections -- in the United States, that is. (The last such report from the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba just happened to come out in 2004.) It promises \$80 million in aid over two years for democracy-building groups and activities, and much more if an interim Cuban administration requests it and undertakes a transition to democracy. Then there is the Cuban exile community, some of whose leaders were already calling yesterday for mass action in Havana to stop the transfer of power.

Yet there are, thankfully, also courageous and dedicated people in Cuba who have been preparing for the post-Castro era. One of them is Oswaldo Payá, the leader of the Varela Project, which several years ago gathered 25,000 signatures on a petition seeking a referendum on free elections and other reforms. The regime ignored the petition and jailed most of its organizers. But Mr. Payá persisted, staging a national dialogue in which some 12,000 Cubans discussed their future in small groups. The result was a document called the Program for All Cubans, which Mr. Payá released in June. It lays out a plan by which the opposition would negotiate a political transition with Mr. Castro's own National Assembly, leading to free elections; the model is the mostly peaceful dismantling of communist regimes that occurred in Central Europe in the late 1980s.

A dictator who has deprived his able and culturally rich nation of freedom and prosperity for five decades may or may not finally be on his deathbed. But his country is clearly ready to move on.