

# Castro's recovery seen in a pullback from reforms

The Miami herald  
Apr. 30, 2007

Nine months after falling victim to an illness that many U.S. analysts assumed would prove fatal, Fidel Castro appears to have come back from death's door to resume some leadership responsibilities and rein in Cuba's would-be reformers.

He's receiving visiting dignitaries, not just friends such as Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez and Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez but official delegations, including one led last week by a senior figure in the Chinese Communist Party, Wu Guanzheng.

Castro's name is again attached to editorials for Cuba's state-run media, ones in which the U.S. government is lambasted for freeing an accused terrorist and Brazil is criticized for using food crops for ethanol production when they could be feeding Latin America's poor.

And, to the alarm of veteran Cuba-watchers who sensed a new degree of openness to economic change during Castro's absence, the apparently reinvigorated revolutionary is now believed to be blocking moves to let Cubans open small businesses. U.S. analysts of Cuban developments acknowledge that they know little about Castro's illness or the degree of his recuperation. His personal secretary said he was suffering from intestinal bleeding when he handed over power last summer to his brother Raúl. U.S. intelligence sources have speculated he has cancer. But the Spanish newspaper El País reported the most detailed and plausible version of his prolonged medical attention, citing unidentified doctors familiar with Castro's case. The newspaper said the Cuban president had undergone three surgeries to remove infected intestinal tissue and became gravely ill when the incisions failed to heal and the infection spread to his stomach.

Since Raúl Castro, the defense minister and first vice president, took over for his older brother on July 31, state-authorized media exposés on rampant corruption and the younger Castro's public criticism of shortages in food, transportation and housing have hinted at an internal review of Cuba's political and economic system, said Phil Peters, vice president of the Lexington Institute near Washington and a veteran analyst of Cuban affairs.

Raúl Castro has a reputation for pragmatism about private enterprise within the state-run economy, having inaugurated many of the island's most successful hard currency-earning joint ventures in tourism in the early 1990s, when the country was reeling from the sudden cutoff of Soviet aid. During the fall, when Fidel Castro was too sick even to make an appearance at the September summit of the Non-Aligned Movement or his delayed 80th birthday celebrations in December, the government announced that a thorough review was under way to identify, and presumably correct, flaws in the communist ideology guiding the country.

"Now it looks like cold water's getting poured over all that," Peters said. "That, to me, is the clearest sign that Fidel Castro is getting better and getting closer to coming back to office."

Castro remains staunchly critical of income disparities among Cubans, including the estimated \$1 billion in annual remittances from relatives abroad that are believed to benefit as much as a third of the island's population.

State salaries average about \$15 a month for most workers, so the \$100 a month that Cubans in the United States can legally send their relatives in Cuba has created a class divide between those who receive dollars and those who do not.

Hopes of an expansion in self-employment were buoyed last fall when Raúl Castro began speaking out in interviews and speeches against the government's inability to properly provide for its 11.2 million citizens.

Those hopes were dashed, at least for the short term, this month when Cuban Vice President Carlos Lage, architect of the early 1990s reforms, parroted Fidel Castro's condemnation of "social distortions" in a speech to a communist youth group. Cuban media also reported recently that the academic commission assigned to examine problems with state ownership wouldn't be delivering its verdict for three years.

Peters believes the debate opened late last year will continue "airing out all kinds of dirty laundry" and putting pressure on the leadership to make course corrections.

'Carlos Lage also said, 'We, the Cuban government, no longer pay a just wage that allows people to cover their basic needs,' " Peters said. ``You can only say that so many times before you have to come up with a solution to the problems."

Other analysts say the seesawing on reform could threaten Cuba's relative social peace. Although Cubans privately express a hunger for more opportunity to improve their living standards, they have remained patient throughout Fidel Castro's rigid opposition to capitalist activity, including the types of business now allowed in Vietnam and China.

Although Cuba-watchers differ in their forecasts of whether Castro will resume full power, they agree he is making at least a partial leadership comeback. By communist protocol, the head of the Cuban party should have received the Wu delegation -- a role Fidel Castro signed over to his brother nine months ago.