

Castro nominated for Cuban parliament

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HAVANA --

Fidel Castro was nominated for a seat in Cuba's parliament Sunday, leaving open the option for the ailing 81-year-old revolutionary to stay on as the communist-run island's president.

A National Assembly seat is a prerequisite for seeking the presidency, and if Castro had failed to be nominated it could have heralded a decision to remove himself from the office after almost a half century as Cuba's undisputed leader.

The Cuban leader was nominated Sunday by city council officials in his eastern home province of Santiago, a step in a multitiered process that will eventually determine his political status.

There was no immediate word on whether Castro will accept the nomination. If he wins a parliament seat during national elections Jan. 20, he would remain in the running to retain the presidency of Cuba's supreme governing body, the Council of State.

Castro still officially heads the council, but has not been seen in public since emergency intestinal surgery forced him to cede power to a provisional government run by his younger brother Raul in July 2006.

In recent government videos, the elder Castro has appeared lucid but extremely frail. Cuban officials say he is recovering and on top of political events.

Members of municipal assemblies across the island gathered to nominate candidates for the 614-member parliament, which is known here as the National Assembly and is chosen every five years.

Several weeks after a new assembly is chosen, its members convene to select the Council of State. Castro has held the council's presidency since it was created in 1976. Previously Cuba's prime minister, he has been the nation's unchallenged leader since leading the 1959 revolution.

"He will have my two hands vote," National Assembly President Ricardo Alarcon said in broken English, meaning he would raise both hands to vote in favor of Castro as head of the council.

Vice President Carlos Lage said if Castro is a candidate for deputy, "I am sure he will be elected."

Raul Castro, 76, is currently the Council of State's first vice president, though he has run Cuba's government since his brother stepped aside.

The elder Castro's illness and condition are state secrets. Recuperating in an undisclosed location, he has been seen only in official photographs and videos, though he also regularly released essays on mostly international themes.

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.

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.

Cuba claims its system is more democratic than most, as evidenced by the more than 8.1 million voters - 95 percent of those registered - who cast ballots in late October to elect more than 12,000 delegates to 169 municipal assemblies.