

Changes in contemporary Cuba

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A major transition is underway in contemporary Cuba. The transfer of power from Fidel Castro to his younger brother Raul Castro not only represents a clear break with the charismatic leadership of the older brother but also involves a sharp re-definition of the priorities of the Revolution with a new focus on economic reform, institutional efficiency, and the more general “normalization” of life. Fidel Castro’s authority derived from his status as the founder and defining figure of the regime; the metric of his success was political and measured by his capacity to mobilize and inspire the population. History will judge his younger brother by more mundane standards, most especially on whether he succeeds in reviving the comatose Cuban economy. He understands that the longer-term stability of the system is at risk, if the regime does not resolve its intertwined economic, political, and institutional challenges.

The Communist Party has been at the epicenter of the political transformation associated with the rise of Raul Castro. His personnel changes decimated the “successor generation” that surrounded his brother and put another in its place. His Report to the Sixth Party Congress April 2011 offered a blunt assessment of the deficiencies of the Communist Party. “What we approve at the Congress,” he declared, “must not suffer the same fate of agreements approved at earlier congresses [that were] nearly all forgotten without having been implemented.” The younger Castro criticized the personnel policies of an earlier era that led to “the accelerated promotion of inexperienced and immature cadres [who were guilty] of sham behavior and opportunism.” As a result, he said, the Revolution lacked “a reserve of substitutes properly prepared and with enough experience and maturity to assume the new and complex tasks of leading the Party, the State, and the Government.” This was not an isolated instance. Over subsequent years there has been no dearth of tongue-lashings directed at party activists and cadres.

If the ascent of Raul Castro diminished the power of the Communist Party, the opposite has been the case for the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR). Now that its long-time leader (Raul Castro was appointed Minister of Defense in October 1959) had reached the apex of power, the armed forces became the most powerful institution in contemporary Cuba. Symptomatically, of the fifteen Politburo members elected at the Sixth Congress, seven were on active duty in the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR), had substantial military experience or had worked in military enterprises, and the total did not include the members of the “revolutionary generation” who had

military experience from their guerrilla days. Similarly, nearly 30 percent of the new 115-member Central Committee hailed from the armed forces.

Seven years since taking over from his brother, first on a temporary basis and more formally after February 2008, Raul Castro has placed his own imprint on the Cuban political process. His project is to preserve the stability of the regime while leading the transition to “market socialism” and implementing a new state-society bargain. Time may be short for the nearly 82-year old leader and the regime does have clear vulnerabilities, but for now it has things firmly in control, with no alternative project to challenge it. The repressive apparatus is robust and effective. The opposition has yet to find a strong echo in society. And after so many years of state-induced dependence, Cuban society is still quiescent and remains anesthetized against activism. Even the Catholic Church has signaled it prefers to negotiate discreet spaces and privileges in the context of a settlement with the regime.

It is difficult to predict the longer-term future of Cuba. If Raul Castro (co-architect of the regime) has had to change policies and style, one can only imagine that those who will succeed him (with their correspondingly diminished authority and legitimacy) might have to advance farther down the path of reform. And yet, while it is true that there is a transition to something new and different underway in contemporary Cuba, we cannot be certain that change will move in the direction of a liberal democracy. Whatever the case, once the “founding” revolutionary generation leaves the scene, things will change significantly. The post-Castro future will surely see increased competition within the ruling elite and revitalized civil and economic societies. These could foreshadow the eventual resurrection of “politics” in Cuba.

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