

Critical Cuban elections in January

The Miami Herald
Nov. 20, 2007

HAVANA --

Cuba announced Tuesday it has set Jan. 20 for national elections that are part of the process of determining whether ailing leader Fidel Castro continues as president.

The ruling, signed by interim leader Raul Castro and read on state television, set the date for elections to provincial and national assemblies - voting that is held every five years.

There was no explicit mention of Fidel Castro, but the 81-year-old leader of the Cuban Revolution must be re-elected to the national parliament before he could repeat as president of the Council of State to remain in full power.

Raul, 76, is the council's first vice president

The January elections come almost 18 months after the elder Castro stepped aside on July 31, 2006, because of emergency intestinal surgery, provisionally ceding his functions to his brother and a team of other top leaders.

He has not been seen in public since, appearing only in official photographs and videos and regularly writing essays with mostly international themes.

The parliament, known in Cuba as the National Assembly, elects a new council every five years, several weeks after deputies are elected. It was not announced when the new National Assembly would meet for the first time to renew the top council members.

Cuba's constitution calls for the council's first vice president, currently Raul Castro, to fill the presidential slot when vacated. Fidel, Cuba's unchallenged leader since 1959, held the council presidency since its 1976 creation.

Phil Peters, a Cuba analyst with the pro-democracy Lexington think tank outside Washington, said January's vote would be "an election with real suspense."

"If (Fidel) doesn't put his name on the ballot he is effectively resigning," Peters said.

However, even if Castro relinquishes the presidency, he could still play a key role in the nation's leadership in his current position as Communist Party general secretary - arguably a more politically powerful job - or in a new emeritus position.

Vicki Huddleston, America's top diplomat in Cuba from 1999-2001, said it seemed likely Raul Castro would be Cuba's next Council of State president.

"Very few people imagine that Fidel will return to power in an active position," said Huddleston.

Cuba recently held the first round of its election process, with more than 8.1 million voters - 95 percent of those registered - casting ballots in late October to elect more than 12,000 delegates to 169 municipal assemblies across the island.

Those assemblies are now choosing candidates for provincial and national assembly seats.

Anyone 16 or older can vote in Cuba and casting a ballot is not mandatory. Membership in the Communist Party - the only legal political party on the island - also is not required.

Small dissident groups - which are tolerated but dismissed by Cuba's government as mercenaries of the United States - boycotted the municipal elections.

Detractors of Cuba's electoral process complain the country's president is not directly elected by citizens and say voters feel heavy pressure to support pro-government candidates.

"The current Electoral Law, marked by a totalitarian character, does not guarantee the elemental right of citizens to freely elect people who represent programs or proposals that differ from those of the only party that has governed for more than four decades," dissident Vladimiro Roca wrote earlier this week in a declaration from the opposition coalition Todos Unidos.