

# Puerto Rico's Cubans long to go home

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SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico --

Exiled from Cuba after quitting Fidel Castro's Cabinet, Manolo Ray moved to Puerto Rico, led a resistance movement against Castro in the early 1960s and gradually settled into a career running an international engineering company.

As his one-time mentor loosens his grip on power, Ray - Castro's first public works minister - is hoping for another chance to help his native island.

"It's my homeland, and it has missed out on 50 years of progress," said the white-haired Ray, 83, who hopes to live to see the day when he can return and "help every way I can."

There are 20,000 Cuban immigrants in Puerto Rico, and many long to help their native land.

Puerto Rico's Cubans number far fewer - and are less hostile to Castro - than Miami's famously outspoken exile community, some 650,000-strong. Some say life on the U.S. island territory, with its similar climate and culture, has helped ease the bitterness of exile.

"Politics isn't the same obsession here that it is up there," 56-year-old emigre Manolo Mendez said during a break from a squash game at the Casa Cuba social club.

Described by 19th-century Puerto Rican poet Lola Rodriguez de Tio as "two wings of the same bird," Cuba and Puerto Rico were both seized by the United States in 1898 in the Spanish-American War. But their paths diverged - one becoming a communist state, the other a U.S. territory.

Still, they are both Caribbean islands with a shared language. Their cultures are so intertwined that both claim credit for salsa music, a blend of European and African rhythms. Their flags are almost identical, except Puerto Rico's has red stripes and Cuba's has blue.

At the beachfront Casa Cuba, the clack of dominoes and Cuban accents can be heard as migrants, many in traditional guayabera shirts, gather to gossip beneath portraits of tiara-wearing beauty queens.

Some of the Cubans who fled Castro's revolution brought investment, including members of the Bacardi family whose rum came to be promoted as a Puerto Rican product. Others found success in construction and other industries, and want to apply their experience in their homeland.

Puerto Rico's Senate in March approved a measure deputizing Cubans to channel public and private aid to Cuba in the event of a democratic transition. Cuban migrants could provide capital and professional expertise to universities, businesses and other sectors accustomed to operating in a controlled economy.

The proposal, developed in meetings with exile groups, also aims to seek opportunities for Puerto Rico if Cuba opens to U.S. investment.

"We should prepare ourselves not only to help where we can, but also to participate in what we can," said Orlando Parga, the Senate vice president who proposed the measure.

The legislation, which is expected to pass in the House and be signed by Gov. Anibal Acevedo Vila, also seeks to gauge how a more open Cuba could affect Puerto Rico's economy by competing for U.S. tourists.

But even when Castro dies, there is no guarantee of abrupt change. Havana's government has deviated little from its course since the 80-year-old president temporarily handed power to his brother Raul last July after intestinal surgery.

"We can all make plans but nobody knows exactly what's going to happen," said Mayra Montero, a San Juan-based author who chronicled the rollicking 1950s Havana of her childhood in her recent novel, "Dancing to Almendra."

Ray, who helped build the Havana Hilton and spent nearly a year in Castro's Cabinet, said from his office in colonial Old San Juan that the emigres, when they return, must be careful to avoid being seen as carpetbaggers out to make a buck - and should work to improve life on the island.

"Along with development, you need to keep the poor engaged and participating," Ray said. "Without that, we won't accomplish anything."