

As Castro fades, a crop of new leaders

Interviews with two younger political figures suggest a gradual opening both economically and socially.

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HAVANA, CUBA – In a country that is in the process of bidding a long farewell to its ageing revolutionaries, Mariela Castro brings an expectation of change along with an air of youthful passion. As the director of Cenesex (the National Sex Education Center) Ms. Castro is eager to consider where Cuba should go in a postrevolutionary era.

"We have many contradictions in Cuba," says Castro, the daughter of Raúl Castro, Cuba's de facto leader and brother of ailing President Fidel Castro. A Spanish doctor arrived in Cuba last week, reenergizing speculation about the health of the Cuban leader, who has not been seen in public since undergoing surgery in July. "We need to experiment and to test what really works, to make public ownership more effective, rather than simply adopting wholesale free-market reforms," Ms. Castro says.



MARIELA CASTRO: Rather than follow in Uncle Fidel's footsteps, she's forged her own revolution of sorts.

Leaders like Ms. Castro may indicate the extent to which a post-Castro Cuba may be willing to liberalize, both economically and socially. As Cuba's old-guard leadership fades, this new generation - made up primarily of the sons and daughters of those who fought in the 1959 Communist revolution - is perhaps more sympathetic to economic reforms and more-liberal social policies.

Nevertheless, Cuba-watchers and experts have ruled out any dramatic lurch toward a liberal market economy that might undermine the island nation's heritage as the persistent holdout of traditional Communist policies. More relaxed social attitudes may also evolve gradually.

Still, no one doubts that change is afoot.

"The transition in Cuba has already taken place" and this new generation has a key role to play, says Richard Gott, a Latin American analyst and former foreign correspondent for the London-based The Guardian newspaper. "Carlos Lage will be the brains behind the new government. He, together with Julio Soberon at the central bank, will seek to chart a new economic course."

Now Raul Castro has started to echo some of his daughter's sentiments. Addressing university students, he urged that they should "fearlessly engage in public debate and analysis," according to Granma, the Communist Party newspaper.

Cuba is one of several Latin American countries that once harassed homosexuals as a matter of policy. But Mariela Castro, who is also an executive member of the World Association for Sexual Health, insists that job discrimination and mass arrests are a thing of the past.

"[Homosexuals] still sometimes face arrest by bigoted police" says Castro, adding that she has sometimes clashed with the authorities in her efforts to release gay men and women from prison.

"Now, society is more relaxed. There is no official repression of gays and lesbians," she argues confidently.

A writer turned politico

Cuban writer and culture minister Abel Prieto has also emerged as an influential power broker in a changing Cuba. Since joining the state bureaucracy and the politburo, the long-haired, middle-aged minister still exudes a passion for culture and a common touch.

In response to a question about the conflict of interest between writers and the state, Mr. Prieto laughs, saying that, "sometimes I feel like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, but I hope that artists and writers feel that I am still one of them."

Unlike many members of the government, Prieto is very candid as he speaks about allegations that the Cuban government censors political websites.

"It would be a delusion to think we could hide that torrent of information," he insists, referring to anti-Castro websites. "The only possibility is to beat them with a better concept of life."

Prieto also defended the arrest of the dissident writer Raul Rivero in 2003.

"He was not arrested for his views, but for receiving US funding for his collaboration with a country that has besieged our island," argues the minister, referring to the 45-year-long US trade embargo.

An avid fan of the Beatles since the 1970s when their music was essentially banned by the Cuban state, Prieto has led an appreciation campaign of John Lennon. In 2000, he unveiled a statue and dedicated "John Lennon Park" to the musician's memory. Many Cubans joke that he is not as much a Marxist-Leninist as a "Marxist-Lennonist."

Prieto, because of a moment on Cuban television five years ago, is known as one of the few Cabinet ministers who has ever dared to challenge the president. Cubans recall a news segment in which Castro and Prieto appeared together.

After Castro blamed his minister for the fact that so many artists were leaving the country to work abroad, Prieto defended himself.

Millions watched as their supreme leader accepted his error and apologized to Abel Prieto.

"Prieto is extremely important. He has carved out a sizable space for cultural expression [for] many Cuban artists and writers since he became minister of culture," says Julia Sweig, director of the Latin American Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington.

In a Foreign Affairs article, written after a lengthy visit to Cuba in November, Ms. Sweig indicated that expectations were high among Cuban officials that the government could move forward after Castro.

"People at all levels of the Cuban government and the Communist Party were enormously confident of the regime's ability to survive Fidel's passing," Ms. Sweig wrote.

That confidence was apparent in Raúl Castro's speech to the opening session of the new parliament last week. "Tell it like it is - tell the truth without justifications, because we are tired of justifications in this revolution," the acting president urged his ministers, according to the youth newspaper Juventud Rebelde.

US economic sanctions irrelevant

Attempts by the Bush administration to set the agenda for change in Cuba, says Sweig, appear to be increasingly irrelevant to the reality inside the country, as a new generation gains increasing clout.

Gott, the Latin American analyst, says that both Ms. Castro and Prieto are figures to watch.

"Mariela Castro is a more than competent member of the Castro clan - she will have an important role in social affairs," he says. "The genial Abel Prieto might well be promoted from the culture ministry to something more taxing."