

## NEW POLICY DIRECTION ON CUBA

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The succession in power from Fidel Castro to his brother Raúl appears to be a done deal, but the evolution away from *fidelismo* will start only upon the death of its namesake. When that happens, Raúl Castro steps out from behind the shadow of his flamboyant sibling and the beginning of a transition process to a new order in Cuba may commence. Since 1961 the United States has pursued policies based on attempting to isolate, contain, and weaken the Castro regime through its economic embargo and by marshalling diplomatic resources to oppose it. Particularly since the end of the Cold War, support for a return to democracy and respect for fundamental rights in Cuba have been the justification for maintaining and even tightening these policies. That such efforts have had no effect on improving the condition of human and civil rights in Cuba is manifestly clear. With the coming to power of Raúl Castro it is time for the United States to chart a different course if it wants to promote a transition to democracy in Cuba.

By all indications, Fidel Castro, who provisionally handed control over the mechanisms of government to his brother on July 31, 2006, in the wake of a severe illness, will not return to power. Since that date, Raúl Castro has further consolidated his hold over the armed forces, security apparatus, and Communist Party—the key levers of control. While there is much speculation regarding what Raúl can or will do with that power, especially in terms of steering Cuba along the lines of social and economic reform, he will not be free to chart his own course until Fidel departs the scene. Eclipsed from the beginning by the force of Fidel's presence and the

cult of personality surrounding the elder Castro, Raúl remained deeply in the background, a powerful but colorless figure—Fidel's loyal helper and designated heir. Even now as de facto chief of state and head of government, Raúl will not have complete authority while his brother lives.

Raúl will likely have only a short time to make his mark. He is 76 years old and reportedly not in the best of health. As yet Raúl has no designated successor, though this is no doubt a top priority; but at this stage he probably does not enjoy the legitimacy or popularity to name one. His most immediate goal will be to ensure the con-

tinuity of the political system and Raúl appears to have that under control.

Most observers predict that he will not attempt a political opening but will instead look for means to loosen restrictions on economic activity, broaden the very small sector of the economy not fully controlled by the state, and begin to address the pressing need for better living conditions. Considerable pressure has built up among the Cuban people for

the chance to earn, keep, and spend money. Responding to deep-seated exasperation with Cuba's sclerotic economic system will be the focus of Raúl's attention and the degree to which he can scale back the state sector a key measure of his success. Continuation of the economic status quo is a less likely option for Raúl than it ever was for Fidel, and nonaction would come with a higher political cost.



When Raúl finally is left alone in power, the potential for change in Cuba grows exponentially, given Fidel's single-minded dedication to preserving Cuba as a police state with a controlled economy. But whatever glue Fidel's persona contributed to holding the system together and generating international support will be lost to Raúl, who has neither the charisma nor the disposition to play the part of revolutionary icon.

As Raúl Castro maneuvers to distance himself from some elements of his brother's legacy, the United States will be confronted with a policy dilemma. With Fidel in charge, a succession of U.S. administrations had little inclination to revisit the increasingly rigid policy of sanctions and restrictions. Earlier attempts by the United States at rapprochement failed utterly in the face of Fidel's recalcitrant anti-Americanism and unwillingness to consider meaningful political or economic change. The domestic political cost of reaching out to Cuba was seen to far outweigh whatever minimal benefit might accrue to U.S. foreign policy objectives. Moreover, Cuba posed little security threat to the United States after the mid-1980s as it morphed into a political and economic museum.

With the end of Fidel, change will come to Cuba. The United States could play a positive role in helping promote both the pace and direction of such change—away from the authoritarian legacy toward a more open and democratic system. A transition toward greater respect for human and civil rights is

by no means guaranteed. Important factions in Cuba will resist even economic reform, let alone attempts to dismantle the police state.

The United States should encourage Raúl to play the role of reformer—albeit if his first steps are limited to the economic and social spheres. Unfortunately, the United States has painted itself into a corner by legislation restricting executive branch discretion in dealing with Cuba, especially the 1992 and 1996 (Helms-Burton) acts, which predicate change in U.S. policy on the consolidation of a transitional government in Cuba that does not include Raúl Castro and that is committed to sweeping democratic reform. Even with these restrictions in place there is some room for policy maneuvering, but the Bush administration has publicly ruled out any thaw in relations with a Raúl Castro government.

Whatever sense adherence to a rigid policy of sanctions and restrictions on Cuba may have made while Fidel Castro was in power no longer holds weight

with Raúl in charge. Instead, it is in the national interest of the United States and of the Cuban people to encourage a peaceful transition that leads to democracy. The United States should promote dialogue with the Cuban government as well as cooperation on any issue of mutual benefit—of which there are many. It should use “soft-power” tools—academic and cultural exchanges, sports programs, technology exchange, and information outreach to begin to break the ice that has encrusted the bilateral relationship. The Cuban people hunger for a closer relationship with the United States—based on mutual respect—and Raúl may see considerable benefit to an opening. Confidence-building measures, however small, can be meaningful in helping to promote real reform in Cuba through a step-by-step approach.

The United States should work with other democracies, at the Organization of American States and in Europe, to develop a more coordinated approach toward encouraging change in Cuba. A more open-minded U.S. policy will win greater credibility for such

efforts and will broaden the effectiveness of other U.S. policy initiatives in the Americas. U.S. public diplomacy should underscore a positive desire to see Cuba rejoin the community of democracies at the OAS and seek means by which that organization—in the spirit of the Inter-American Democratic Charter—can help Cuba move toward democracy.

Reaching out to a new Cuban regime by no means implies an abandonment of U.S. commitment to democracy in Cuba, but instead a more realistic and pragmatic approach toward meeting that goal. Rather than stepping back until a transitional government comes into being that meets the strict standards of the Helms-Burton legislation, the United States should engage with Cuba as a means of helping promote positive change. There is nothing to lose and much to gain by doing so. ■