

# Change from Fidel to Raúl is a-coming

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By Michael Putney

**W**e are witnessing important changes in Havana and Washington. Small, nuanced changes that may not mean much individually, but collectively they point to the possibility of positive, if modest, improvements in relations between the two countries. That's a siren song we have all heard before, but the evidence is there. And it's not just based on my impression of recent events, but those of Cuba experts whose judgment I trust, hard-eyed realists not given to Pollyanna-ish views.

I'm talking about people like Brian Latell, former lead CIA analyst on Cuba and now a research associate at the Institute for Cuban and Cuban American Studies at the University of Miami; Teo Babun, a Cuba-born business consultant who prepares for some of the Forbes 100 companies minutely detailed reports on Cuba's infrastructure and the people who manage it; and Damian Fernandez, director of the Cuban Research Institute at Florida International University.

"The real story out of Cuba is the lack of change over the last seven months," says Fernandez, an internationally respected scholar recently promoted to provost of FIU's North Campus. "I have talked to academics who've visited Cuba in the past few months, and they say it's almost eerie there. People go about their business, and no one even mentions Fidel."

## **What to expect from Raúl**

Latell, whose book *After Fidel* is by far the single best source of information about Raúl and what we might expect from his reign, says the younger Castro brother and his coterie are so firmly in charge that even if Fidel should stage a miraculous recovery and return to government in some capacity, Fidel's power would be negligible.

One could say it's negligible now. When Raúl spoke last week publicly about Fidel's health for the first time and said he's getting better, he also described how Fidel has a phone at his bedside and is on it constantly. I bet bureaucrats

and party leaders around the country just love getting his calls. "Yes, yes, Fidel," they say. "Seguro, Fidel," they tell him, "*inmediatamente*." And then they proceed to pretty much ignore whatever he wanted or said. They know that Raúl has the juice and control of the government.

The question is, what will Raúl do with it? Respected Cuba experts like UM's Jaime Suchlicki believe not much, even after Fidel dies. And yet there are signs he might try something different even before. Indeed, the Cuba experts I consulted believe that Raúl must roll out some new policies since he cannot rule by force of personality and charisma, as his brother did. "How Raúl orchestrates the succession over the next six to seven months will be critical," says Fernandez. He says Raúl must walk a political tightrope -- giving the people a few more creature comforts and the prospect of more to come while hewing to the ideological hard-line that the Communist Party leadership expects.

Babun says Raúl has a few tricks up his sleeve that he may reveal after Fidel dies to solidify his position and mollify the masses. Babun says Cuba has received 130 new buses from China but has only 40 in general operation. Another 40 buses ferry members of the Communist Youth Union around the country doing various tasks. Raúl is also sitting on six big electricity generators that were imported from Europe, but none has gone on line. They will, along with those 50 new buses, Babun predicts, when Raúl believes the time is right. When he needs to show the Cuban people that he can deliver things they desperately need -- electricity and transportation. Very clever.

"Nothing happens in Cuba unless the government allows it," Babun says. What it has recently allowed are new rules (*La Ley de Cultos*) that spell out when churches can expand their operations, proselytize, hand out literature, even use microphones at services. This works in favor of the growing evangelical movement in Cuba and against the Catholic Church, which is the only viable nongovernmental institution on the island.

What else might Raúl do to secure his place as the *líder máximo*? Release a group of about 130 dissidents, which would send a symbolic message to Washington about his position on human rights. He might also tell Eloy Gutiérrez Menoyo, the former Miamian and Cuban political prisoner who returned to Cuba a few years ago to start an opposition political party, that he can open an office, hand out pamphlets, maybe even get his name on a few local ballots. Cuba would remain a one-party country in practice and theory, but even this small political opening would send Washington another signal.

## **Better U.S.-Cuba relations**

Should any of these things happen, how would Washington respond? Well, it's already responding with renewed efforts by the Cuba Working Group -- 44 members of Congress who seek better U.S.-Cuba relations -- to lift travel restrictions on U.S. citizens and ease those for Cuban exiles. Rep. Jeff Flake, the Arizona Republican who is leading the fight, tells me he thinks Congress will pass such a bill this session.

Last week, in an Op-Ed piece in *The Washington Post*, Vicki Huddleston, a respected former U.S. ambassador who once headed the U.S. Interests Section in Havana, suggested that President Bush reinstitute the "People-to-People" program and the annual Cuban-American family visits that were allowed during the first two years of his administration. "Those polices," Huddleston wrote, "were opening doors in Cuba."

Fidel thought the doors were opening too wide and closed them. I'd bet that Raúl, with a few positive signs from Washington, will allow them to nudge open again.