

Bet on dictatorship

Opinion
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Fidel Castro is fighting his last battle -- one that he cannot win. He will not elude death. Cuba is witnessing the end of the *Fidelista* era and the beginning of a *Raúlista* one. Power has passed into the hands of the younger brother. Succession now seems irreversible.

Questions remain: What can Raúl hope to accomplish within the existing sociopolitical and economic context? More important, what options in domestic and foreign affairs are open to Cuba's new leaders? What are the chances that they will be unable or unwilling to exercise any major options at all? Will they fear upsetting the multilevel balance of interests upon which a new government will depend?

Raúl faces significant challenges: a nonproductive economy highly dependent on Venezuela and other foreign sources; popular unhappiness; the need to maintain order and discipline among the population; and the need to increase productivity. Raúl is critically dependent on the military. Lacking his brother's charisma, he will also need the support of key party leaders and technocrats within the government bureaucracy.

The critical challenge for a Raúl Castro regime will be to balance the need to improve the economy and satisfy the needs of the population with maintaining political control. Too-rapid economic reforms may lead to an unraveling of political control, an outcome feared by Raúl, the military and other allies keen on remaining in power. An initial solution may be to provide more consumer goods to the population, including food, but without any structural economic changes.

Similarly, serious overtures to the United States seem unlikely in the near future. Such an approach would mean the rejection of one of Fidel Castro's main legacies: anti-Americanism. This could create uncertainty within the Raúl Castro government leading to frictions and factionalism and would require the weakening of Cuba's anti-American alliance with radical regimes in Latin America, Iran and Syria.

From Cuba's point of view, the United States has little to offer: American tourists, which Raúl doesn't want or need; American investments, which he fears may subvert his highly centralized and controlled economy; and products that he can buy cheaper from other countries. Furthermore, the United States does not have the ability to provide Cuba with the petroleum that Venezuela is sending at little or no cost.

U.S. recognition may mean a great victory for Raúl and the legitimization of his regime. Yet it's a small prize when compared to the uncertainties that a Cuba-U.S. relation may produce internally and externally among Cuba's allies.

Raúl Castro is no Mikhail Gorbachev or Deng Xiaoping. With Fidel alive -- and even when he is gone -- Raúl is not likely to embark on major economic or political reforms. Forty-seven years as minister of defense has hardened him into a Stalinist military man more than a liberal reformer. Whether the *Raúlista* era lasts a long period or not, Cubans seem destined to endure difficult times and a harsh military dictatorship.

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