

Cuban transition makes no waves

A month after Fidel Castro stepped aside, nothing in Cuba seems to have changed.

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One month to the day after Fidel Castro ceded power to his younger brother, Raúl, Cuba appears to be much like a plane on autopilot with no final destination.

There has been no visible indication of political change on the communist-ruled island, no visible increase in rule by Raúl, no apparent change in the machinery of government. There have been no stepped-up challenges by dissidents or increases in the number of rafters fleeing by sea.

Neither has there been any explanation for what caused the man who ruled Cuba for 47 years to undergo intestinal surgery on July 31 and surrender his monopoly on power for the first time.

Taken together, these elements have left some Cuba watchers wondering about what is really going on in the island of 11 million people just 90 miles off Key West.

When Fidel Castro handed over the reins to Raúl, he stage-managed a scene that caught most Cuba experts off guard: a succession from Fidel to Raúl without Fidel's death.

Even now, some believe, the 80-year-old Fidel may well be continuing to plot the island's future course, leaving little leeway for his 75-year-old brother.

"I don't think Raúl would want to make a lot of change with Fidel still in the picture," said Mark Falcoff, author of *Cuba, The Morning After*. "I think he's scared to death of his brother."

"He has to be careful on how far he can push, not only because of Fidel, but because of the hard-line Fidelistas, who would accuse him of betrayal," said Edward Gonzalez, a Cuba expert at the California-based RAND Corporation.

QUIET COUNTDOWN

Illustrating the apparent calm, Miami radio commentator Francisco Aruca, a steadfast critic of U.S. sanctions on Cuba, had been starting his daily program with the words "Today marks XX days, and nothing has happened."

"Contrary to what people want to acknowledge, the great majority of people [in Cuba] don't want the shaking up of society," said Aruca, a frequent traveler to the island. "I do believe that they want changes, but no upheaval or violence."

Even dissidents on the island have been reluctant to push too hard for change, perhaps because some want to retain a measure of stability, perhaps because some fear a government crackdown.

Wayne Smith, a former head of the U.S. diplomatic mission in Havana and frequent critic of U.S. policy on Cuba, said that dissidents have acted responsibly and that the population as a whole has accepted the transfer of power "with great calm and maturity."

"It had always been planned that Raúl Castro would step in, and he did," Smith said in a telephone interview from Washington. "Only people in Miami were expecting some kind of collapse."

Castro shocked the world on a Monday night a month ago when his secretary, Carlos Valenciaga, read a letter on Cuban television, announcing the power shift because of a "sharp intestinal crisis with sustained bleeding" that required "complicated surgery."

The public has since seen Castro only twice, first in a series of Cuban newspaper photos showing him sitting up, then in a video taken during a bedside visit by Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez and broadcast on Castro's 80th birthday, Aug. 13.

Raúl, too, has kept a low profile, showing up only to meet Chávez at the airport, in the visit video and later in a photo that accompanied a long interview he granted to the daily newspaper Granma.

Raúl said in the interview that he was open to dialogue with the United States, and Washington later made somewhat similar comments. Both comments included harsh caveats that would make it difficult to open talks, but they nevertheless raised eyebrows among Cuba watchers.

In the meantime, the Bush administration has shown no appetite for any aggressive effort to undermine the succession to Raúl and promote a transition to democracy.

AWAITING DIALOGUE?

"The U.S. wants to avoid any kind of crisis or instability in Cuba," said Antonio Jorge, a professor of economics and international relations at Florida International University. "So, I expect Washington [will] wait for the opportunity to establish some kind of . . . dialogue."

Roger Noriega, a former assistant secretary of state for the Western Hemisphere, said the administration's lack of more muscular insistence for democratic reforms is more likely "just a question of quiet diplomacy."

"The United States does not want to be perceived as trying to manage what is happening in Cuba," he said.

But Noriega expressed concern about the "lack of any obvious mobilization" by Cuba's small and traditionally tightly monitored dissident movement.

"That's what's going to propel change -- when Cubans themselves take the initiative and claim their rights," Noriega said. "They need to step up."

In a sign that the elder Castro remains in charge, Raúl reportedly has continued to work in his office in the Ministry of Defense instead of moving into Fidel's presidential offices.

But Raúl received a Syrian delegation earlier this week in preparation for a summit of Nonaligned Movement nations that Havana is scheduled to host next month -- a move seen as a hint that Fidel will not be well enough to attend.