

# Fidel's Health and Implications for U.S. Policy

By Mavis Anderson | August 18, 2006

Fidel Castro's recent announcement that he would temporarily transfer power to his brother Raul and others in the Cuban Government has led to much speculation about the course of events in both Cuba and Miami. With hard-line Cuban Americans dancing in the streets of Little Havana, and even preparing boats to sail to the island to foment unrest, the question on everyone's mind is: does this signal the beginning of a much-discussed transition for Cuba? And if so, what will it look like?

The official press in Cuba adamantly rejects the use of the word "transition" at all. And no wonder, with the thrust of the recent U.S. "Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba" report indicating that succession is not acceptable, but rather calling for a new transition government in Cuba, approved by the United States.

Cuba maintains that Fidel Castro is "recovering favorably" from intestinal surgery and will likely return to his duties in a few weeks. In fact, post-surgery photographs have recently been published of the Cuban leader—talking on the phone and visiting with Venezuela President Hugo Chavez and Castro's brother, Raul (who had not been previously seen in public since his ascendance to power on July 31).

It is difficult to ascertain just what form a government, temporary or otherwise, headed by Raul Castro, would take. Predictions have been all over the map: more pragmatic, more likely to institute increased military and security presence on the island, more hard-line communist, more likely to open up economically, more likely to crack down on dissent, less likely to have the support of the Cuban people, less likely to demonstrate political skill, less charismatic, etc.

While this is mere speculation, the most important factor for foreign observers to bear in mind is that the organization and political orientation of the Cuban Government and its leadership should be the decision of the Cuban people—those currently living on the island.

This simple concept of self-determination, so jealously defended in U.S. society, dictates that the United States should not interfere in any way—openly or surreptitiously behind-the-scenes—in Cuba's internal affairs.

However, the Bush administration's recent second report of the "Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba," and high-level administration officials' comments after the transfer of power, have overtly threatened Cuban sovereignty. The report's interventionist policies move the United States farther down the path of a failed and outdated policy that has done nothing but attempt to isolate Cuba, while keeping the United States and its people in the dark about the island.

A more constructive response would allow U.S. citizens freedom of association with our Cuban neighbors to form constructive relationships. Freedom to travel, engage in two-way trade, organize educational and cultural exchange—to name a few of the basic liberties currently denied U.S. citizens with respect to Cuba—could lead to a positive role in the future of Cuba. Today U.S. citizens cannot be a positive force because they have no direct knowledge of Cuba due to enforced separation and hostile foreign policy toward the island.

These policies have galvanized anti-U.S. sentiment in Cuba as well. Even Cuban internal opposition protests U.S. interference in their country.



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Miriam Leiva, wife of Oscar Espinosa Chepe, one of the 75 Cubans who was charged and jailed for collaboration with the United States several years ago, wrote about Cuba's future in a July 15 *Miami Herald* op-ed entitled "We Cubans Must Decide:" "... It would be extraordinarily helpful to lift the restrictive U.S. measures adopted in 2004, which haven't produced positive results ... I have never understood how a country that has accumulated so much wisdom and has been so flexible with former enemies has applied such counterproductive policies to Cuba for 47 years ... Only we Cubans, of our own volition and according to the moment's conditions, can decide issues of such singular importance."

Eloy Gutierrez Menoyo wrote about succession and the future in an August 7 press release from his organization, *Cambio Cubano* (Cuban Change): "The recently issued document on the transition for Cuba, produced under the auspices of the current administration in Washington in an intrigue with extremist factions in exile, breaks the most elemental rules of international friendship, contravenes the sovereign rights of civilized nations, and crudely insults the history and the intelligence of Cubans. In reaffirming our ethical, intellectual, and spiritual repudiation of such a coarse and inconceivable document, we wish also to make clear our faith that the Cuban people are capable of gambling on a democratic opening without ever abandoning their ancestral devotion to Cuba's sovereignty."

The Cuban opposition also has ideas about the transition that differ substantially from the U.S. State Department version. In a recent op-ed in the *Washington Post*, Oswaldo Paya, the initiator of the Varela Project, a reform movement in Cuba, laid out some of those differences: "We want to preserve the right to free health care and education, and to expand our rights to include freedom of religious education and freedom of expression. We do not want change if it comes at the cost of paying a ransom to those in power, allowing them to take control of the country's resources, to define its values, to become millionaires and to leave the people of the country in distress ... There will be no

uncontrolled privatizations, but there will be a guarantee for the right of all Cubans to a free economy, the right to have private enterprise, and to trade freely. No one will be forced out of his home; the law will prohibit evictions."

A response to the state of Fidel Castro's health and the provisional delegation of his responsibilities from nearly 10,000 people, including Nobel Peace Prize winners, notable authors, religious leaders, and political leaders, quotes U.S. officials' comments regarding more aggressive forms of intervention. The statement ends: "Faced with this increasing threat against the integrity of a nation, and the peace and the security of Latin America and the world, we the signatories listed below demand that the government of the United States respect the sovereignty of Cuba. We must prevent a new aggression at all costs." (See <http://www.porcuba.cult.cu/index.php?lang=2>.)

What appears to be most striking about recent events in Cuba is how uneventful the leadership change actually was. The succession, mandated by the Cuban constitution, from President Fidel to First Vice President Raul was smooth: no uprising in the streets of Havana, no response on the island to Miami's call to civil disobedience, no collapse of the Cuban system of government, no rapid change to U.S.-desired and U.S.-defined transitional government. Those who expected a dramatic shift with the departure of Fidel are out of touch with what is happening on the island.

And Fidel Castro has not yet disappeared from the scene. While the succession may already be beginning, and it is still possible that Castro may not return to fully take back the reins of power, the likelihood remains small for a bold move from other Cuban leaders, including Raul, while Fidel is still a force in the country. This transfer of power may indeed have been a "trial run" for an eventual stable succession. The Cuban people are perhaps being prepared for the moment when Fidel Castro is truly absent, but it has just been demonstrated that the change could be gradual, peaceful, and responsible.

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## **Refrain from Interference in Cuba's Internal Political Affairs**

*In light of all these events, a number of organizations that work on U.S. policy toward Cuba have joined together in sending out a call to the White House for non-interference in the sovereign affairs of Cuba.*

For the first time in 47 years, Cuba is undergoing a transfer of political power, as President Fidel Castro has temporarily turned the reins of government over to his brother, Raul and other leaders of the Cuban Government. No one knows whether Fidel Castro will recuperate from his illness and return to office, or whether Raul Castro and his leadership team will continue in power.

But we do know this: the future of Cuba should only be decided by the Cuban people themselves—those living in Cuba, without interference by the United States or others.

The Bush administration has set criteria for what an acceptable post-Fidel Castro government in Cuba should look like, and has committed funds to encourage a transition to such a government in Cuba. This is wrong. **The United States should not interfere in any way in Cuban internal affairs.** Not only is it improper for the United States to take actions that interfere with Cuba's sovereignty, but these actions are likely to be counter-productive.

In the past, groups within the hard-line Cuban-American community have taken provocative and

belligerent actions to destabilize the political situation in Cuba. **U.S. authorities should take every appropriate step to prevent these groups from launching any hostile or provocative actions from U.S. soil.**

At a time when events are unfolding in Cuba, we are missing an incredible opportunity for Americans to engage directly with Cubans. Under current policy, U.S. citizens have very little contact with people and institutions on the island. Cuban-Americans have lost nearly all access to their own family members on the island. Student study abroad programs have been all but eliminated. Visits to the United States by Cuban cultural groups and academics have been sharply curtailed. And new restrictions have reduced contact between religious groups in Cuba and their counterparts in the United States. **To understand and relate to developments in Cuba, the Bush administration should permit U.S. citizens to engage with Cuba, through travel and trade, rather than continuing a failed policy of isolation.**

Now is the time for all of us to work together to make our voices heard in Washington to ensure that the Bush administration respects Cuba's sovereignty and international law, and promotes peace by refraining from interference in Cuba's internal political process.

The full message, including an **action citizens can take**, can be found on the website of the Latin America Working Group <http://www.lawg.org>.

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## RESOURCES

The United States and Cuba—Strands of a Failed Policy: <http://americas.irc-online.org/am/3350>

Latin America Working Group (LAWG): [www.lawg.org](http://www.lawg.org)

Freedom to Travel Campaign: [www.cubacentral.com](http://www.cubacentral.com)

Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA): [www.wola.org](http://www.wola.org)

Witness for Peace: [www.witnessforpeace.org](http://www.witnessforpeace.org)

Center for International Policy (CIP): [www.ciponline.org](http://www.ciponline.org)

Chicago Religious Leadership Network on Latin America (CRLN): (773) 293-2964

Cuban American Alliance Education Fund (CAAEF): [www.cubamer.org](http://www.cubamer.org)

Cuban American Commission for Family Rights: [www.cubanfamilyrights.org](http://www.cubanfamilyrights.org)

Emergency Network of Cuban American Scholars and Artists for Change in U.S.-Cuba Policy (ENCASA): Statement at <http://www.rprogreso.com/index.php?progreso=encasa&otherweek=1142834400>

Fund for Reconciliation and Development: [www.ffrd.org](http://www.ffrd.org)

Puentes Cubanos: [cubapunte@aol.com](mailto:cubapunte@aol.com)

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