

Fidel Castro's towering shadow endures

Even as acting president, Raúl Castro is still a few steps behind his older brother Fidel and very much under his shadow.

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Raúl Castro has lived much of his life just a few steps behind older brother Fidel.

He followed Fidel in the mountain battles against the Batista dictatorship in the 1950s, and for nearly five decades since has been No. 2 in the Cuban Communist Party and in the Cuban government.

But as Raúl Castro marks his first year today out in front of his ailing brother, his reputation as a supremely efficient and organized taskmaster who shuns Fidel's bombastic style of rule appears to be serving him well as he faces a communist nation mired in myriad difficulties.

While cutting back on the long speeches and political rallies, Castro, 76, has launched a rash of new projects and ideas to improve the troubled economy. Above all, he has been credited with keeping Cuba politically stable since Fidel took ill.

Yet even now, he appears to have been unable to entirely shake his image as Cuba's "second banana." His talks on the need for economic reforms seemed to lose some steam around March, after Fidel rebounded and began writing articles interpreted as putting limits on reforms.

"The list of what didn't happen in Cuba in the last year is much longer than what happened," said Cuba's former U.N. ambassador, Alcibiades Hidalgo, who also served as a senior personal aide to Castro and defected in 2002. "To describe this year . . . I'd use this phrase: 'Fidel Castro, better; Cuba, the same.'

'Or this one: 'Fidel Castro let go of the helm, but he remains the ship's anchor.' "

Fidel "temporarily" surrendered his official duties to his brother on July 31, saying intestinal surgery made him unable to work. While his health appears to have improved, there is no sign he will ever again exercise the extraordinary power he once wielded. For the first time in 48 years, last week -- two weeks before his 81st birthday -- he missed Cuba's annual July 26 revolutionary celebration.

"The past 12 months have been a remarkable example of our people's maturity, firmness in principles, unity, trust in Fidel and the party and particularly in themselves," Raúl Castro said at the celebration. "Adjustments and postponements have been necessary, and we do not rule out that more will be made in the future."

Indeed, Raúl Castro has spent the last 12 months reportedly working quietly on the changes that could salvage the country's communist system upon the death of its ultra-charismatic founder.

He has paid off the government's large and long-standing debts to small farmers and hiked prices that producers get for milk and meat -- both incentives to production. Some public debate and even criticism of government failures has taken place, without crushing repercussion.

In his first six months in power, he named four new cabinet ministers, promoted an ally to head Cuba's only labor union and twice offered to talk to Washington. He urged debate on sensitive issues and encouraged journalists to expose state corruption and social indiscipline. These days a nation where many survive on corruption is being urged to show up to work on time and not steal from state stocks.

He has spoken of trying to reinvigorate foreign investments, which have sagged over the past four years, and relaxed customs regulations to allow more imports of home appliances, DVD players, VCRs and automotive parts.

"A lot of people's lives will be easier because of that," said Cuba expert Philip Peters, an analyst at the Lexington Institute, a Virginia-based think tank. "He'll do stuff like that, that produces modest results but does not change the rules of the game."

LITTLE EXPECTED

Few analysts, in fact, expect earth-shattering transformations under Castro -- at least not while his older brother is still alive.

"He's afraid of his brother's shadow and always has been, so he's sitting at his desk trying to solve problems quietly, like a clerk crossing t's and dotting i's," said Teo Babún, a business consultant who studies Cuba's economy. "Perhaps that's what Cuba needs: less talk and more action. But people are going to be looking to him for leadership, and I'm not sure he's going to be able to fulfill that role."

Castro's rejection of his brother's charismatic brand of leadership is so strong that he has not appeared on Cuba's most important TV news talk show, *Round Table*, even once in the past year. He gave just nine speeches and one newspaper interview, and attended none of the rallies against accused terrorist Luis Posada Carriles staged by the government in front of the U.S. diplomatic mission in Havana.

"Raúl is one of the least known men of the revolution," said Lissette Bustamante, a former Cuban television journalist who enjoyed close access to top power circles before she defected in 1992. "He has always been second banana, in the shadows, the gray man."

And even though many recall his hand in harsh political repression over his nearly five decades as Cuba's minister of defense, he also is known as a highly effective organizer and administrator -- the pragmatist who gets things done.

"When I knew him as a [Havana university] student, he was always discreet rather than an exhibitionist," said controversial Miami radio commentator Max Lesnik, an anti-embargo activist who favors a full normalization of U.S.-Cuba relations.

"Everyone predicted that the moment Fidel left the scene, Raúl wouldn't . . . keep the country going. The opposite happened -- the total opposite."

The past year also has been significant for Castro personally. Last month his wife of 48 years, Vilma Espín, a hero of the revolution and prominent advocate for women's rights, died after a long illness. Daughter Mariela has emerged as a family spokesman on her uncle's health.

Fidel Castro told French writer Ignacio Ramonet that he has long considered his brother the person with the "most authority and experience" to lead Cuba in his absence.

"He has been an educator, a builder of men, with much equanimity and much seriousness," he said in Ramonet's book, *Biografía a Dos Voces*, published last year. "He is the person who, even today, has the greatest authority, and the people have placed great confidence in him."

Most experts agree that the succession of power from Fidel to his younger brother -- Cuban officials prefer to call it a "continuation" -- has been smooth. But it has not trickled down to the Cuban people, who say they have yet to feel any real changes.

'MAYBE THE WORST'

"There have been no structural or political changes within the regime. All that has happened is a modification in style and a reshuffling of the power elite. . . . This is a terrible year -- maybe the worst in a long time," said Cuban historian Rafael Rojas, who left the island in 1991 and is now a visiting professor at Columbia University.

Larissa, a seamstress in the central Cuba city of Sancti Spiritus, says her house is in just as poor condition, and her pension is still not enough to live on.

Whether Fidel or Raúl Castro rules the island, to make ends meet the 72-year-old widow must keep sewing.

"Don't talk to me about who is or is not in charge," she said in a telephone interview. "Life is the same routine: invent; survive; stretch money. Nothing has moved here, not even the leaves."