

CUBA AND CHINA

# Similarities and differences on power, economy

Opinion

The Miami Herald

Aug. 11, 2006

By OSCAR ESPINOSA CHEPE

**HAVANA** -- After President Fidel Castro's startling proclamation, in which he announced his delicate state of health and the temporary transfer of his duties to Raúl Castro, his prearranged substitute, a series of possible scenarios for the future of Cuba has emerged.

One of the analyses more emphatically made is the possibility that, if the president does not recover fully, his substitute at the helm of Cuban society might promote, in the near future, economic reforms that -- as in China and Vietnam -- will give political support to his management by improving the currently low standard of living of the population.

Similarities have arisen between the two distant countries in recent decades because they were ruled for years by totalitarian regimes and dominated at the apex by personalities who concentrated in their hands an *absolutely absolute* power.

- **In China**, after the disappearance of Mao Zedong, a process of economic aperture began with great difficulty, a process that has brought real benefits to the population, including impressive economic growth, although many of the totalitarian features remain and the personality of "The Great Helmsman" continues to hover over all. However, although sometimes subtly criticized, Mao continues to be respected as the historic leader of the revolution.

- **In Cuba**, something similar could happen. With the departure from power of Fidel Castro, the man who has totally filled the island's history in 47 years, a path similar -- if not identical -- to the Chinese road could open.

Raúl Castro is a man lacking his brother's charisma and political stature but undoubtedly endowed with a pragmatic spirit and a sense of organization that has been proven by his performance as armed forces leader. He could choose to become a sort of Deng Xiaoping and promote economic reforms with the objective of creating a political base.

It should be stressed that the legacy Raúl Castro inherits in economic and social terms is terrible. In Cuba, there is an impressive decapitalization of tangible assets, and social differences, among other ills, contradict the revolution's original objectives. All this would happen within a very deteriorated political framework, in which the powerful support of the people, present for a long time, has been wearing out due to disappointment over continued failures and unfulfilled promises.

These criteria can be corroborated by the statements that Raúl Castro has been making for a while to the effect that Fidel Castro's only true substitute is the Communist Party -- which might indicate a radical change in the way to direct the country toward more-collective forms of government.

Nor can we forget some positions taken by the armed-forces minister during various times of crisis, when Raúl Castro's stance was regularly characterized by flexibility and certain apertures to the market, with an eye to preserving power.

We must not dismiss that, within the armed forces, there always have existed innovative methods of action, different from those in the civilian sector, that gave business leaders greater power to deal in an increasing number of affairs. An effort was made to transfer that mechanism to the whole of society via the Program for Entrepreneurial Training in the mid-1990s, a set of measures that, while timid, represented a step forward. As we all know, that came to a halt when a decision was made to reverse the reforms that had been initiated. At present, an inverse process of economic recentralization is in effect.

Another aspect where we can see similarities, and specific particularities, is that both China and Cuba have diasporas abroad with solid economic positions.

- **China's diaspora** lives essentially in Taiwan and Hong Kong, the latter an area China has incorporated into its territory while maintaining its capitalistic economic and political system. Those territories today represent robust sources of direct investment and technology, and, in a way, have an indirect political influence on the mainland.

- **Cuba, too**, has large nuclei abroad, mainly in the United States, where Cubans stand out for their industriousness and creative ability. They represent a potential of singular magnitude that, as in the case of China, could contribute

notably to the island's development with their financial resources and, most important, with their know-how and democratic experience.

The economic reforms could be an anteroom to political reforms. There is a reason why the more conservative elements within government have always refused to apply the Chinese and Vietnamese experiences, concealing from the people what has happened in those two nations.

The fact that economic reforms could be instituted would in no way limit the efforts of the Cuban democratic movement toward liberty and an unrestricted respect for human rights.

On the contrary, better conditions could be created for the struggle for those priority objectives, in a climate that might contribute to relax the tensions between Cuba and the United States. That climate would be a determining element in the equation for achieving the society that most people desire: one reconciled above all ideologies, without winners or losers.

Oscar Espinosa Chepe is an economist and independent journalist in Cuba.