

Understanding Cuba

EDITED BY ELIZABETH BRYAN

The Cuban government's announcement in July 2006 that Fidel Castro had temporarily ceded power to his brother Raúl took many observers by surprise. While the Cuban government has not confirmed the details of Fidel's illness, it is assumed to be grave. Questions regarding the nature of the future leadership of the country, the possibility for reform, and the expectations of the Cuban people are all of critical importance, as are the attitudes of the Cuban American community and the reaction of the U.S. government. On Thursday, December 14, 2006, the Latin American Program hosted the seminar "Understanding Cuba" to shed light on these questions and discuss the implications of internal and external dynamics for the future direction of the country.

Discussing the current situation in Cuba, *William LeoGrande* (American University) argued that Fidel Castro's extended illness has given him the opportunity to "test drive" the succession machinery that he has been building for the last decade and has given Raúl Castro a chance to practice being president. However, Raúl has chosen to keep an extremely low profile perhaps due to deference to Fidel, LeoGrande speculated. He added that Raúl's absence from the public eye is also likely due to his personal leadership style, which could suggest that Raúl has not yet recognized the importance of the symbolic role of being president.

The extended succession also gives other leaders an opportunity to begin working together without Fidel there to resolve conflicts, LeoGrande said. Under Fidel's rule, he was the principal decision-maker and political power stemmed from proximity to him. However, LeoGrande predicted that once Fidel

is gone, decision-making by the new leadership team will be much more collective since no one, including Raúl, has the same degree of authority. The challenges confronting the new team involve figuring out a process for resolving disagreements and making decisions stick. LeoGrande suggested this new leadership style may lead to the reemergence of disagreement about core policies such as economic and political reforms.

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William LeoGrande

Although popular attitude is difficult to gauge, many observers feel that Cubans want a peaceful and gradual change. Therefore, LeoGrande argued, the successors also must address the Cuban public's pent up expectation



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of change while reassuring the public that peace will be maintained. LeoGrande predicted that initially the successor team would avoid drastic changes, focusing instead on maintaining unity and continuity of government. However, LeoGrande warned that the government must also be willing to undertake changes on the economic front to build a legitimacy of its own. Alternatively, if the new government is paralyzed by indecision it risks disappointing the public's expectation of change.

LeoGrande stressed that the succession challenge in Cuba is not just about the succession of the presidency, but is more about the succession of the founding generation to the next generation of leaders. This aspect of the succession has been underway for the better part of two decades as Fidel and his team have been promoting young people into leadership positions, to give them the experience to run the coun-

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try when the founding generation is gone. Since the third congress of the Cuban Communist Party in the 1980s, a number of founding generation leaders have been removed from their positions in the Political



Margaret E. Crahan, Dorothy Epstein Professor of Latin American History at Hunter College and The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, moderated the event.



Lisandro Pérez

Bureau of the party and the Central Committee and the average age in these institutions continues to decline. Today, the average age of the National Assembly, which is the largest collection of the leadership, is around 43. There have also been a number of younger people who have been promoted to senior leadership positions, including the Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque, who is 41 years old, and Carlos Lage, Vice President of the Council of State, who is 55.

Discussing the position of the armed forces as a result of the succession and Raúl's expanded leadership role, *Hal Klepak* (Royal Military College of Canada) argued that the armed forces are ideally situated for a number of reasons. First, the power transition has not been marked by any conflict or turmoil, and the military has every intention of ensuring a peaceful succession. Second, Raúl, who is considered a hero within the armed forces due to his unquestionable valor and loyalty, now has the opportunity to show his mettle more widely and place people with whom he has great confidence in positions of considerable influence. Third, while they have yielded to political forces for many years, the armed forces now are being called upon to fulfill their historic mission to defend and carry on the revolution.

Although Fidel and Raúl have insisted on the Communist Party's continuing role, Klepak asserted that the military is unquestionably the most important institution in the transition, due to a number of advantages. The military not only brings historic legitimacy but also enjoys relative popularity, a sense of relevance, and a sense of success compared to the

Communist Party. In addition, the military is extremely flexible, having taken on a number of different roles since the revolution that include managing important sectors of the economy. It is also independent, due to its access to foreign currency and fuel. The armed forces are also mobile, fit, and ubiquitous, despite being cut dramatically in recent years. While the military need not play a central role in the transition, Klepak said, these advantages make it a powerful asset for any power group.

Despite the many advantages the military enjoys, it also faces several challenges, Klepak added. Unlike the case in other government institutions, generational promotion has not taken place in the armed forces. Moreover, due to a size reduction, the armed forces



Hal Klepak

are not as capable of dealing with crises such as natural disasters, and have even been required to bring reserve forces into partial mobilization.

Klepak added that Raúl is viewed as a good administrator and a reformer when the achievements of the revolution, particularly national independence, are not in question. He argued that the military would be willing to support reforms that do not threaten Cuba's independence. With regard to officer

corps' opinion, Klepak remarked that there is a fear that a "happy transition" scenario will give excessive confidence to the conservatives within the party and slow the process of reform. There is also a concern that Raúl may be required to show strength before reform, which would further disappoint widespread demands for reform.

Focusing on the future direction of the economy under new leadership, *Ted Henken* (Baruch College, City University of New York) remarked that foreigners are often surprised by Cubans' ability to maintain a certain standard of living despite extremely low wages and a rationing system that fails to satisfy their basic needs. He argued that Cubans' ability to sustain themselves is partly due to massive state subsidies, including housing and health, but mostly due to Cubans' entrepreneurship and their involvement in the informal economy.

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Henken argued that Fidel Castro has been both "a loaves and fishes miracle worker" and "a power-obsessed ideologue," demanding revolutionary unity and egalitarianism, railing against corruption and, most recently, the new rich and illicit enrichment. The central question, Henken said, is how Raúl will differ from Fidel in his position on the economy.

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Although many analysts view Raúl as an economic pragmatist who has not had the opportunity to put his views into practice, Henken noted that in the past Raúl has also taken a hardline position. In a speech to the Central Committee of the Communist Party in

1. Brothers to the Rescue is a Miami-based organization strongly opposed to the Cuban government. In February 1996, ignoring warnings by Cuban and U.S. authorities two Brothers to the Rescue planes were shot down by the Cuban Air Force while dropping anti-Castro leaflets over Havana. [Ed.]
2. The Helms-Burton Act of March 1996, formally known as the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act, is a federal law which strengthens the U.S. embargo against Cuba. This measure was passed largely in response to the Brothers to the Rescue shootdown. [Ed.]



March 1996 in the aftermath of the Brothers to the Rescue shoot-down¹ and the passage of the Helms-Burton law in the United States,² Raúl spoke out against illegal self employment and pushed for greater state control over the economy. This speech quashed many independent and reform-minded academics, and was followed by the purging of many of these reformers from the Centro de Estudios sobre América (CEA). In this sense, Henken cautioned that Raúl's position on economic policy is more unpredictable than many analysts assume.

Henken added that Raúl has more policy leeway because there is less pressure for economic reform due to the success of several industries such as tourism and nickel, foreign direct investment, and aid from Venezuela. Major economic reforms after the fall of the Soviet Union (between 1990 and 1993) were undertaken out of necessity and were either frozen or stalled in 1996. However, echoing LeoGrande's warning, Henken argued that Raúl and the successor team will have to address pressure

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for change arising from the Cuban people. He predicted that Cubans would be patient regarding political reform if they are given more freedom in the economic realm. He added that change may be slow, as Raúl and others in the leadership team are not likely to depart from past economic policies while Fidel is alive.

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Regarding the attitude of the Cuban American community towards the situation in Cuba, *Lisandro Pérez* (Florida International University) argued that it is important to discuss the Cuban American community in the context of its strong influence on U.S. policy toward Cuba over the last 20 years. Pérez argued



Ted Henken

that since the news of the succession first surfaced, there has been more movement for change in Miami than in Washington, D.C. or Havana, as Cuban Americans are beginning to recognize the sturdiness of the Castro government. This realization, Pérez said, has set into motion Cuban Americans' reconsideration of the viability of the U.S. strategy that assumes a rapid transition following Castro's demise.

The U.S. transition strategy is based on the exile perspective of change that is predicated on the primacy of personal authority and the belief that once Castro is gone, the rest of the Cuban government will "fall like a house of cards," Pérez said. In fact, a report by the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, which is based on the assumption of a rapid transformation, details U.S. involvement in the administering of a new Cuba in all aspects of national life, from health and education to governance, justice, and the economy.³ The report even includes provisions for the administration of a national park service and the training of rangers.

The fact that Cuba has remained stable after the incapacitation of Fidel has been an unexpected and sobering event that has left many Cuban Americans feeling powerless, Pérez argued. Moreover, he stressed that the U.S. government lacks a blueprint for dealing with the process of gradual change that is unfolding on the island, due to its reliance on the

3. The Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba was formed by President George W. Bush in October 2003 to explore ways to promote democratic transition in Cuba. The Commission has since issued two reports which have largely defined U.S. Cuba policy under the Bush administration. [Ed.]

traditional Cuban American community's view of the Cuban transition—the “rupture scenario.”

Pérez added that the seeds of change that have been emerging in Miami within the last few months were planted even before recent events in Cuba. He argued that many Cuban Americans, particularly humanitarian and moderate exile groups, were strongly opposed to measures enacted by the Bush administration after the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba released its recommendations for U.S. policy toward the island. These measures, influenced by earlier exiles with political clout in Washington and who are less likely to have family in Cuba, limited contact between Cubans on and off the island, and were seen as a serious threat to the viability of the Cuban family.

Other recent events have contributed to the dynamic of change in Miami. One is the release of a report by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) on the U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID) program aimed at empowering Cuban civil society through outreach to dissident groups. Despite the millions of dollars that have been provided to NGOs and academic organizations through this program, the GAO report found that, in addition to fiscal accountability problems and questionable expenditures, there was little evidence that any assistance actually reached dissidents in Cuba. One reason cited by the report was the U.S. government's own restrictions on traveling and sending resources and money to Cuba, indicating that the restrictions are not just harmful to the Cuban family but counterproductive to the purported U.S. government agenda.

Another event that encouraged change within the Cuban American community was the release of a letter in November 2006 signed by top dissidents in Cuba, which stated that U.S. restrictions in no way helped them in their struggle for democracy on the island. Finally, in early December, an umbrella organization called *Consenso Cubano*, consisting of a broad cross-section of influential, mainstream, and even hardline exile groups, issued a statement denouncing the restrictions of both governments on the free movement of Cubans to and from Cuba. Although public opinion seems to be shifting in favor of removing the more recent travel restrictions, Pérez said it is unclear whether or not there is support within the Cuban-American community for changes in U.S. policy that go beyond this point.

Participants also addressed the possibility for new Cuba policy initiatives given the influence of a number of interest groups and the recently inaugurated 110th U.S. Congress. LeoGrande noted that since Congress approved the sale of food and medicine to Cuba in 2000, the House of Representatives has voted four times and the Senate two times to stop enforcing the travel ban on Cuba. It has never become law because Republican leaders in Congress have managed to strip these amendments from the appropriations bill, given a veto threat from the White House. While the new House and Senate are likely to vote again in favor of lifting the travel restrictions, the main question, LeoGrande said, is how the Democratic leadership will respond to the President's veto threat. He predicted that there might be a negotiated compromise between Congress and the White House that would involve some rolling back of the restrictions on travel imposed by presidential executive order rather than a full lifting of the travel ban. However, he added that if the Democrats

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decide to make this issue a priority, they could place an amendment on a “must-sign” piece of legislation.

Pérez affirmed that Congress is a much more likely setting for policy change than the White House because some members of Congress who are committed long-time opponents of the restrictions are now in leadership positions, while the Bush administration is likely to continue to be influenced by hardline Cuban-American leaders in Congress and the Cabinet. The only factor that could sway the administration is the realization that public attitudes in Miami are changing, particularly regarding the restrictions on family visits and remittances.

Although the business community is often seen as a source of pressure for change in U.S. policy, Henken noted that the United States is already in an ideal situation: The United States is Cuba's fourth largest trading partner after Venezuela, China, and Spain, and Cuba is required to pay in cash for purchases of U.S. goods. Pérez added that although many businesses are in favor of lifting the travel restrictions, U.S. policy



toward Cuba is not a priority for them like it is for the Cuban-American community, which means that Miami politics will continue to dominate the policy debate in the United States.

The U.S. military has also sought greater engagement with the Cuban military in recent years, since this would facilitate eventual crisis management. Migration is the principal area of concern, LeoGrande said. Klepak added that there is tremendous room for cooperation between the U.S. and Cuban armed forces, especially since the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR) acknowledge the U.S. military's desire for a peaceful transition in the island. Despite the fact that both sides may welcome greater military communication, *Jay Cope* (National Defense University) noted there is concern within U.S. government circles that military contact could be misinterpreted in Cuba as a weakening of U.S. policy.

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The election of many leftist governments in Latin America is another factor that may influence U.S. policy toward Cuba. Other countries in the region, particularly Venezuela, may shift U.S. policy focus away from Cuba, Pérez said. Expressing concern that the Bush administration was beginning to adopt a one-size-fits-all policy towards the left in Latin America, Henken argued that leftist countries in the region are very different and should be dealt with as such.

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The panelists also addressed the possibility that their prediction of a peaceful and gradual transition could be wrong, and that a collapse scenario could unfold in a manner similar to that of Eastern Europe. LeoGrande acknowledged this possibility, particularly given the fact that such collapse was not predicted in Eastern Europe. However, he pointed to several important differences between Cuba and Eastern Europe that make it unlikely that Cuba will follow the same path. First, Cuba had an authentic revolution after which the regime initially enjoyed overwhelming support. Second, there is at least an important minority of the population that still accords the regime residual legitimacy. Third, strong anti-U.S. nationalism also bolsters the regime. Finally, the critical dynamic of many democratic transitions in Europe and Latin America was the building of a political coalition of reformers inside and outside the regime. In the case of Cuba, while there are reformers and hardliners within the regime, there are no credible reformers outside. LeoGrande asserted that U.S. policy has drawn a distinct line between those inside and outside the regime, which further hinders the formation of such a political coalition. For these reasons, he argued that Cuba resembles more closely the evolutionary models of China and Vietnam than the rupture models of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

The country is not likely to fall into civil war, Klepak added, because many Cubans have been heavily invested in the revolutionary project and feel a sense of ownership of it. Moreover, the Cuban military fully rejects the idea that it would use force against the Cuban people, in a manner similar to Tiananmen Square. In addition, unlike in Eastern Europe, where not a single corporal, let alone general, was willing to defend the regime, the Cuban military is strongly determined to prevent the collapse scenario from occurring. Klepak said the armed forces have been reorganized since 1989 to bolster preparedness for maintaining stability through the transition, and to be ready to face any potential challenges.

Acknowledging the difficulties in predicting the future direction of Cuba, Pérez noted that many Cubans find it difficult to imagine that the current system could disappear overnight. He also questioned who would constitute agents of change in the island, noting that most Cubans consider the notion that dissidents might become the leaders of a new system to be far flung.

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