

Exiles' plans dependent on Cubans, Raúl's ouster

South Florida's Cuban exile leaders reacted with grand plans for a post-Castro Cuba that would not include a succession of power for Raúl Castro.

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South Florida's Cuban exile organizations, after waiting nearly a half-century hoping for a change in leadership in Cuba, reacted Tuesday with a mixture of wait-and-see optimism and no-holds-barred plans for firing up Cubans on the island.

One mantra became increasingly clear throughout the day, however: No succession of power -- with Fidel Castro ceding control of the country to his brother, Raúl -- would be acceptable as real change.

Some Cuban activists vowed they would head to Cuba and join dissidents who might seize the moment to try to bring real change to the island.

"We are preparing our boats and our planes to possibly send a contingency to Cuba, to unite with the internal movement," said Ramón Saúl Sánchez, the leader of the Democracy Movement, which has staged flotillas off the Cuban coast for more than 10 years.

He is also concerned about dissidents on the island and has repeatedly asked that the foreign media keep an eye on them.

"The big danger here is that Raúl Castro tries to squash the dissident movement to send a clear message that there is no negotiating with him."

Other exiles hoped to send clear messages back to those who already work within Cuba's communist system.

OFFERS OF SUPPORT

Alfredo Mesa, a spokesman with the Cuban American National Foundation said, "We do have a strong message to people in a position of power inside of Cuba who have a genuine and transparent interest in a peaceful nonviolent transition to democracy: that they are not alone and that they have our support," Mesa said.

CANF members in chapters all over the United States and in Europe spent the day calling contacts in Cuba and foreign diplomats who could deliver that message to the right people in the regime, Mesa added.

"We're in a position to help," he said, referring to the \$80 million in post-Castro aid promised by the U.S. government to the Cuban people. "Those who have a genuine interest need not go to [Venezuelan President] Hugo Chávez for a financing plan for a succession of power. That is a very tangible sign of support."

He said CANF is fighting 47 years of anti-exile propaganda.

"Fidel Castro has engrained in the minds of all Cubans that the Cuban American National Foundation wants to take away people's homes and go in there and boot people out of their jobs. That's a myth," Mesa said.

By no means was CANF calling for the people in Cuba to revolt.

“We support how the day has gone today in Cuba because ultimately they will be the ones who suffer any repercussions. They need to be more careful on how they react to this news than we do.”

The organization -- once the most influential Cuban-American lobby in Washington -- was also preparing for further developments, Mesa said.

“We are in constant communication with folks inside Cuba to get our direction from them. At the end of the day, our job is not to dictate or to tell them how this will carry out. Our job is to support their efforts in Cuba, to break this succession and enjoy the liberties that you and I enjoy as free Cubans,” Mesa said.

The grandfather of Miami Cuban radio, Radio Mambi’s Armando Perez Roura, also began to plan ahead Tuesday. He hopes news of Castro’s death comes within days, not months.

“Our main focus will be to detoxify what communism has done to Cuba and, more importantly, reconstruct it,” Pérez said. “[Before Castro took power], Cuba was exporting a lot of products, including sugar and rice, industries the people no longer have.”

He told Cuban exile listeners not to worry.

“The end has to come. We need to be very clear in what we are going to do.”

Some groups -- including Mothers Against Repression and the Cuban Democratic Directorate -- hoped the situation would allow them to capitalize on the promotion of a "noncooperation campaign," which political prisoners and dissidents on the island called for last month.

“We believe in the power of the Cuban people to change the government,” said Javier de Cespedes, president of the directorate. If there were a time to stop cooperating with the government, he added, it is now.

“This opens new doors and opportunities for that campaign inside and outside the island,” de Cespedes said. “It gives them more international attention in which to do it and it also reveals that dictatorships do not last forever.”

But not everyone planned to join a peaceful transition.

Members of Alpha 66 -- a hard-line paramilitary group that claims to have conducted sabotage missions on the island in the past and believes that change can only come from an armed conflict -- would conduct their training this weekend, as they do every Sunday, at their campground near the Everglades.

THE WAIT GOES ON

Some Cuban exiles were cautiously looking toward the island for a sign.

“Before implementing any plan, we are trying to wait out what is happening,” said Ninoska Pérez Castellón, a popular radio host and spokeswoman for the Cuban Liberty Council, many of whose members left CANF after its leadership moved to the center.

"We have to wait and see how events unfold in the next few days. The next steps have to be based on whatever actions take place inside Cuba. Right now, the status quo is the same. It's still the same dictatorship, just with a different face," Pérez said.