

# WHAT'S NEXT FOR CUBA - AND LATIN AMERICA - AFTER CASTRO?

**Chávez may succeed Castro as champion for the socialist cause in Latin America.**

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By John Hughes

**SALT LAKE CITY** – While President Bush is understandably preoccupied with the far-off Middle East, there is uncertainty, and perhaps mischief brewing, in America's own backyard.

This past weekend marked the eclipse of Fidel Castro, who spent a lifetime trying to convert Latin America to anti-American socialism. The weekend also saw the consolidation of power by Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. Mr. Chávez seeks to assume Mr. Castro's mantle and inject even more virulent anti-Americanism into a leftward drift like we are witnessing in such countries as Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and even Mexico, where leftists showed surprising strength in recent elections.

Evidence of Castro's fading in Cuba was his absence from celebrations of his 80th birthday in Havana this past weekend. The celebrations had already been postponed from Aug. 13, his actual birthday, because of ill health. Apart from a few photographs in which he has appeared drawn and frail, Castro has been out of public view for months following surgery for an undisclosed ailment. The official explanation of the postponement of his August birthday celebration was to give him time to recuperate so that he could appear in person this past weekend. Clearly he was unable to do that. Written messages, purportedly drafted by Castro, have been read. But this has only fueled speculation that Castro is now too weak even to speak into a tape recorder.

During his illness, Castro transferred power to his brother Raúl. But Raúl is himself elderly and lacks the energy and charisma that would enable him to deliver the four- and five-hour speeches with which his brother was able to galvanize the Cuban populace.

So the question now is whether Raúl Castro, and the elderly Cuban generals around him, will continue to pursue the same narrow economic policies favored by Fidel Castro. These policies have kept many Cubans impoverished, but have enabled the top ranks of the military to live grandly. The generals have been placed in charge of state-run agencies

that control agriculture, hotels, mining, the allocation of oil leases, and other sections of the economy.

Raúl Castro has indicated some interest in the current Chinese model of government that frees up the economy to private development, but retains the reins of political power in the hands of the communist regime.

Cuba must decide whether it is to continue the Fidel model, or perhaps the Fidel model somewhat moderated by the ideas of Raúl, or whether it is to embrace the free-market system that most economists outside Cuba believe would set Cuba on the path to prosperity. The risk to that is that it might trigger a parallel demand for political liberalization threatening the present ruling regime.

The Army, and an intelligence system that currently keeps tabs on dissidents, probably effectively neutralizes any serious reform movement that would change the existing regime. But some US experts on Cuba speculate that there may be a "Mister X," such as a lieutenant colonel in the Cuban Army, disgusted by corruption at higher levels, who could spearhead a movement for reform.

Meanwhile, Venezuela's Chávez confidently won a new six-year presidential term this past weekend, and says he will seek a change in his country's Constitution that would enable him to rule indefinitely.

As part of a campaign to impose his leftist views on Latin America, Chávez has vigorously courted Fidel Castro and subsidizes vital oil shipments from Venezuela to Cuba to a tune of about \$2 billion a year. Whereas Cuba's economy is in disrepair and has failed, Venezuela profits hugely from the export of oil from its considerable reserves. With such a stream of revenue, Chávez has been spending large sums on arms and military aircraft. These are not considered a direct threat to the US, but they could be used to destabilize countries in Latin America unyielding to Chávez's socialist blandishments. More serious, they could be used to arm terrorists hostile to the US in regions elsewhere.

Chávez's tasteless attack on President Bush at the recent meeting of the UN General Assembly may have played a role in thwarting his attempt to secure a seat for Venezuela on the Security Council. But Chávez clearly is undaunted in his ambition to succeed Fidel Castro as a significant figure from Latin America who proudly waves the socialist banner and taunts the US.

Despite America's diverse involvements elsewhere around the globe, Chávez's is a campaign the US would be well advised to watch carefully.

- *John Hughes, a former editor of the Monitor, is editor and chief operating officer of the Deseret Morning News.*