

Wary Cubans say they're ready to `adapt'

With Fidel Castro ill and his brother temporarily at the helm, Cubans on the island said they would adjust to whatever happens next.

The Miami Herald
Aug. 20, 2006

HAVANA - Within hours of watching a brittle-looking Fidel Castro confined to a hospital bed, Cubans began using a new catchword around this tropical city, where attitudes are often as shifty as the sea breeze.

Adaptarse -- adapting to Cuba's new normal after 47 years of strong Castro rule -- was suddenly the most common word uttered by a wide range of Havana residents.

Cubans have long used code words and even signs to hint at sensitive topics in this tightly controlled society. They "resolve" some of their needs on the illegal black market, refer to prostitutes as "jockeys" and touch imaginary beards when referring to Castro.

And now there's no more sensitive subject than the island's future under an ailing Castro or his anointed successor and younger brother, Defense Minister Raúl Castro.

Enter *adaptarse*, a word that acknowledges the potential changes but says little about how the speaker might consider those very changes.

To adapt, it seems, is to turn to the next yet-to-be written chapter of Cuban history. To resolve, by contrast, has been Cuban lingo for ``to survive."

While some in Cuba are facing the future with a mixture of dread, resignation and uncertainty, others simply express confidence, though it is hard for outsiders to know whether they really mean it.

BIG CHANGE

A 30-year-old bicycle taxi driver told The Miami Herald it would be a big change for Cuba if Castro permanently disappeared: "But what can you do?," he said. ``You'd have to adapt."

Ricardo, a 23-year-old waiter, said he likes Cuba's socialist system and has no desire to leave the island: "If there are changes, I'll adapt," he said.

Cuba experts say now that the 80-year-old Fidel Castro has fallen ill and turned over the reins of power to Raúl, Cubans understand that they face a new reality -- still undefined but at least within the bounds of the island's communist system.

`HOPING FOR CHANGE'

"Cubans have absolutely no control of their future," said Uva de Aragón, associate director at Florida International University's Cuban Research Institute. ``It's always a matter of them adapting to whatever happens."

Since the photos and a video showing Castro's poor health were made public last weekend, the ruling Communist Party has vowed that the revolution that brought Castro to power in 1959 would continue under the leadership of Raúl. So far, -- at least publicly -- the government has remained intact since Castro ceded power on July 31 following intestinal surgery for an unspecified ailment.

Martha Beatriz Roque, a prominent dissident in Havana, said she believes that Castro was shown in such a vulnerable state in order to squelch strong rumors that he was already dead while preparing the population for his eventual death.

"I think they are preparing for the worst," Roque said by telephone. But also evident, she added, is ``nothing of change. I don't see that word in the panorama."

Miami sociologist and Cuba expert Lisandro Pérez said it is no surprise Cubans have opted to adapt.

"The U.S. theory is that the system is fragile and entirely dependent on Castro," Pérez said. ``People in Cuba see a system that is more institutionally entrenched rather than based on a person."

"They see the entire breadth and scope of a system that will likely survive with or without Fidel Castro," Pérez said.

In a statement published last week in the Communist Party's Granma newspaper, the head of the party's ideological department wrote that outsiders ``cannot understand that our people trust that the party leadership does not lie to them . . . that they weep and grieve when . . . their leader is ill."

"Every day, more and more people understand that in order to solve the problems that remain we have to fight, because if we don't . . . we will lose everything," wrote Rolando Alfonso.

Cuba's strongest institutions are the armed forces and the Communist Party -- both now controlled by Raúl and both now functioning without any public signs of trouble.

STAKE IN SYSTEM

"I think that there are enough people in Cuba who have a stake in the system, who greatly benefited from the revolutionary process and don't want it abandoned," said Lisandro Pérez. ``Cubans have not been presented with a clear, realistic, viable alternative as an option to the current system."

"Fidel is all we've known," said a woman named Yanil. ``I hope he gets better. It's a scary time for us."

Said her boyfriend Alejandro: ``We'll adapt."