

# A comeback for Castro?

Confidants of Fidel Castro are hinting that the ailing Cuban leader could one day return to his work.

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Seven months ago, Fidel Castro was considered all but dead. These days, he's reported to be taking long walks with old friends and calling other presidents to discuss global warming.

To hear National Assembly President Ricardo Alarcón tell it, Castro is in fact preparing for a comeback. This week Alarcón said to foreign correspondents in Havana that Castro would be in "great shape" to run for president of the Council of State, his official title.

"I'd nominate him," Alarcón said after a National Assembly session.

As Castro loyalists insist that the ailing leader is getting lots of exercise, eating well and engaged in domestic and world affairs, Alarcón's comments were the strongest suggestion yet that Castro might return to public life.

But his comments raise the question of whether a man who seven months ago was written off for good could return to power -- and whether his acting president brother would let him.

"It depends on his health. If he's 100 percent, nobody is going to stop him," said Cuba expert Phil Peters of the Lexington Institute think tank in Virginia. "There seem to be indications he's getting better."

Castro ceded power, "temporarily" but for the first time in 47 years, on July 31 after announcing he had undergone surgery for an intestinal illness. His younger brother Raúl, the defense minister, has taken the reins in a period marked by surprising stability.

## **BUSY ON THE PHONE**

Although Fidel Castro has not appeared in public since then, the government recently released a transcript of a telephone call he made to Haiti's René Préval and Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. Earlier, he phoned in to Chávez's live radio show and chatted for about half an hour.

During a trip to Paris earlier this week, Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque said Castro was in direct contact with Communist Party leaders and increasingly taking on more work.

"He has a telephone at his side and uses it a lot," Raúl Castro said last month, according to The Associated Press. "He's consulted on the most important questions. He doesn't interfere, but he knows about everything."

In a comment that Cuba experts considered intriguing but likely a bit of humor, Raúl added: "Luckily, he doesn't call me much."

Castro's longtime friend, Colombian Nobel prize winner Gabriel García Márquez, told the newspaper El País this week that Castro walks "kilometers" and is improving "hour by hour."

Castro, he said, is obsessed with detail, in good humor, and talking passionately about preferred topics such as climate change.

Officially, Castro's health remains a state secret, and it's unclear whether statements that his brother and other close allies make about his status are truthful or over-optimistic.

But experts point out that many outsiders insisted Cuban officials were lying several months ago when they denied reports Castro was on the brink of death, only for Castro to eventually emerge in a late January video with Chávez, having regained considerable weight and looking much better.

## **RETURN DOUBTED**

Some Cuba-watchers still doubt that Castro will ever again wield the kind of total power he once had, and note that no new minister of defense has been named to replace Raúl.

"I don't think he'll come back, period," said Silvia Wilhelm, executive director of the Cuban American Commission for Family Rights. "If he did, it would be as something like a senior consultant."

The apparent improvement in Castro's health now raises the question of whether a healthier Fidel means a working Fidel.

"All the things Fidel is doing are international relations/Chávez things: buddy-buddy telephone calls to foreign leaders," said Baruch College Latin American studies professor Ted Henken, who travels to Cuba frequently. "They don't seem to be real decision-making things that affect policy. Maybe that's what he has allowed himself to graduate to."

Henken said Raúl actually needs for Fidel to linger on the sidelines, because the elder Castro offers legitimacy to his younger brother's rule. Together they can play good-cop bad-cop, while Cubans wait for word on their nation's future.

"They can keep this up for a pretty long time," said former political prisoner Sebastian Arcos.

“The signal that he is back is when he appears in public. As long as he's just on Chávez's radio show, I don't take it seriously.”

Arcos, who works at Florida International University doing community outreach, said he believes that if Castro can come back, he will.

### **SIDELINES NOT FOR HIM**

“The only way he won't come back is if he's mentally incapacitated,” he said. “I cannot conceive of Castro waiting on the sidelines of his own volition.”

In an interview with Argentina's Clarín newspaper, though, Alarcón hesitated to call it a comeback.

“The return, the road back -- that poses semantic difficulties to me, because you can only return from some place where you've gone,” he said.

Castro “has only stopped doing things the way he used to do them, for which he had become emblematic: the long speeches; his presence in all the activities; being on top of each and every topic.”

“ . . . Will he return to do things the way he used to? That's something else.”

Miami Herald translator Renato Pérez contributed to this report.