

Cuba's New Generation Takes the Helm With an Immediate Test: the Economy

William M. LeoGrande | Tuesday, April 24, 2018

For a man stepping down after half a century at the apex of Cuba's government—first as the island's longtime defense minister and vice president, then as president—Raul Castro was in good humor last week, looking relaxed and happy as he handed the presidency

(<http://www.granma.cu/elecciones-en-cuba-2017-2018/2018-04-20/el-partido-comunista-apoyara-y-respaldara-resueltamente-al-nuevo-presidente-video-20-04-2018-04-04-18>) to his designated successor, Miguel Diaz-Canel. Departing from the prepared text of his valedictory speech in Havana, Castro cracked jokes, reminisced about the revolution and quipped that he planned to travel more, “since I'm supposed to have less work to do.”

There were no big surprises at the National Assembly meeting that installed Diaz-Canel as the first non-Castro to lead Cuba in six decades. Raul Castro did not decide at the last minute to stay in office, or sneak his son Alejandro into the presidency, as fevered commentary out of Miami kept predicting (<http://indicepolitico.com/el-verdadero-poder-lo-tiene-alejandro-castro-hijo-de-raul-guillermo-farinas/>).

Instead, the central theme of the conclave was continuity (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/23394/cuba-after-castro-the-coming-elections-and-a-historic-changing-of-the-guard>). Diaz-Canel began his inaugural speech with a paean to Raul Castro's leadership and a promise to continue his policies, especially the “updating” of the economy, which Diaz-Canel lauded (<http://www.granma.cu/elecciones-en-cuba-2017-2018/2018-04-20/asumo-la-responsabilidad-con-la-conviccion-de-que-todos-los-revolucionarios-seremos-fieles-al-ejemplar-legado-de-fidel-y-raul-video-20-04-2018-04-04-02>) as bringing “profound and essential structural and conceptual changes” to Cuba's socialist model. He declared that Cuban foreign policy would “remain unchanged,” listing the restoration of diplomatic relations with the United States as one of Castro's achievements. It was a signal that the Cuban leadership still sees value in improving relations with Washington, despite the fact that ties have deteriorated (<https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/reasons-why-trump-should-change-cuba-policy-as-castro-prepares-to-leave-office>) since President Donald Trump took office.

Diaz-Canel's professed fealty to Castro's policy agenda has led some commentators to argue that the presidential succession is much ado about nothing (<https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2018/04/cuba-now-has-a-non-castro-president-but-dont-expect-huge-changes.html>). But that view underestimates the significance of the generational



A poster of Fidel Castro and Raul Castro in Havana, Cuba, April 18, 2018 (AP photo by Ramon Espinosa).

transition from the “historicos” who made the Cuban revolution to Diaz-Canel’s generation born after it. The new leaders take office in the face of economic distress and popular impatience that will test their mettle immediately, revealing who is up to the job and who is not.

To allay his fellow citizens’ concerns about the presidential succession, Diaz-Canel pledged that Castro would continue to “lead the most important decisions for the present and the future of the nation,” a promise that drew prolonged applause in the National Assembly. His declaration was reminiscent (<http://www.granma.cu/granmad/2008/02/24/nacional/artic36.html>) of Raul Castro’s inaugural speech in 2008, when he promised to consult his brother Fidel on all major issues—a new president hoping to share his predecessor’s mantle of legitimacy.

Both Diaz-Canel and Castro reiterated that the Communist Party would retain its political monopoly. “We do not intend to modify the irrevocable socialist character of our political and social system,” Castro declared, “nor the leading role of the Communist Party of Cuba, as organized vanguard and highest leading force of society and the state.”

Diaz-Canel stressed the theme of unity, within the party and among the broader public, while promising a more collective and participatory leadership style—a necessary virtue for a president who lacks the inherent authority of being a Castro. Harkening back to Cuba’s struggle for independence, Diaz-Canel called unity the nation’s “most valuable and sacred force” for the defense of its sovereignty.

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He repeatedly asserted the need for greater popular participation in government and a government more responsive to the popular will. Serving the people’s interests was the government’s “raison d’être,” he declared, while he asked for support in his new role not just from state officials, but from the entire population “without whom it is impossible to successfully advance.”

A more responsive government would certainly help shore up the regime’s flagging public support (<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/668226>). At the local level, in particular, the failure of government to resolve basic problems of everyday life has produced cynicism and disdain (<https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/sep/05/havana-cuba-rubbish-strewn-streets-spark-anger-failing-city>) among many Cubans. If Diaz-Canel’s rhetoric signals that he recognizes this problem, the central government might even devolve more authority—and more resources—to local governments, finally giving them the ability to tackle these issues.

In his address to the National Assembly, Raul Castro also presented a snapshot of the new Cuban leadership’s

composition, offering the clearest explanation yet (<http://www.granma.cu/elecciones-en-cuba-2017-2018/2018-04-20/miembros-del-consejo-de-estado-electos-en-la-ix-legislatura-de-la-asamblea-nacional-del-poder-popular-20-04-2018-02-04-01>) of the succession process he envisions. Castro and Jose Machado Ventura will remain the Communist Party's first and second secretaries, respectively, until the next party congress in 2021, in order to assure "a secure transition and apprenticeship" for the new president. After that, Diaz-Canel, if he does a good job, will become head of the party, as well as the government. When his second term as president concludes, Diaz-Canel, like Raul before him, will have another three years as party leader to assure that the next presidential transition goes smoothly. It is not yet known who his successor will be. The new first vice president, 72-year-old Salvador Valdes Mesa, is unlikely to serve more than one term in that post.

In line with the theme of generational transition, the average age of National Assembly members decreased to 49; 88 percent of its members now were born after the revolution. Even in the Council of State, the average age was just 54, with 77 percent born after 1959. Women comprise more than half the National Assembly and almost half the Council of State; Cubans of African and mixed-race descent make up almost half of each, including two Afro-Cuban vice presidents.

The new Council of State appears to signal an attempt to separate party and state functions. The party would still decide the strategic direction of policy, but would refrain from interfering in policy implementation by the government—interference that Castro has identified as a problem. In 2013, 13 of the 19 members of the party's Political Bureau also sat on the Council. The overlap is now just nine. Apart from Castro's and Machado Ventura's departures, which were expected, the first secretary of the party in Havana, Mercedes Lopez Acea, was also removed, along with the chief of staff of the armed forces, Gen. Alvaro Lopez Miera.

Most surprising is the departure of Marino Murillo, chair of the commission overseeing the implementation of the economic reforms—perhaps a casualty of Castro's displeasure at the slow pace of the changes (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cuba-economy/cubas-communist-party-admits-errors-slowdown-in-reforms-idUSKBN1H32CJ>). Whether Murillo will retain his position as a vice president of the Council of Ministers won't be clear for certain until July, when the National Assembly reconvenes for Diaz-Canel to present his picks for a new Council of Ministers.

Castro hinted that the changes unveiled this summer could be far-reaching, as they were when he replaced 22 of Fidel's 24 ministers in his first year as president. Castro advised the incumbents to prepare their arguments for staying. The breadth of the personnel changes in July will reveal more about Diaz-Canel's priorities than any of the speeches last week. The Assembly will also take up a package of constitutional amendments that are rumored to include changes to the electoral process, downsizing the 605-member National Assembly, and providing a legal foundation for private businesses.

But the significance of all the personnel changes and even the constitutional amendments pale in comparison to the urgent need to jump-start the economy, as the speeches by both Castro and Diaz-Canel implicitly acknowledge. Cuba's younger generations are not just tired of octogenarian leadership; they are tired of economic hardship (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cuba-youth/cubas-young-see-bleak-future-many-want-to-leave-idUSBRE93R01820130428>).

Miguel Diaz-Canel's ascension to the presidency represents a major step in the generational transition of leadership in the Cuban state. But nothing will improve the prospects for a smooth transition more than a growing economy that finally raises the standard of living and gives young Cubans hope for the future.

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