



Retooling Canada's Cuba policy for the post-Castro era

by Cristina Warren

Fidel Castro, 81, officially stepped down as president of Cuba's Councils of State and Ministers in February 2008. He remains head of the Communist party as its first secretary and keeps his presence felt through occasional appearances on edited videos and photos and by writing extensive editorials. Although it is unclear how much decision-making influence Fidel continues to hold – he recently wrote that he's consulted on all important matters – it is becoming increasingly clear that a new, distinct era under the new president, his brother Raúl Castro, 76, has begun.

Raúl acknowledged in his July 26 speech, the official anniversary of the start of the Cuban revolution, that the economy needed “structural and conceptual changes” in order to raise productivity and efficiency. In effect, he launched a national debate on Cuba's domestic problems and opened the door to a series of reforms.

More recently, Raúl indicated in a February 24 speech that Cuba had been “permanently opened to free debate,” later stating that “the best solutions can come from a profound exchange of differing opinions.” He also reiterated an earlier promise to “reduce excessive prohibitions and regulations,” recognizing the inefficiencies due to the “enormous amounts of meetings, coordination, permissions, and conciliations, provisions, rules and regulations.”

Reforms were recently put in place to reduce restrictions on home ownership; sales of computers, DVDs, cell phones, video players, and other appliances; as well as access to hotels previously off-limits to Cubans. Raúl has promised a progressive, gradual and prudent revaluation of the peso, and has also committed to address the phenomenon of the dual currency, first introduced by Fidel in 1993. Small steps in this direction include the recent lifting of restrictions that put ceilings on how much waged workers can make. Major restructuring of Cuba's unproductive agricultural sector is soon expected, as are easing of restrictions on travel by Cubans outside the island.

While so far minor, and focused on strengthening socialism and preserving the Revolution rather than representing a political opening, these reforms should not be discounted given their important symbolic break with fidelista orthodoxy. They mark the beginning of a slow, tentative process of change on the island, which countries like Canada should seek to nurture.

Understanding Raúl

Raúl Castro's delegatory management style, as well as his emphasis on order and well-functioning and streamlined institutions, contrasts sharply with his brother's micro-management and improvisational approach to governance, through which he imposed his will. However, Raúl's choice of appointments to the Councils of State and Ministers in February highlights that the regime remains inherently conservative and focused on control.

A clearer picture of the nature of the regime under Raúl will be revealed over the course of the next year as the results of an anticipated institutional restructuring and reshuffling in the composition of government signaled by Raúl become known. Furthermore, it was recently announced that Cuba will convene its first Communist Party congress since 1997 sometime during the second half of 2009 — a gathering that could chart the island's more distant political future.

The leadership's hints of greater tolerance appear to extend only to the economy and toward reforms aimed directly at improving the standard of living. Alternative political parties and pro-democracy movements present on the island, which are committed to non-violence and a peaceful transition to a democracy, remain taboo. Despite the government's signing in February of the UN covenants on civil and political rights and on economic, social and cultural rights, police continue to arrest and harass independent journalists and dissidents, who are accused of working as agents for the U.S. government and the CIA to destabilize the Revolution. Of the 75 arrested in a major crackdown in March 2003, 55 remain in prison (20 have been released for medical reasons, close to the end of their sentences).

An article titled, "There will be no space for subversion in Cuba," recently appeared on the website of Cuba's state newspaper, *Granma*, and left no room for doubt about the government's view of political opposition. "There is no space," it reads, "for adversaries, fifth columnists, or internal mercenaries." In the government's most recent clash with dissidents on April 21, the police broke up a peaceful demonstration in Havana by the Ladies in White group, who were demanding the release of their husbands, brothers and fathers jailed in the crackdown of 2003.

Canadian options

Clearly, Cuba is at an important crossroads. This begs the question of how best Canada should respond with its policy.

While the reform process recently initiated by Raúl can be viewed as a positive development, it is unclear where the changes currently underway will lead. Although the unstable equilibrium on the island is creating new dynamics for positive change, it is also creating new possibilities for conflict. These need to be better understood in order to help shed light on new options for Canada to help manage and transform change so as to more effectively facilitate sustainable socio-economic development and peaceful co-existence among Cubans and long-term democratization on the island.

Potential triggers of conflict include:

- The failure of the cautious reform process currently underway to substantially improve the livelihood of Cubans, aggravating an already fragile socio-economic situation and leading to growing dissent among the population, including among a younger generation of Cubans, many of whom feel alienated from the current political system.
- A growing conflict between the government and independent civil society forces on the island whose rising calls for peaceful political and economic transition are likely to continue to be dealt with harshly by Cuban authorities.
- An escalation of the conflict between Cuba and the United States, the latter not wavering in its wish to see an immediate transition to democracy on the island. Following the “provisional” transfer of power to Raúl Castro, the current U.S. administration indicated that four policy goals would need to be met before it would consider a change in policy: 1) all political prisoners must be freed, 2) human rights guaranteed, 3) trade unions allowed to form, and 4) concrete moves be made toward free elections.
- A culture of intolerance for divergent political views poses a significant barrier to achieving genuine democracy, prosperity and reconciliation among Cubans. Present throughout Cuban history, the leadership style of Fidel Castro and the island’s longstanding conflict with the U.S. radicalized this culture. The effects of this culture of intolerance have contributed to a significant undercurrent of tensions among Cubans within the island as well as between Cubans inside the island and the exile community.

Canada’s current government is well placed to play a helpful and constructive role at this juncture in facilitating peaceful, sustainable and genuine democratization in Cuba. Canada has excellent strategic assets that may pay important dividends in Cuba’s emerging new context. Canada has good relations and open channels of communication with the U.S. and Cuban governments. It also has an extensive presence in Cuba and a reputation for stability, fairness and international credibility as a peacemaker. It provides a positive example inside the island as a democratic, capitalist, prosperous, tolerant and socially progressive country that works well.

Canada’s effective approach to managing and reaping many benefits from its longstanding and, not completely unlike Cuba, historically complicated relationship with the United States, may provide an inspiring example and model for Cubans as they seek to find solutions to their mounting economic, social and political problems.

In working toward ensuring sustainable peace, prosperity and genuine democratization in Cuba, two distinct roles for Canada come to mind: 1) Canada can be a direct interface with Cuban authorities and civil society, and 2) Canada can be involved within the international community, including through hemispheric fora and bodies such as the Organization of American States (OAS).

While long-term peace and stability in Cuba will require a sustainable development plan, it will also require a change in Cuban political culture and a real commitment to human rights and national reconciliation. Equally important will be working toward laying the

groundwork for a genuinely democratic institutional structure that will allow Cubans to address their differences, coexist peacefully over the long-term, manage relations with the United States and meet the challenges of globalization.

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