

Wanted: economic opportunity

Opinion
The Miami Herald
Jan. 04, 2007
By Marifeli Perez-Stable

"I promise I won't give long speeches," Raúl Castro told a gathering of university students recently. There's only one commander-in-chief, and no one should copy Fidel's style.

The Comandante's policies -- not marathon speeches -- are the main problem. Ideological battles, revolutionary ethics and true socialism lie at the heart of his legacy. Pluralism, autonomous institutions and markets are anathema. What will Raúl do? Will he muddle through a status quo that hasn't restored living standards to 1989 levels? Might he resume modest economic reforms or even embrace a radical restructuring?

The tea leaves aren't saying much yet. The elder Castro is still watching over Cuba, or so says his New Year's message. Raúl may deem it prudent to tread lightly as the moment of truth approaches. Still, some signals are emerging. A collective leadership is truly taking shape under the younger Castro. An anti-corruption campaign is in progress. Discipline and concrete results seem to be the new catch words. The *doble moral* -- people saying one thing in public while privately believing another -- is under attack, again.

Free the markets

That's the problem. Except for collective leadership, nothing done or said over the past few months is new under the revolutionary sun. Efficiency and productivity -- has eluded the Cuban economy for decades. It's no mystery why, for instance, agriculture in a land so fertile is in dire straits. Markets must be set free.

Since the early 1960s, corruption has been endemic. Transparency, which requires undoctored access to information by citizens, is a partial antidote. In the early 1990s, Raúl himself decried the *doble moral*, which would certainly recede if fear didn't reign over public spaces.

Though tried-and-true remedies won't improve living standards, the Comandante's successors are likely to go there first. Why rock the boat if tinkering will do? But, will it? Ordinary Cubans are seemingly resigned to their circumstances. Will they so passively accept them once Fidel's shadow is lifted? Castro's passing will leave a huge psychological vacuum, an uncharted terrain of possibilities and dangers. Fidelismo light may carry the regime for a while but it is not a blueprint for a longer-term succession.

Gallup recently released the results of a poll conducted among residents of Havana (600) and Santiago (400) in early September. These citizens registered familiar satisfaction with their healthcare and education, much higher than did their counterparts in Latin America. Less predictable were the 75 percent who expressed dissatisfaction with personal freedoms in choosing how to live their lives or the 40 percent who disapproved of their leaders' performance.

Inadequate opportunities

Even if taken at face value, Raúl and the others should weigh these responses carefully. The urban citizens who uttered them may be but the tip of the iceberg, and the successors -- at least, in their current mode -- have no way of persuading them. Only 42 percent of interviewees considered that working hard is the way to get ahead. Cubans see themselves as creative and entrepreneurial, yet they are more unhappy with their jobs and the opportunities to excel in them than other Latin Americans. Tinkering around the edges will neither motivate hard work nor unleash pent-up entrepreneurial energies.

If the Cuban people once welcomed the revolution wholeheartedly, Cubans today are largely mired in fear, apathy and a sense of impotence. I suspect the new collective leadership understands that their only platform for reaching them is a radical economic restructuring. Legalization of small businesses would certainly catch the attention of ordinary Cubans. Sure, it's risky, but so is doing little or nothing. The Comandante avoided a Tiananmen Square, but the successors may not.

An economic opening that empowers ordinary Cubans to earn their living could have a host of positive consequences. Living standards would certainly improve. Food production and light consumer durables would increase in no time. Beyond material gains, Cubans would once again hope. That's why we in the diaspora should welcome such an opening: A greening of their spirit would redound to the benefit of a democratic Cuba, the only one that would have room for all of us.

Marifeli Pérez-Stable is vice president for democratic governance at Inter-American Dialogue in Washington, D.C., and a professor at Florida International University.