

Cuba Stays Calm With Castro on Sidelines

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MEXICO CITY, Aug. 13 — The decline of [Fidel Castro](#), who turned 80 on Sunday and appeared in photographs for the first time since his unspecified intestinal surgery last month, was supposed to be a kind of second Cuban revolution. The notion, put forward by [Cuba](#) specialists for years, was that the entire system hung on one man.



But in the last two weeks, with Mr. Castro turning over power to his brother Raúl, at least for now, a different reality has emerged on the island. There was calm and normalcy, not chaos and hysteria that was predicted. Instead of an intervention by the United States, the Bush administration called on the Cuban people to take their future in their own hands. And rather than upheaval within the Cuban government, it appears that the political system may not change much at all.

“American policy toward Cuba has always been based on the fragility of the Cuban system,” said Philip Peters, an expert on Cuba at the Lexington Institute, a policy group based in Virginia that promotes free-market economics. “There is this predicate in our policies that the Cuban system is one that can be pushed over with one finger, and that has not been the case.”

If Mr. Castro dies, the country’s stability may be more overtly shaken. But so far it appears that Mr. Castro, who has governed Cuba for 47 years, may once again defy the experts and prove his influence, some call it control, over the government and its people, whether he survives or not.

Photos published Sunday by the state-run youth newspaper, Juventud Rebelde, showed Mr. Castro looking alert. A message signed by the president, however, made it clear that his recovery would be long, and might not be successful.

“I suggest to everyone to be optimistic,” Mr. Castro’s letter said, “and at the same time to be ready always to face any adverse news.”

The four photos showed Mr. Castro from the waist up, wearing an Adidas sweat-suit jacket, rather than his signature army fatigues. In two of the photographs, Mr. Castro was speaking on the telephone. In another, he held a copy of a special supplement, published on Saturday by the state-run newspaper Granma, in honor of his birthday.

“For all those who care about my health,” Mr. Castro wrote, “I promise to fight for it.”

Upon the announcement that Mr. Castro was temporarily stepping down from power to have surgery, this reporter traveled to Cuba on a tourist visa, and was expelled a week later. Neither during that time, nor since then, has Mr. Castro vowed to return to office. Aides to Mr. Castro have suggested that he might not ever be able to fully reassume his responsibilities. But Julia E. Sweig, the director of the Latin American program at the [Council on Foreign Relations](#), a nonpartisan organization, predicted he would not.

“I think they are signaling to domestic and international publics that the duration of Fidel’s absence may be much longer than the provisional nature he initially stated,” Ms. Sweig said. “The transfer is under way.”

She added that in stepping down from power two weeks ago, even if only temporarily, Mr. Castro did more than elevate his brother Raúl. She said he also delegated control of government sectors, including energy, education and health care, to other close aides.

“It was a promotion for the people who have been running the country with Fidel,” she said. “Now they are preparing to run the country without him.”

Thoughts of a future without Fidel Castro have consumed public attention on the island since the ailing Mr. Castro announced that he had handed interim power to his brother 14 days ago.

Rather than making an abrupt departure from power, however, Ms. Sweig said that Mr. Castro had begun a drawn-out campaign aimed at keeping the country stable while his aides quietly worked out the details of the nation’s first permanent transition in recent history. On Sunday, Raúl Castro made his first appearance as Cuba’s temporary president when he greeted Venezuela’s president, [Hugo Chávez](#), at the airport.

Meanwhile, people across Havana pored over the photos and seemed to see different things in their president’s unremarkable expressions. At a Coppelia ice cream shop that draws lines around the block, one man said that Mr. Castro’s beard looked freshly dyed. It was a sign, the man said, of recovery.

A woman in the same line commented on Mr. Castro’s eyes, and said, “He looks so tired.”

Given the restrictions on political expression in Cuba, it can be hard to know peoples' true thoughts. Still, whether people said they felt relieved or skeptical, they continued on with their normal activities. If there was something unusual happening inside the government, there was hardly any way to tell it on the streets.

Annual carnival celebrations scheduled for earlier this month were canceled, and the official celebrations of Mr. Castro's birthday were postponed until December, both because of his illness. But neighborhood Revolutionary Defense Committees called residents together for "reaffirmation ceremonies" to spread the message that the government was in good hands while Mr. Castro struggled to recover.

There were occasional light infantry exercises along the seaside boulevard, known as the Malecón, but they seemed much less spectacular than the everyday rush-hour blitz in which workers cram themselves onto decrepit public buses to get home.

Booksellers hawked used texts the way they always do in plazas at the heart of the city's colonial center. Children on summer vacation squealed as dolphins at the National Aquarium balanced balls on their noses and leaped through hoops. Foreign tourists sang along with salsa bands in bars that were once [Ernest Hemingway's](#) hangouts.

All in all, the days after Fidel Castro left power seemed a lot like any other.

"We were ill-prepared for the eventuality of continuity rather than change," said Damián Fernández, director of the Cuban Research Institute at Florida International University, referring to policy makers in Washington and Miami. "All our policies have been built on a foundation of wishful thinking. Now we are confronted with reality, and it's not what we had hoped it would be."

neighborhood on the eastern outskirts of Havana, called Alamar, offers a glimpse of that reality. It was built in the early 1970's, the heyday of Mr. Castro's government, first for Eastern European technicians working on the island and then for the masses of Cuban workers moving from the countryside to the capital in search of a better life.

The money and utilitarian design for the project was provided by the former Soviet Union. The politics of the place, home to more than 140,000 people, is pure Castro.

There is free health care, but so little new housing that young couples often decide against getting married or having children because they have no places of their own. There is free education, but the government restricts access to the Internet and satellite television. Individuals are free to complain about shortages of food and fuel. But more than three residents

complaining around a kitchen table can be run out of their homes as “counterrevolutionaries,” and charged with treason.

It was not the police or the military that watched what people said and did, said a retired port worker and his wife. It was the people themselves.

An architect who could not be identified for his own safety stopped to talk after walking his wife and 2-year-old daughter to a park in Alamar last week. Like other Cubans interviewed there, the architect described himself as a “Fidelista,” saying he respected Mr. Castro as a “person with incredible vision.”

Still, he complained at length about the Cuban economy, which runs on two currencies: one for Cubans and one for foreigners.

He said that although he had helped the Cuban military design some of the elegant resorts that had attracted millions of tourists to the island, he did not dream on his \$36-a-month salary of spending a night in one of them.

The bulk of the architect’s earnings were in Cuban pesos, good only at state stores with limited stocks. Hotels like the ones he designed accept only “convertible pesos,” available to those with foreign currency. The same is true for most supermarkets and clothing stores.

Although almost everyone has a state job, no one is able to support their families on them, the architect said. Most people, he added, illegally “invent” jobs on the side to earn foreign currency. He said he made ends meet with the \$100 his father sent him monthly from Miami.

“Foreigners live as if it was a paradise,” the architect said. “Cubans do not have access to it. Our money is no good in those places. It has generated a long chain of frustration.”

When asked how it was that frustration had not boiled over into unrest after Mr. Castro stepped down from power, the architect said Cubans had already lived through several waves of uncertainty, from the Bay of Pigs to the collapse of the former Soviet Union.

Each time, he said, predictions that their government would collapse proved premature. Instead of getting weaker, he said, Mr. Castro’s grip on the island seemed to get stronger.

“Children who live in countries at war get used to the sounds of bombs,” he said. “We are accustomed to living with threats.”