

Cuba After Castro: The Coming Elections and a Historic Changing of the Guard

William M. LeoGrande | Tuesday, Oct. 17, 2017

On Nov. 26, Cubans will go to the polls to elect delegates to 168 municipal assemblies, the first step in an electoral process that will culminate next February when the National Assembly, Cuba's parliament, will select a new president. In 2013, when Raul Castro pledged not to seek a third term, he also imposed a two-term limit for all senior government and Communist Party leadership positions. That means the succession will replace not only Castro but almost all the remaining members of the "historical generation" who fought to overthrow Fulgencio Batista's dictatorship in 1959.

The changing of the guard comes at a delicate political moment. Castro's ambitious economic reform program, the "updating" of the economy (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/12882/socialism-with-cuban-characteristics-part-i>), is still a work in progress and has yet to significantly raise the standard of living of most Cubans. Moreover, it is encountering resistance from state and party bureaucrats who are loath to lose control over the levers of economic power and the perks those provide. The economy has also been struggling because of declining oil shipments from Venezuela, which sells oil to Cuba at subsidized prices, helping to ease Cuba's chronic shortage of hard currency. The political and economic chaos engulfing Venezuela has caused oil production to decline, and shipments to Cuba are running 13 percent below last year and 37 percent below their peak in 2008. The resulting energy shortage has forced Cuba to impose drastic conservation measures and pushed the economy into a mild recession last year.

In September, Cuba's economic woes were exacerbated when Hurricane Irma came ashore, inflicting several billion dollars' worth of damage as it tracked along the north coast before turning toward the Florida Keys. The storm hit some of Cuba's most lucrative tourist resorts, cutting into the one sector of the economy that has enjoyed sustained growth in recent years. Most of the major hotels predicted they would reopen for business quickly (<http://en.granma.cu/tourism/2017-09-27/cuba-will-be-ready-for-tourist-high-season-without-a-trace-of-hurricane-irma>), but the storm did enormous damage to the power grid, leaving large swaths of central Cuba in darkness.



A young man fishes on the shores of Regla as commuters cross the bay by ferry to Havana, March 14, 2016 (AP photo by Ramon Espinosa).

Popular discontent over the economy and impatience with the slow pace of improvement are both running high. In an independent opinion poll (<http://www.norc.org/Research/Projects/Pages/survey-of-cuban-public-opinion.aspx>) taken in late 2016, 46 percent of Cubans rated the nation's economic performance as poor or very poor, 35 percent rated it as fair, and only 13 percent rated it as good or excellent. Solid majorities reported not seeing much economic progress in recent years for the country or themselves, and they had low expectations for the future.

The economy is not Cubans' only source of anxiety. With the election of Donald Trump, Havana's relations with Washington entered a period of uncertainty. In his speech to Cuban Americans (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/06/16/remarks-president-trump-policy-united-states-towards-cuba>) on June 16 in Miami, Trump blasted the Cuban government as a murderous dictatorship, echoing the Cold War rhetoric of regime change. Although the new economic sanctions Trump imposed were surprisingly mild—the result of intense lobbying by the U.S. business community—the prospects for improved relations and expanded commercial ties look dim in the near term. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's decision to withdraw nonessential personnel (https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/reports-us-to-slash-embassy-staff-in-cuba-warn-travelers-of-hotel-attacks/2017/09/29/c0bf9d94-a523-11e7-b14f-f41773cd5a14_story.html) from the U.S. embassy in Havana in the wake of mysterious health problems among nearly two dozen staff and family members, the expulsion of most Cuban diplomats from Washington, and the State Department's decision to issue a travel advisory warning U.S. residents not to travel to Cuba, pushed relations to a low point not seen since December 2014, when then-President Barack Obama's normalization process began.

Cuba's transition comes at a delicate political moment.

Cuba's new post-Castro leaders will therefore face an imposing array of problems, and they will have to answer to a population that has become more vocal in expressing its discontent. The expansion of internet access, the ability of Cubans to travel abroad without state permission and Raul Castro's own calls for more open debate about Cuba's problems have fueled an increasingly robust public sphere.

As the leadership transition gets under way, First Vice President Miguel Diaz-Canel is the likely successor to Raul Castro as president, but little is known about this party veteran's real views. Until recently, he kept a low profile, but even as his public visibility has increased, his speeches have simply reiterated well-established policy, providing little insight into his own thinking.

A Tightly Controlled Process

On its face, the basic structure of November's local elections is reasonably democratic, but opposition candidates face formidable obstacles. First, no overt campaigning is allowed, so it is hard for candidates to run on an alternative policy agenda. In the absence of a formal campaign, people learn about candidates by word of mouth.

Moreover, no political parties other than the Communist Party are legal. Although most local candidates are not party members and the law prohibits the party from endorsing candidates, it has the ability to influence elections by mobilizing its members against candidates it regards as dissidents. That's what it did in 2015, when two dissidents nominated by their neighbors as candidates for municipal councils in Havana were both easily defeated in the general election.

This year, though, a coalition of dissident groups known as Otro 18 (<http://alternativacuba2018.com/project/otro-18/>) has come together to mount a challenge to the establishment by fielding opposition candidates. Candidates for the municipal assemblies are directly nominated and elected by their constituents, so Otro 18 recruited more than 170 people to seek nomination. Municipalities are divided into election districts, each of which elects an assembly delegate. Election districts are divided into neighborhoods, which hold public meetings to propose, discuss and vote by show of hands to select their neighborhood's nominee. The law requires at least two candidates for each delegate seat and voting is by secret ballot in closed voting booths.

The appearance of so many opposition candidates this year has generated real concern among Cuba's leaders. As Diaz-Canel explained in a speech (<http://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/cuba/article170069877.html>) to a private meeting of Communist Party members last February, "If they become delegates, they could reach the Municipal Assembly...and it would be a way to legitimize the counterrevolution." The party, he assured his audience, would not stand idly by. "We are taking steps to discredit all that. In this battle, which we are already fighting, we are going to be involved in this whole process."



Cuban Vice President Miguel Diaz-Canel, left, President Raul Castro and Vice President Jose Ramon Machado Ventura watch the May Day parade at Revolution Square, Havana, May 1, 2016 (AP photo by Ramon Espinosa).

After the municipal elections, Cuba will hold elections for the provincial assemblies and the National Assembly. Expected to take place in January 2018, these will be even more tightly controlled. Candidacy commissions composed of leaders from the trade unions, the women's federation and the neighborhood-level mass organization, the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, produce slates of nominees with just one candidate per seat. Voters only have the choice of voting yes or no. Since the direct election of provincial delegates and National Assembly deputies began in 1993, no nominee has been defeated, though some nationally prominent leaders have received more "no" votes

(<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/laps.12017/full>) than the average candidate, which could be interpreted as a sign of popular discontent with the status quo.

When the new National Assembly meets early next year, it will elect the president, vice presidents and the 31-member Council of State from among its members. At the highest echelons of power, the overlap between state and party is nearly total. Almost everyone in the National Assembly is a member of the Communist Party. Fifteen of the 17 members of the party's Political Bureau are also members of the Council of State, and all five Council of State vice presidents are members of the Political Bureau.

A Favorite Emerges

As first vice president, Diaz-Canel is the constitutional successor to the presidency. Barring unforeseen events, he is likely to be Cuba's next president. In recent months, he has assumed a higher public profile, meeting with foreign dignitaries and presiding at political ceremonies around the island. Born in 1960, he represents the ascension to leadership of the generation born after the triumph of the revolution. His rise exemplifies Raul Castro's commitment to institutionality, promoting people on the basis of experience and merit, as opposed to his brother Fidel's penchant for elevating promising but inexperienced young people to top positions for which they were often unprepared—people Raul derisively called “test-tube leaders (<http://www.juventudrebelde.cu/cuba/2007-02-25/dialoga-raul-con-participantes-en-el-pleno-del-comite-nacional-de-la-ujc>).”

Some Cuban dissidents insist that Castro will find some excuse to turn over power to his son (<http://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/cuba/article170069877.html>), Alejandro Castro. Alejandro serves on his father's personal staff and was responsible for negotiating the agreement to normalize relations with the United States announced on Dec. 17, 2014. But he is only a colonel in the Ministry of the Interior. He is not a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, let alone the Political Bureau, where the key decisions are made. Nor is he among the 612 deputies in the National Assembly. For Raul to catapult him into the presidency would demolish the institutional norms Raul has spent the past decade building.

Diaz-Canel was long thought to be fairly moderate, but a leaked video of him speaking in private to Communist Party members revealed a more conservative side.

Diaz-Canel, by contrast, is a seasoned politician who rose through the ranks (<http://www.americasquarterly.org/content/cuba-new-leaders>) of the Communist Party, serving as first secretary in his home province of Villa Clara for a decade and as first secretary in Holguin, a province in eastern Cuba, for six years. He joined the Communist Party's Central Committee in 1991, and the Political Bureau in 2003. At 43, he was the youngest person ever named to the party's highest body. In 2009, Diaz-Canel was brought to Havana to head the Ministry of Higher Education. In 2012, he was named one of several vice presidents, and he became first vice president in 2013.

In the provinces, he earned a reputation as an honest, efficient manager and an enemy of corruption.

Although his speeches tend to be flat and uninspiring, in small groups he is said to be relaxed, humorous and willing to listen. When Cuba was plagued by fuel shortages during the economic crisis of the 1990s, he abandoned his official car and security detail to ride to work on a bicycle, endearing him to his constituents.

He also appeared to be more tolerant than the average apparatchik. He was a Beatles fan in the 1970s, a time when their music was banned as an expression of decadent bourgeois culture. In Villa Clara, he defended Cuba's first LGBT club and cultural center, El Mejunje, against critics who wanted to shut it down. "I think this place is an example of his broad mind and forward-thinking," said El Mejunje's owner (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-22066591>), Ramon Silverio.

Shortly after Diaz-Canel was named first vice president, a controversy erupted over the censorship of an independent yet generally pro-government blog, La Joven Cuba, run by students at the University of Matanzas. Diaz-Canel weighed in on the side of the students (<http://chiringadecuba.com/2013/05/07/la-prensa-cubana-silencia-la-critica-al-silencio-de-miguel-diaz-canel-vid/>) and in favor of allowing open debate online for the simple reason that in the long run, the state could not control it anyway. "Today, with the development of information technology, social networking, computing, and the internet, banning something is almost an impossible illusion. It makes no sense," he explained. "Today, the news from all sides, good and bad, manipulated and true, and half-true, circulates on the networks, reaches people, people are aware of it." He criticized Cuba's official press for its unwillingness to tackle real problems, and he posed for a photograph with the student bloggers.

A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing?

This history, plus the fact that Raul Castro has confidence in him, seemed to place Diaz-Canel squarely in the camp of party moderates—until someone leaked a video of him speaking to a closed meeting of Communist Party members in Havana last February. In a lengthy presentation, he recited the full litany (<http://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/cuba/article168657017.html>) of conservative positions. He echoed the familiar charge that dissidents are all mercenaries paid by the United States. And he also extended his attack to independent voices that advocate reforming the socialist system rather than replacing it: Cuba Emprende (<http://www.cubaemprendefoundation.org>), a project of the Catholic Church and the Miami-based Cuba Study Group that provides business education to would-be entrepreneurs; OnCuba (<http://oncubamagazine.com/en/>), a media company based in Miami, but with press credentials in Havana; and Cuba Posible (<https://cubaposible.com/>), a self-described laboratory of ideas that publishes a wide variety of social, economic and political analysis online.

Contrary to his earlier defense of online debate, Diaz-Canel promised the audience of party faithful that OnCuba would be silenced (<http://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/cuba/article168657017.html>). "We will shut it down it. We are going to close its digital platform," he said. "And let the scandal ensue. Let

them say we censure, it's fine. Everyone censors." Eight months later, however, OnCuba still has its Cuban press credentials.



People access a public Wi-Fi hotspot using their smartphones, Havana, Jan. 6, 2017

(AP photo by Desmond Boylan).

Diaz-Canel also took aim at a key element of the economic reform program, the expansion of Cuba's private sector, declaring elements of it subversive. He even seemed to call into question the wisdom of normalizing relations with Washington. He described Obama's March 2016 visit to Havana, the high point of the normalization process, as a "subversive project," part of Washington's new strategy to bring about "the destruction of the revolution"—a line that echoed conservative criticism that erupted right after the trip, ignited by Fidel Castro himself (<http://en.granma.cu/cuba/2016-03-28/brother-obama>).

Did the pirated video reveal Diaz-Canel to be a wolf in sheep's clothing—a party hard-liner who had been masquerading as a moderate? Or was he a sheep who had to growl to reassure the wolves that he was up to the job of leading the pack? His real sympathies will not become apparent until he takes office, but the future of Cuba's reform process and its relations with the United States depend on them.

The Pace of Economic Reform

If Diaz-Canel does follow Raul Castro into the presidency, he will have to maintain a delicate balancing act among the diverse voices and contending interests that comprise Cuba's political elite. As the moment of succession draws near, disagreements within the leadership, often visible as shadows on the wall of the cave, have begun breaking into the open. Indeed, the leak of the Diaz-Canel video may itself be a symptom of the internecine jockeying underway.

Raul Castro's plans to modernize Cuba's economy faced political opposition from the outset (<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/668226>). Within the political elite, resistance came from people who feared that concessions to the market were a slippery slope leading to capitalist restoration or even regime collapse, as happened in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Ideological concerns were reinforced by self-interest. If economic management was decentralized and nonstrategic economic activity devolved to the private sector, the role of the central government bureaucracy would be much diminished. As central administrative structures contract, so will the number of bureaucrats and the privileges available to those who remain.

In early 2017, ideological hard-liners launched a vitriolic campaign (<http://www.havanatimes.org/?p=127288>) against "centrism," which they derided as the belief that one could combine the positive attributes of socialism and the positive attributes of capitalism to create a third way. Their critique echoed Fidel Castro, who issued this warning (<http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/2005/ing/f171105i.html>) in 2005: "Some thought that socialism could be constructed with capitalist methods. That is one of the great historical errors."

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Yet the economic reform program Raul launched in 2011 focuses on expanding private enterprise, limiting state ownership to strategic sectors of the economy, allowing greater sway for market forces, boosting productivity with wage incentives, and attracting foreign investment—capitalist methods all. The anti-centrist polemics targeted some of the same people Diaz-Canel condemned as counterrevolutionary in February, but it was hard not to draw the conclusion that the real target was the reform process itself. At first, the attacks on "centrists" and "social democrats" were confined to unofficial blogs. But in June and July, the party's official newspaper, Granma, ran several opinion columns (<http://en.granma.cu/cuba/2017-07-10/is-it-possible-to-meld-the-best-of-capitalism-and-socialism>) endorsing the anti-centrism campaign.

Speaking to the National Assembly in June, Raul Castro himself criticized the private sector (<http://en.granma.cu/cuba/2017-07-17/we-will-continue-to-advance-along-the-path-freely-chosen-by-our-people>) for “deviations from established policy” and “illegalities,” including tax evasion and black-marketeering. He insisted that private enterprise would remain a permanent part of the economic landscape, but he warned of new regulations to come. The other shoe dropped on Aug. 1, when the government announced that it was temporarily suspending (<http://www.granma.cu/cuba/2017-08-01/por-la-ruta-de-la-actualizacion-01-08-2017-00-08-07>) the issuance of new licenses for some private occupations, including the most popular: private restaurants and bed-and-breakfast rentals. A number of successful, high-profile businesses were closed (<http://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/cuba/article165075352.html>) for allegedly expanding into areas not authorized by their licenses.

The accusations against the private sector were undoubtedly true. With no access to wholesale markets for supplies or equipment, entrepreneurs were often forced to trade on the black market. Tax rates were so high and the tax system so rudimentary that businesses felt compelled, and able, to evade taxes in order to stay open. The government set the rates unreasonably high knowing full well that people would only declare a portion of their income, creating a vicious circle of extortionate rates and rampant evasion. As Cuban economist Ricardo Torres pointed out (<http://progresosemanal.us/20170817/aqui-otra-vez/>), the problems with the private sector might be real, but part of the blame lay with government policies that failed to provide an environment in which businesses could operate successfully within the law.

Raul Castro has been able to balance the need for economic reform with the fear of change prevalent within key sectors of the political elite. His formula is best summed up in his oft-repeated declaration that the reforms will continue, “without haste, but without pause.” Without haste, to reassure those who worry about the political risks that change entails; without pause, to reassure those who are convinced that the greatest political risk is failing to reform.

Castro, who has been the principal public advocate for updating the economy, has the authority to forge consensus within the leadership and push ahead despite the doubts of conservatives. But even he has encountered significant passive resistance from the bureaucracy. Reporting to the Seventh Party Congress in 2016, Castro revealed that only 21 percent (<http://en.granma.cu/cuba/2016-04-18/the-development-of-the-national-economy-along-with-the-struggle-for-peace-and-our-ideological-resolve-constitute-the-partys-principal-missions>) of the 313 economic guidelines adopted in 2011 at the Sixth Party Congress had been fully implemented. “The main obstacle we have faced,” Castro declared, “is the issue of outdated mentalities, which give rise to an attitude of inertia or lack of confidence in the future.”

The Challenge Ahead

Will Diaz-Canel, or any president who lacks the legitimacy of belonging to the revolution’s “historical generation,” be able to hold together the fraying elite consensus for reform and force the bureaucracy to

implement it? Conservatives can point to Cuba's immediate economic travails due to Hurricane Irma and the crisis in Venezuela to argue that now is not the time to risk further dislocations by pushing reforms. Reformers can point to the widespread popular discontent with the economy's anemic performance and the expectations that the reform process has raised—expectations yet to be met.

Luckily for him, Diaz-Canel, if he indeed becomes president, will not have to face this challenge alone. Raul Castro will still be First Secretary of the Communist Party until 2021, leading the Political Bureau and setting policy direction. Even after he steps down from that post, he will likely retain considerable political authority if he chooses to exercise it, like Deng Xiaoping did in China. But for the first time in a generation, someone other than a Castro will be the public face of the regime. It will be the new president's leadership that determines the regime's success in building a new legitimacy based on economic performance rather than on the heroic revolutionary deeds of his predecessors.

William M. LeoGrande is professor of government at American University in Washington, D.C., and the co-author with Peter Kornbluh of "Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations between Washington and Havana" (<http://uncpress.unc.edu/books/13863.html>).

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