

No sign of Fidel as Cubans wait, wonder

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HAVANA - Some Cubans express frustration, others apathy as 80-year-old Fidel Castro battles an unnamed illness and remains unseen six months after handing power to his younger brother. But most seem willing to wait patiently to see how Acting President Raul Castro might change things after his brother is gone.

"We need to give him time, to see what he does," Joaquin Hernandez, 70, said of the younger Castro. "Raul is more family oriented, so he might reach out more to the Cuban people to better understand their problems. He is also more approachable, and seems to listen more to his advisers."

The caretaker government has done nothing to lighten restrictions on freedom of speech or to change a punishing economy in which state salaries averaging about \$15 aren't always enough to buy basic foodstuffs not always provided by government rations, such as cooking oil or milk for older children and teenagers. Cubans still lack details about their leader's medical condition.

Life on the island has been virtually unchanged since Fidel Castro announced on July 31 that he had undergone intestinal surgery and was provisionally relinquishing power to his brother Raul, the 75-year-old defense minister.

There have been no obvious signs that anything extraordinary occurred since the older Castro stepped aside after nearly a half century of rule.

Adults go to work, children go to school, the government's nightly public affairs show focuses on the same recurring themes: Miami exiles it terms the "Mafia," Cuba's highly touted social programs in Latin America, the U.S. war in Iraq, American sanctions against the island.

Fidel Castro is mentioned in the state media as if he were still a constant of daily life, often through historical articles. "Fidel took Caracas," read the top headline in the Communist Party newspaper Granma on Monday, recalling the huge welcome Venezuelans gave him on his first visit to their country in 1959.

Hernandez, a retired telegraphist who works at his church's reception office to supplement his small pension, says he stays out of politics. He prays for Fidel Castro, and thinks the man is a "genius for having known how to govern a country for more than 47 years."

Among the younger Castro's immediate challenges are communist Cuba's many economic concerns, including often dilapidated housing in which several generations often crowd together in small apartments and a lack of decent bus service that requires many people to hitchhike or hire black market taxis to get to work and school.

But in the meantime, Cubans complain about the lack of information on the older Castro's health, which remains a state secret. Officials have declined to say what exactly ails the leader, though they deny that it is cancer.

"There has been a total lack of information," Hernandez said. "But, every country has its idiosyncrasies. People are frustrated with this though."

He said, though, that most people are "too focused on the challenge of acquiring a peso" to worry much about it.

Not everyone thinks the lack of change and the Communist Party's continued control of the government is a good thing.

"Everything here is going to stay the same, or get worse," said a 29-year-old biologist who declined to give her full name for fear of government retribution. "As long as there is just one political party, nothing is going to change."

The woman, who spoke nervously at a Havana park, said Cubans are afraid to fight for political change after decades of government control. She said she thinks they're even less likely to speak up under Raul Castro, given his influence with the nation's military forces.

Government opponents also say they expect little political change under the younger Castro.

Top officials, including the acting president, affirm that Fidel Castro's socialist revolution will continue long after he is gone. Nonetheless, Raul Castro, a committed communist, has also started publicly criticizing the system's failings, telling lawmakers in December that there is no excuse for the transportation and food production problems beleaguering Cubans.

This marks a departure from past policy, under which Fidel Castro would defend the system while blaming a handful of corrupt individuals for problems.

While Cubans wait, they continue the daily scramble to make ends meet or prepare for their futures, focused more on survival than a political situation that may or may not ultimately change their lives.

"Everything is the same here - things are normal," said 18-year-old Katy Garcia, who plans to study medicine. "I'm just focused on finishing my studies. I hardly think about the political situation."