

In the long run, democracy in Cuba inevitable

OPINION

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Widespread media reports strongly suggest that Fidel Castro will die in the near future. While it appears that Raúl Castro will take over in his wake, I fervently hope that the Castro family dictatorship will not long outlive Fidel. In the long term, I believe that a transition to democracy is inevitable for Cuba. While U.S. government support and assistance will be critical to making democracy succeed in Cuba, they will not prove sufficient in isolation.

The undertaking is simply too large. Although Cuba's natural beauty and talented, hard-working population will afford it significant long-term advantages in the global economy, it is important to recall just how far Cuba has fallen. Once Latin America's wealthiest country (and the third wealthiest country in the hemisphere after the United States and Canada), Cuba now has a standard of living far below the Latin American median. Throughout the country, trained doctors and veterinarians work at menial jobs while millions go to bed hungry.

Mexico, for example, enjoys nearly three times Cuba's per-capita income. Entrepreneurs will have to invest billions of dollars just to bring Cuba's infrastructure and per-capita income up to Mexico's levels. I'm confident that it can happen, but it won't be easy. If Cuba ever hopes to return to developed-nation status, it will require decades of hard work.

The U.S. Government can help. I have cosponsored legislation in Congress that would give a significant boost to our government's efforts to support a democratic transition in Cuba following the end of the Castro regime. It would provide new funding to enhance American efforts to help Cubans move towards democracy and begin a series of hemisphere-wide consultations intended to help Cuba chart a course towards the future.

When the Cuban people establish a democratic government, furthermore, I believe Congress must be prepared to take additional steps to provide technical and financial assistance to Cuba. Democracy will also mean an end to the trade embargo that we have had to apply for over 40 years in response to Castro's domestic oppression and efforts to spread his brand of totalitarian communism throughout the world. Opening up trade with the United States will bring much needed new income to the Cuban people.

But government policies can only do so much. Getting the Cuban economy going and establishing a thriving democracy will take exactly the thing that Castro's economic planners have squelched for so long: individual entrepreneurial initiative.

Given that Castro's brutal rule has driven millions of Cubans to American shores, nearly every Cuban family now has relatives in the United States. Once free travel becomes possible between Cuba and the United States, families can and should be able to travel freely. As a result of Castro's rule, Cuba has lost a tremendous number of talented people to the United States. Once the Castro regime ends, however, the talents, resources and expertise of the Cuban-American community will become an invaluable asset to a newly democratic Cuba.

Both the United States and a democratic Cuba will have a tremendous amount to gain from measures that encourage Cuban-Americans to visit Cuba, share their expertise and invest there. Once the Cuban people throw off the yoke of authoritarianism, both the United States and the Cuban people must work together to find ways to identify and take advantage of such opportunities. Formal cultural and educational exchanges between the two countries could also play a major role in building the relationships that will, in time, rebuild Cuba.

The end of the Fidel Castro era for Cuba should not mean transition from one dictatorship to another but, rather, a new Cuba based on authentic flowering of democracy and a return to economic prosperity. Building such a new Cuba will require cooperation between the Cuban and the American peoples, and both countries are fortunate that we have a Cuban-American community ideally situated to foster the necessary transition.

Sen. Bill Frist, R-Tenn., is majority leader of the U.S. Senate.