

# AND THE MAMBO KINGS WILL LIVE ON: CUBA AFTER FIDEL

Julia Sagebien



With the announcement this summer that Fidel Castro was undergoing surgery and that power was being temporarily transferred to Fidel's brother, Raul, speculation about the future of Cuba without the *líder máximo* started anew. "Fidel's long-term illness or death," says Cuban-born Dalhousie University professor Julia Sagebien, "would remove the major kingpin that has held together the country's internal and external dynamics. Nature abhors a vacuum. The death or incapacitation of Fidel Castro will leave a very big one." In this article, she takes a look at some likely scenarios for a post-Fidel Cuba and examines the interplay between uncertainty, change and continuity and the actions and reactions of several constituencies within and outside Cuba, notably the Cuban diaspora and the US government.

L'intervention chirurgicale de Fidel Castro et le transfert provisoire du pouvoir aux mains de son frère Raul ont relancé cet été les hypothèses sur l'avenir de Cuba sans le *líder máximo*. « Une longue maladie ou la mort de Fidel Castro viendrait éliminer la cheville ouvrière de la dynamique interne et externe du pays, affirme Julia Sagebien, originaire de Cuba et professeure à l'Université de Dalhousie. La nature a horreur du vide, poursuit-elle. Or la disparition ou l'incapacité de Castro créerait un vide immense. » L'auteure examine quelques scénarios de l'après-Fidel, de même que le rapport entre l'incertitude, le changement et la continuité face aux actions et réactions des premiers intéressés, à Cuba comme à l'étranger, en particulier au sein de la diaspora cubaine et du gouvernement américain.

**O**n July 31, Fidel Castro issued a proclamation stating that power had been temporarily transferred to his brother Raul Castro and to a small group of Cuban leaders. Despite press releases from Cuban authorities claiming that Castro was recuperating well from intestinal surgery, for nearly two weeks the actual condition of Fidel Castro's health could not be independently verified. There were rumours that he was already dead, concern by some that this was all an elaborate smoke-out engineered to bring Cuban dissidents out into the open, and speculation about the severity of his illness and the length of his recovery. During these two weeks many plans for Castro's succession were dusted off and put on ready alert for deployment. The US government highlighted the recommendations of its latest plan, the "Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba," and unveiled a draft immigration policy aimed at stalling a mass illegal exodus while assisting legal departures from the island. Cuban exiles danced for joy in the streets of Miami and New Jersey, contemplated packing their bags to return home and readied their flotilla to rescue their beleaguered compatriots still on the island. The US and

international business communities glimpsed the possibility of the eagerly awaited end of the US-imposed embargo and leafed through consulting reports on opportunities in a post-embargo Cuba.

By August 14, photos of a recuperating Fidel, some of him flanked by Raul and by Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez, began appearing in the national and international press. Apparently, news of Fidel Castro's demise were, again, vastly exaggerated. Raul Castro's first pronouncements as acting president appeared on August 18 in the Communist Party's newspaper. Raul stated that Cuba remained open to normalized relations with the United States but warned the US that it would not respond to threats, pressure or aggressive acts. He added that tens of thousands of Cuban troops had been mobilized. The US State Department quickly responded that it was not "enamoured" with the first words from "Fidel light."

In the next few months or perhaps even years, some combination of the three following scenarios is going to take place in Cuba. One, Raul Castro continues to serve as the head of the Cuban state because Fidel is too sick to reassume

power or because Fidel wants him to stay in power. Two, Fidel Castro recuperates and takes back the reigns of power. Three, Fidel Castro dies and a new leadership takes over. Scenarios one and two are not mutually exclusive, and could happen sequentially or even intermittently. Both would, however, inevitably culminate in scenario three. Scenarios one and two are likely to have the same results — “dead calm” on the island and in the US lots of blus-

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ter combined with political paralysis on the topic of normalization of relations. Scenario three will unleash major change inside and outside Cuba.

Not much is known outside top Cuban political and military circles about the internal plans for Fidel’s succession, except for the well-publicized fact that his successor is his brother Raul Castro. This plan has been in place for a very long time. What is less certain, though, is what changes a government led by Raul Castro would bring and how long the 75-year-old Raul himself will last.

**F**undamentally, Cuba is facing an era of underlying uncertainty, mostly because no one really knows what to expect from a Cuba without Fidel or even one with less of Fidel. There are, however, many powerful dynamics at work inside and outside Cuba aimed at achieving relative calm and stability.

As confirmed by Raul’s first official public statement, the Cuban security apparatus is on full alert. Most Cubans, including dissidents, are likely to lay low and take a wait-and-see attitude. In just a few days in August, the Cuban government demonstrated that it was “in control.” The Cuban government and security forces are likely to repeat

this seamless tightening of state control if Fidel becomes gravely ill again or if he dies. In fact, they may never lower the state of security alert that Fidel’s August health scare instigated. On the ground in Cuba, expressions of dissent will not be tolerated; large demonstrations and attempts to take to the sea en route to US soil will be severely punished.

There will be continuity of ideals and personnel with Raul in power. The

military out of uniform already holds the commanding heights of most key sectors of the Cuban economy, and it is in their interests to maintain relative calm. Raul, a military leader, is respected by this community and will surely garner their support. Raul does not, however, have the loyalty-inducing charisma of his brother. Thus, this solidarity may be short-lived. Though at times Raul has been the political hardliner, he is also known to be more pragmatic and less ideologically “pure” in economic matters than his brother. Cautiously and slowly, he is likely to open Cuba up to market forces, albeit in a state-controlled, China-like style.

Stability and continuity will surely be aided by Cuba’s recent economic recovery. High nickel prices, buoyant tourism, the efficient functioning of the relatively liberalized domestic agricultural sector and, especially, Venezuelan largesse, have all contributed to an estimated growth rate of 8-10 percent in 2005. Venezuela, Cuba’s main trading partner, provides the island with an ample supply of cut-rate oil (an estimated 100,000 barrels a day), which helps satisfy domestic consumption and gives Cuba an opportunity for wind-fall profits through the re-export of this oil at world market prices. Estimates of the

value of this oil-based financing approximate the US\$2 billion mark. Cuba pays for Venezuelan oil in part through the services of thousand of Cuban doctors and advisors (some in military and security matters) and exports of sugar-refining and medical equipment and parts.

Internal political stability will necessitate economic liberalization. Though there is a small and active political dissident community inside Cuba, most of the dissatisfaction with the Revolution these days is due to the never-ending economic hardships faced by ordinary citizens. Raul would shore up support for his administration if he were able to bring about sustained economic growth and a better quality of life for ordinary Cubans.

**T**he US government will also endeavour to maintain calm and stability on the island. The last thing it needs or wants in the first decade of the new millennium is another international crisis, a wave of illegal immigrants, or armed conflict, especially one 90 miles from its shores. Nevertheless, the Cuban exile community, especially that residing in the US, will instigate upheaval on the island and will wax eloquently about the imminent demise of the regime.

Along with US State Department communiqués aimed at tempering Cuban exiles’ hopes for a swift regime change in the island, we are likely to see an increase in tough anti-Castro (Fidel and/or Raul) language and renewed funding for projects allegedly aimed at destabilizing the Cuban regime and capturing the Cuban-American vote in Florida and New Jersey. The prospect of normalizing relations will be reviewed yet again.

As far as an exodus from Miami to Cuba or from Cuba to Miami, neither movement of people is likely to happen in the short to medium terms. Cuban exiles face many travel restrictions, some imposed by the Cuban

government but most imposed by the US government on its citizens and permanent residents, including those of Cuban origin. Once relations are normalized, Cuban exiles will visit their homeland in droves, begin procedures to legally reclaim their former properties, and invest in and support a transition. However, they are no longer likely to relocate in significant numbers. Time has taken its toll, and there are few survivors of the early wave of exiles who vowed to return to a free and democratic Cuba. Second- and third-generation hyphenated Cuban-Americans have a strong identification with the island and with its history of diaspora, but they have become well integrated into American life and few are likely to take on the hardships of rebuilding a nation.

Movement from Cuba to the US will be hampered by several factors. The repressive apparatus of the Cuban state will not tolerate dissent, and unless it chooses to promote an exodus, like it did with the 1980 "Mariel" boatlift, or cannot prevent one, as in the case of the 1994 "Habanazo" boatlift, escape and asylum-seeking will continue on a small scale. Legal migration to the US, the EU, Canada and Mexico will remain steady. A draft new US immigration policy announced in August 2006 instituted impediments to illegal immigration by Cubans while assisting legal departures from the island and family unification. In an effort to dull one of Cuba's few public relations weapons, the draft law encourages the immigration of Cuban doctors. Preoccupied by the never-ending conflict in the Middle East and by the likelihood of terrorist attacks, the US State Department and the White House have apparently concluded that while tough words are vote-getters, Cubans and their problems are best kept at home for now. Until relations are normalized between the two countries and substantial legal immigration quotas negotiated, the number of Cuban immigrants to the US is likely to stay relatively modest. Lastly, despite pronouncements to the contrary, conflicts between the old exiled elite and



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**The appearance of pictures showing Fidel Castro recuperating, here with Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, has not stopped the rumours and uncertainty about Cuba's future. "No one really knows what to expect from a Cuba without Fidel or even one with less of Fidel," says Julia Sagebien.**

newer Cuban arrivals (generally darker skinned and less skilled) have demonstrated that a large wave of refugees would not be warmly welcomed.

As long as he is compos mentis Fidel Castro will try to maintain power as he has for the past 47 years, even if it is from behind the scenes. Moreover, as long as he is alive, the rank and file of the Cuban government and the military will stay loyal to revolutionary ideals. Fidel Castro is, nevertheless, 80 years old and in less than perfect health. There is a high probability that he will die at some point in the not so distant future. History may or may not *absolve* Fidel,

as his revolutionary manifesto claimed, but it will certainly *dissolve* him at some point.

Day one of the real transition in Cuba will be the day that Fidel Castro dies. Only then will major change be possible in Cuba. And at that time, change, whether wanted or not, will happen. Fidel Castro's demise is, however, only half of the change dynamic for Cuba. The Cuban-American exile community holds the other half — it is the key actor in the normalization of US-Cuba relations. Since the end of the Cold War, when Cuba actually mattered to the US for geo-political and security reasons, Cuban exiles have been the most important element

in the development of US foreign policy toward Cuba. Exiles deliver votes in key states such as Florida and New Jersey. Fundamentally, US policy toward Cuba reflects the convoluted "spy vs. spy" thinking of a bitter family feud between Cubans on the island and Cubans in exile.

**Unfortunately, the Cuban-American leadership in office in the US government, and the powerful Cuban-American lobby led by the Cuban American National Foundation, have built careers as anti-Castro hard-liners, and are likely to continue their intransigent and belligerent stance toward anything that remotely smacks of Castro and of communist rule on the island. Normalization may also have to wait for the end of the political life of the exile hard-liners.**

The exile-inspired *Helms-Burton Act* of 1996, and the *Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity (Libertad) Act*, which tightened the trade embargo first imposed in 1962, took the authority to radically alter US policy toward Cuba away from the US president and lodged it firmly in Congress. Under the stipulations of this regulation, a government led by Raul Castro cannot bring about a negotiated end to the US embargo. Therefore, normalization of relations will require either a leadership on the island that is acceptable to the exiles or the amendment or repeal of Helms-Burton. The US commercial lobby will continue pushing for measures aimed at increasing trade between the US and Cuba, especially in agricultural products, even while the embargo is in full force. But taking a position that goes against that taken by the exile lobby would be a very expensive proposition for any legislator to undertake in terms of political capital.

Exiles generally hate Raul only second to Fidel. Rather than an easing of the embargo, exile leaders may opt for lobbying the US government for a new round of embargo tightening measures in yet another failed attempt to give Fidel's and possibly Raul's regime a *coup de grace*. There are moderate factions within the exile

community who welcome a less interventionist approach to change within Cuba and actively call for reconciliation with their compatriots. Unfortunately, the Cuban-American leadership in office in the US government, and the powerful Cuban-American lobby led by the Cuban

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Internal power struggles are likely to occur within the new Cuban leadership once the initial period of stability and continuity brought about through solidarity gets old. The succession plan, though clear in its designation of Raul as the supreme leader, is neither robust nor stable in that it does not incorporate the political ambitions of the rest of the Cuban leadership. Competition, conflict, manoeuvring and intrigue are certain to happen as a new spectrum of positions are taken and new alliances are formed. There will be tension between conservative hard-liners and progressive reformists in both the political and economic spheres. Though this will be mostly an internal matter, outside actors will surely attempt to affect the outcomes. The United States and Venezuela will support opposing ideological camps, while Canada and the EU will advocate a middle way. Countries with commercial interests on the island, such as Venezuela, China, Canada

and Spain, will take a great interest in influencing the creation of a new Cuban legal-economical framework in order to protect their existing investment, define their property claims and better position themselves for future competition.

Latin America's relative swing to the left (among them Evo Morales in Bolivia, Lula in Brazil, Bachelet in Chile, and the contender for the presidency of Mexico, Lopez Obrador) and the fact that Cuba's strongest supporters are Venezuela and China, suggests that a new Cuban leadership will establish a state-led social welfare, albeit more market oriented, form of political-economic organization. While Raul may be Castro's successor in Cuba, the dream of a Latin American revolution will live on in the person of Hugo Chavez. If a non-negotiable condition for the normalization of relations continues to be multi-party democratic elections, we may have to wait a long time for normalization, given the left-leaning, state centred tendencies that are likely to survive Fidel Castro's demise.

Once the embargo is actually lifted, Cuba will be eligible to rejoin the International Monetary Fund and will thus be able to negotiate relief from its crushing external debt. International financial institution (IFI) and US funds will pour into the island in an effort to reconstruct its physical, commercial and institutional infrastructure and to provide employment and business opportunities for Cubans. US national security interests will motivate this largesse to some extent. Cuba is 90 miles from US soil. A mass exodus of Cuban economic migrants as well as short-haul drug-smuggling points are to be prevented at all costs.

One event that could unleash chaos is the incapacitation or death of Raul Castro. He is 75 years old and reputedly a heavy drinker. How long he himself will last is anyone's guess.

As long as the Cuban government maintains relative calm on the streets, Canadian tourists, more than 600,000 per year (out of a total of 2.3 million visitors), are likely to continue. For Canadian commercial interests and for the Canadian government, it is going to be a continuation of the “wait-and-see” attitude and cautious advances that have predominated for about the last half decade.

Helms-Burton threatened foreigners with lawsuits if their business on the island involved property confiscated from Americans, even if the American owners were Cuban citizens at the time of the confiscation. It also threatened to bar such foreigners from entry into the US. Canadian businesses have generally been lying low in Cuba because of the threat of sanctions and because there has been a change in the business climate of Cuba from a friendly partner in the mid-1990s to a somewhat difficult and unpredictable “boss” in the early years of the new millennium.

Canadian commercial interests in Cuba are in trade and direct investment. Canada was Cuba’s fourth-largest trading partner in 2005, after Venezuela, China and Spain. As long as the economy keeps growing and Cubans can pay (not always assured given that Cuba has almost no credit), trade will continue. According to the Cuban government, there are 40 Cuban-Canadian joint companies, and Canada is the second largest investor in Cuba after Spain. Of these joint ventures, 54 percent are with the Ministry of Basic Industry. These large Canadian investments are in sectors relatively resilient to political risk such as mining, energy and oil exploration. Of the other 46 percent of joint ventures, 18 percent are with the Ministry of Tourism in areas such as construction and services, 8 percent are in food products, and 20 percent are in a number of sectors such as construction,

financial services, automobile repair, etc. Today, Canadian companies face competition mostly from EU companies. However, big challenges and opportunities will come for both with the end of the US embargo. As outlined earlier though, this transition is not likely to take place in the short or medium terms.

Prime Minister Chrétien’s policy of “constructive engagement” toward Cuba was not particularly successful in bringing about either democratization or a better record on human rights. Cuba’s rebuff of Chrétien’s efforts to bring about a release of political prisoners put a chill over relations. Prime Minister Martin’s and Prime Minister Harper’s policies of relative benign neglect, except for occasional reprimands on human rights records, have not had much effect on Cuba either. Nor, for that matter, have the hard line of the US or the conditional approach of the EU. The Cuban government is resilient in crisis, resistant to outside

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influence, and picks its own friends. Canadian foreign policy toward Cuba, whether hot or cold, is not likely to bring about much change in the internal dynamics of the island. It could, however, provide, as it has historically, a counter-point to US interventionism. The Canadian government should make a greater effort to understand the Cuban exile dynamic and it should start a process of coalition-building with the moderate faction of this community, since this faction will be a key agent in the normalization of US-Cuba relations. Canadian companies should

have their legal teams ready for property disputes, and the Canadian courts and the federal government should be ready to support them.

The transition toward a new leader of the Cuban state is certainly underway. If Raul Castro continues at the helm, his administration will follow the same general ideological and political principles that have been in effect for almost half a century, while allowing market forces to operate more freely in order to spur growth and deliver a better quality of life to Cuban citizens. In sum, the Cuba of the Castro brothers will live on in the short to medium terms. Long-term, change is inevitable. Fidel Castro’s role in Cuba has been similar to that of Tito in Yugoslavia. He has managed to hold in check contradictory tendencies by force of his personality, his perceived legitimacy, and an uncanny ability to survive against all odds. Cuban politics and economics, as well

as US policy toward Cuba, have been in a sort of steady state for over half a decade. Fidel’s long-term illness or death would remove the kingpin that has held together the country’s internal and external dynamics. Nature abhors a vacuum. The death or incapacitation of Fidel Castro will leave a very big one.

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