



March 2008

AFTER FIDEL, THE DELUGE?

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As Louis XV allegedly said, “Apres moi, le deluge.” Certainly people have thought that Cuba after Fidel would be the same. How would a Cuban state that revolves around him survive his departure? How would a government where no decision is too small for his attention function? How would the generations who have known no one other than the “Maximo Lider” handle the change? Luckily for the Cuban government, the answer is—there will be almost no change in the near future. No deluge, just a drizzle.

Cuba watchers conceptualize five post-Fidel scenarios. From most to least likely, they are: stable succession, stable transition, unstable succession, unstable transition, and chaos. But few people realize that stable succession has already occurred.

In late July 2006, Fidel passed control of the government to his younger brother. Raul Castro assumed the positions of President of the Council of State of Cuba, First Secretary of the Communist Party, and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, and he has been in charge ever since. On February 19, 2008, Fidel announced that he would not be seeking another term as President and Commander-in-Chief. However, Raúl has been the Minister of the Revolutionary Armed Forces (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias [FAR]) since 1959 and has held the number two position in the Politburo, the Cuban Council of State, the National Assembly of the Popular Power, and the Council of Ministers. Moreover, he has personally held all coercive power in the Cuban state since 1996, when the FAR took control of the Ministry of the Interior.

Fidel, Raúl, and their advisors understand their challenges and have prepared well for every eventuality posited in the five scenarios. The uneventful transfer of power in 2006 was especially helpful for them. Raul has been the de facto leader ever since, so the Cuban people have gotten used to him being in charge. His becoming the de jure leader only required a quick announcement. The fact that Fidel made the announcement indicates that Cuba’s current leaders are comfortable with their level of control.

What about other options? The current Cuban state apparatus, in uncontested control since 1959, is aimed at preventing either an unstable transition or chaos. Although the Cuban Communist Party ostensibly is in charge, the Castro brothers have been in control, splitting all senior positions between them. Leaders of every important state organization have proven their loyalty to Fidel and Raúl time after time, with no question about their support. Some have questioned whether there are two factions: Fidelistas and Raúlistas.

Although a preference for the leadership of one or the other may exist, the government remains united in the goal of self-continuation.

Who is in charge? Raúl obviously is the main actor; however his lifestyle and advanced age imply that he will not be there long. Unlike his brother, he has a reputation for letting people run their organizations with a minimum of meddling. The Cuban system is working constitutionally. This legitimizes the regime in the eyes of many Cubans on the island. Several senior leaders assisted Fidel and now assist Raúl in running the government, including Ricardo Alarcón, the President of the National Assembly; Carlos Lage, the Executive Secretary of the Council of Ministers; Felipe Roque, the Foreign Minister; and Julio Soberón of the Central Bank. Raúl's daughter, Mariela Castro, has also been mentioned as a future leader. All have been active in the government and have their own supporters. The serious maneuvering will now begin among them. The one certain thing is that the military is the main actor. It holds the monopoly on violence and controls the heights of the economy, especially tourism and transportation. Raúl has moved military officers into many influential positions within the government, and they will not abandon these positions quickly or easily.

What is the way ahead for the United States? Is it time to open relations with Cuba? What about relations with the Cuban military? What do we do with the embargo? The U.S. long-term goal is a stable, democratic Cuba integrated into the global market economy. The path to this goal is not evident. However, to achieve the goal, clearly we must be able to influence the Cuban government and people. Many aspects of our relations are not within the purview of the Executive Branch. The Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity or Libertad Act (also known as the Helms-Burton Act) of 1995 tightens the embargo and limits the President's ability to change our posture towards Cuba. The May 2004 and July 2006 reports of The Commission to Assist a Free Cuba (CAFC) provide some recommendations, specifically discussing the roles of the post-Fidel military. The various sections of the Executive Branch should conceptualize engaging the Cuban government and the FAR within the law. We cannot achieve our goals without engaging them and communicating very clearly in a nonthreatening manner the standard of behavior for Western Hemisphere governments and militaries. That standard is a neutral, apolitical military supporting a democratic government that respects human rights and is integrated into the global political and economic system. Without engaging Cuba, the current situation will continue: a Cuba that does not cleave to hemispheric and international norms, together with a United States that cannot even inform the debate, much less shape it.

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