

Castro stalls any change in Cuba

The top U.S. diplomat for Latin America says that the uncertainty created by Fidel Castro's condition prevents any economic or political shifts by the Cuban government.

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WASHINGTON - Even with Fidel Castro seriously ill and power transferred to his brother, the ailing leader's presence is widely felt and is keeping the country from taking any new economic or political direction, says the U.S. government's top diplomat for Latin America.

"We see that this regime has made this successful transfer of power and is trying to consolidate itself, but it can't define itself or separate itself from Fidel," Thomas Shannon, assistant secretary of state for the Western Hemisphere, said in an interview. "My guess is that we're not going to see that until Fidel Castro is dead and buried."

"Fidel Castro is in this odd moment where he is neither alive nor dead politically. He is alive physically, but he's not in charge day to day, and he's obviously not present day to day, but it appears that he still has the ability to sit up in bed and give orders occasionally," Shannon said.

Castro's medical condition has been a state secret since he underwent surgery for intestinal bleeding in late July and temporarily ceded power to younger brother Raúl Castro. He has not been seen publicly since July 26, fueling intense speculation about his future.

Shannon said that Raúl Castro has shown no sign that he will be any different from Fidel, despite Raúl Castro's call on Dec. 2 for the U.S. government to meet with the Cuban government to work through their differences.

Shannon said four goals must be met before the U.S. government considers a change in policy: All political prisoners must be freed, human rights guaranteed, trade unions allowed to form and concrete moves made toward free elections.

"We're not going to engage with Cuba just to engage," Shannon said. "Any engagement we have with Cuba has to be part of some kind of change process that leads toward this transition to democracy, and therefore we depend on what the Cuban people think and will want us to do."

Shannon acknowledged that the U.S. government has no clear idea what ails Castro. Last month the U.S. director of national intelligence, John Negroponte, told The Washington Post that Castro had "months, not years" to live.

"We know he's really sick, that he's not really getting any better," Shannon said. "But it's not clear to us what his problem is and what his timeline is, if I can speak of it crudely. Negroponte said that the information available to us portrays his demise in a question of months as opposed to years, but the reality is that we don't know because the Cubans don't share that information."

The Spanish surgeon who has been treating Castro, Dr. José Luis García Sabrido, indicated last week that his patient was "absolutely" not dying from cancer, but was recovering from complications after surgery to treat a "benign illness."