

# Beginning of the end of tyranny?

## OUR OPINION: SURPRISE POWER SHIFT RAISES HOPE FOR A FREE CUBA

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The world heard the cheer of Miami Cubans at Versailles on Monday night. But Cuba's dictator-for-life isn't dead yet -- as far as we know. The sudden news that Fidel Castro had transferred power to his brother Raúl, even temporarily, raised hopes that the tyranny in Cuba is nearing an end. Forty-seven years of pent-up frustration and desire burst out at the first sign that a free Cuba might be in sight.

Yet we don't really know Fidel Castro's true condition. Speculation is rampant. Some say he is fine, and the illness is a ploy to see how Cubans react to Raúl's succession. Others say he is dead, but the death is being kept secret to buy time to secure Raúl's rule.

The scenario could be exactly as announced on Cuban television. Fidel Castro has undergone a "complicated surgery" for an "intestinal crisis" and will be incapacitated for "several weeks." In the interim, the dictator transferred power to Raúl Castro and control over various functions to other loyalists. He also postponed planned celebrations of his 80th birthday on Aug. 13, a huge event.

We know certainly that this is the first time in nearly five decades of strong-arm rule that Fidel Castro publicly has ceded any power. For a megalomaniac, that's significant.

The coming days will be a test run for his designated successor, Raúl Castro, who will be closely watched for any signs of policy change or weakness. Raúl is reputed to be a better administrator -- and more ruthless than his brother, without the charisma. He also is 75 years old, which doesn't suggest good health or long years ahead. Many Cuba analysts say that his rule will be inherently unstable.

For Cubans on the island, this is a time of mixed emotions. While many long for democracy and fundamental freedoms, many also fear change and uncertainty. Unlike Cubans here, those on the island have reason to avoid celebrating the power shift or agitating for government reform. They know repression. Even Cuba's brave dissidents are girding for more arrests and attacks by rapid-response mobs.

Yet, despite Fidel Castro's efforts to institutionalize his revolution, it is difficult to imagine that anyone could grip power as successfully in his wake. No one knows what will happen when he *really* dies. A wild card still could spoil the best laid plans. Dissident leaders and popular movements could unexpectedly rise up, as in Eastern Europe, to unseat the Stalinist government. Or not.

Meanwhile, people of goodwill will continue to long for the day that Cuba is free of tyranny. Those of us outside the island should continue to support dissidents advocating for a democratic transition on the front lines. It may not happen tomorrow. It may not happen immediately after Fidel Castro's death. But right now it seems a nearer possibility.