

In Latin America, A Warm Spotlight For Socialist Icon

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LA PAZ, Bolivia, Aug. 1 -- Patients with bandaged eyes sat in the waiting room of an ophthalmological clinic here on Tuesday, watching reports about Fidel Castro's health on an overhead television and expressing a level of concern that might not have existed here just a year ago.

That was before Bolivians elected Evo Morales as president and gave the Cuban leader another reliable ally in South America, and before Castro began dispatching doctors to Bolivian neighborhoods like this one to perform surgeries for the poor.

"Castro's image is a lot different here now, because before -- to us, at least -- he didn't even have an image," said Paula Casas, 27, who was visiting the Cuban-staffed clinic with her husband and two daughters.

The 79-year-old socialist icon has been basking in his warmest spotlight in decades in South America. With the help of promotion by regional leaders such as Morales and President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela -- where Cuban teachers and doctors have also been dispatched -- Castro has cultivated an image of the grandfatherly benefactor.

The Cuban president has his detractors. He remains the most recognizable symbol of a polarizing, anti-American brand of socialism that represents only a part of Latin America's current political climate. But he is no longer susceptible to the label that threatened him just a few years ago: irrelevance.

Castro's most recent overseas trip -- a visit in July to an economic summit in Argentina attended by most of the leaders of South America's southern cone -- provided a clear view of how energetically he has burnished his star in Latin America in recent years.

Television stations interrupted programming to show him arriving in the Argentine city of Cordoba, aired his lengthy speeches, and followed him when he joined Chávez for a tour of the childhood home of Ernesto "Che" Guevara, Castro's close confidant during the Cuban revolution. Despite having little involvement in the official business of the summit, Castro unquestionably got the most attention.

Many officials in South America publicly embrace Castro much more warmly than they do U.S. officials, in part because of low public support in the region for U.S. policies and the war in Iraq. Speaking about Castro's condition on Tuesday, Brazil's ambassador to Cuba indirectly criticized U.S. policy while wishing Castro well.

"The main concern of representatives from countries friendly to Cuba is that Cubans decide their future without interference," said the envoy, Tilden Santiago. "It would be very bad to see interventionist attitudes repeated in Cuba, in a world that has seen episodes like those in Iraq."

Venezuela's government issued a statement on Tuesday saying that authorities there had conferred with their Cuban counterparts and that Castro's recovery was "advancing positively."

"We are very sure and we have great faith, here in our hearts, that in a few weeks Fidel Castro will be once again as he has been and will always be: with us," Chávez told reporters during a visit to Vietnam.

But the first day in almost 50 years without Castro at the helm in Cuba had some thinking about what might happen if he is forced to permanently relinquish his post to his brother, Raul Castro. In Caracas, Carolina Villanueva, a 43-year-old economist, predicted that the bilateral agreements that provide oil at low prices to Cuba and social services to Venezuela could fray.

"Chávez is going to want to interfere and rule Cuba, and he's going to want to review all the contracts and agreements," said Villanueva. "Besides, you don't know if Fidel's brother is going to negotiate with the gringos. There wouldn't be that closeness and intimacy between our two countries anymore."

Pedro Cardón, a farmer who lives outside La Paz, said he believes the political landscape of South America will likely change significantly when Castro dies.

"It's going to change a lot of the cooperative agreements that have been made, and we're going to see a lot fewer Cuban students visiting here, I'm sure," said Cardón, 44. "We've seen how fast things can change in a country in a very short time when a new president takes power. Things change quickly."

In Argentina, the thought of life after Castro was viewed more symbolically.

"The death of Castro would mean the death of an icon," said Fernando Hitzig, 29, an architect in Buenos Aires. "Argentines will be really affected because we have such a close connection with Cuba because of Che. When Fidel dies, the Cuban system will fail for sure, and the United States will devour Cuba. They'll have a McDonald's in Havana the next day."