

Cuban exiles eye change in Cuba

Castro's transfer of power to his brother – for now – speeds plans for a new era.

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MIAMI – The provisional transfer of power in Cuba from Fidel Castro to his brother, Raul, is not expected to result in any immediate easing of communist control of the island nation.

But it has accelerated planning by Cuban exiles and others for a post-Castro Cuba. And it is raising concerns about whether the emerging transition in Cuba will remain peaceful or turn violent.



REVOLUTION ANNIVERSARY: Fidel Castro (left) and his brother, Raul, attended an observance in Havana in 1979.

The announcement on Cuban television that Mr. Castro was about to undergo surgery and had temporarily turned over control of the government to Defense Minister Raul Castro sparked jubilant celebrations in Miami. Hundreds of Cuban-Americans took to the streets in Hialeah and Little Havana Monday and Tuesday, waving Cuban flags, cheering, and dancing. They included three generations of Cuban-Americans, the original exiles from the early 1960s, their children, and their grandchildren.

"It has been 50 years of dictatorship, so Cubans in Miami and all over the world are excited about the possibility that finally there can be change," says Camila Ruiz-Gallardo of the Cuban American National Foundation. "There is a light at the end of the tunnel."

For many here it is a celebration of the potential demise of arch-enemy Fidel Castro, the embodiment of the 1959 revolution that seized private property, cracked down on political dissent, and caused hundreds of thousands to flee to the US - many in flimsy rafts.

Some exiles see a freer Cuba ahead

Others are beginning to ponder the possibility of greater political and economic freedom in Cuba. Some are talking of potential business ties between Havana and Miami. Others are expressing hope of reuniting with relatives who remained behind.

But some analysts warn that Cuba's communist government may survive for many years under Raul Castro.

"We are going to have to wait and see what happens," says Frank Calzon of the Center for a Free Cuba in Washington.

Political analysts say that Castro had long ago laid the groundwork for a transition to his brother. Raul is said to command the loyalty of the Cuban army and its internal security force. Although his revolutionary credentials are impeccable, Raul does not have the charisma of his older brother, they say. And it is unclear how internal loyalties may play out once Fidel is no longer in charge.

"We don't know exactly what is occurring," Sen. Mel Martinez (R) of Florida told reporters in Washington.

"It is certain that [Castro's] plan is for a transfer from one dictator to another," said Mr. Martinez, the first Cuban-American elected to the US Senate. "I hope voices of freedom will come forward."

Last month, the Bush administration announced a proposal to spend \$80 million to hasten the transition toward democracy in post-Castro Cuba. It included efforts to reach out to the Cuban military to help prevent violent upheaval.

The Cuban regime denounced the effort as a violation of its sovereignty.

President Bush was in Miami earlier Monday. In comments to a Spanish-language radio station made prior to the Castro announcement, he said: "If Fidel Castro were to move on because of natural causes, we've got a plan in place to help the people of Cuba understand there's a better way than the system in which they've been living under."

Speculation about Castro's condition

The method used by Cuba to make the announcement sparked speculation that Castro must be seriously ill or perhaps already dead.

"It is obviously a very serious situation," says Mr. Calzon. It is highly unusual that Castro himself did not announce the transfer of power. It suggests his condition is grave, he says.

There are two potential models for post-Castro Cuba, Calzon says. "The model for Raul and his brother is North Korea, where you saw no bloodshed and a transition within communism," he says.

In contrast, Calzon says, "The model for millions of Cubans could be the Czech experience where there was no bloodshed and a transition to the rule of law."

But Calzon warns that other, darker scenarios are possible - including the kind of violent upheaval that ousted the repressive regime in Romania.

He says one key to the transition will be how the Cuban army responds. Will certain units balk at any ordered crackdown against those urging greater freedom on the island?

Calzon says the US government should boost transmissions of radio and television programming into Cuba. "I would put on the air military officers who played a role in transitions to democracy in many countries around the world," he says. They should talk about "how they have a better life now and how, for the most part, they were not punished and that the change to the rule of law was better for them, their family, and for the country."