

# Castro's death creates opening for political, economic evolution in Cuba (Commentary)



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**By Jorge Luis Romeu | Special to The Post-Standard**

Cuban former President Fidel Castro died last week, at age 90. Castro held power in Cuba for almost half a century, until his brother Raul Castro took over for him in 2008, due to illness.

Castro's death triggered many world-wide demonstrations. In Miami, the Cuban exiled community in exile partied in the streets of Little Havana, celebrating the end of a Cuban era. Inside the island, the Council of State declared nine days of national mourning, forbidding activities and public events. And many world leaders, including President Barack Obama, sent their condolences, tributes of admiration for his policies, or criticisms for his poor human rights record.

How can Castro inspire so diverse feelings, among Cubans and around the world? But most importantly, what will happen after his demise, in a country that he governed with such tight grip? To provide answers we need to examine Castro's context, as well as to understand that Cuba and Cubans are no different than any other country or people. (Can the reader imagine their preferred U.S. president, sitting in the White House for half a century?)

The U.S. just had a very divisive presidential election that split the country between its two rival candidates. In Cuba, in the 1960s, Castro unexpectedly announced that he was a Marxist and would establish a socialist regime, instead of a multiparty democracy, the original plan of the revolution of 1959. Thus, Cuba also split into two rival political factions.

Anti-Castro forces sought the support of the U.S. government; and Castro's, the support of the Soviet Union. Converting our internal conflict into a Cold War affair was the worst strategic mistake Cubans have ever made: Politics stops at the water's edge. Both sides lost control of the events.

Castro shut down political parties, took over the media, jailed thousands, sent hundreds to the firing squads, took over the private sector, and encouraged the exodus of the opposition. Tens of thousands of professionals, businessmen, technicians and workers left the island because they lost their jobs or businesses, or feared they would. Such exodus had severe consequences: The strong Cuban family structure broke down, Cuba lost the contributions of hundreds of thousands of its citizens, and Castro became free to define Cuba's future course.

The U.S. then created the Cuban Embargo - the best thing that ever happened to Castro. From there on, the lack of food, clothing and everything else, much of which was previously produced in Cuba, was blamed on the embargo. And governments that admitted how human rights were violated in Cuba justified them as defensive measures of a small island, besieged by the most powerful nation in the world.

Castro's social plans and economic policies improved regions remote from large urban centers, and benefited the poorest Cubans, who then supported him strongly. But mismanagement bankrupted the country. Many projects costing millions of dollars failed because no one dared to contradict Castro's orders. Always, incompetent government ministers, party leaders or the American embargo were blamed when something went wrong. Cuba became like a company town. Its economy was 95 percent state-controlled, and falling out with the government brought about personal as well as family consequences.

In 1991, after the Cold War ended, Cuba lost its Soviet subsidies and turned to tourism from Europe and Canada. Soon after, the **Dual Currency**, with its Convertible Peso (CUC, at par with the U.S. dollar) was born. In 1994, after an agreement signed with the U.S., restrictions to emigration were relaxed. Since then, tens of thousands of young **Cubans have come to the United States**.

## The U.S. needs a good neighbor, not the security threat that Cuba was during the Cold War.

In 2008, Raul Castro became president and proposed several economic reforms: Idle land was to be rented to private farmers, more occupations for private economic activity were allowed, and visits and remittances from Cubans living abroad were increased. The old party guard and brother Fidel did not appreciate (nor did they collaborate with) the new measures.

Remittances and family visits enabled the formation of capital in CUCs. A new entrepreneurial class emerged. Today, 25 percent of the labor force is in the private sector (from less than 5 percent in the 1990s). They are paid in CUCs, while state workers are paid in Cuban Pesos (CUPs, traded 24 to a dollar). The Dual Currency has in fact created a dual citizenship.

So, what will happen now, after Fidel Castro's demise?

His passing will have a constructive effect inside Cuba. Fidel exemplified the group that came to power in 1959 and ran Cuba for 50 years. Many of them, now in their 70s and 80s, are still in high places and resist change. This group may likely lose power, now that their leader is gone.

A new generation, born after 1959, is due to take over in 2018 when Raul retires. These younger Cubans may seek a balance between providing growth and goods to improve Cuban life today, and preserving the social network created by the revolution. But they also need to provide a space for the alternative voices, and to listen, accept and act upon their real and legitimate grievances.

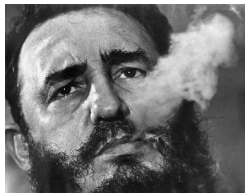
Despite **President-elect Donald Trump's recent rhetoric**, the new American administration will likely continue to allow business and tourism in Cuba, as has occurred since the early 2000s. The U.S. needs a good neighbor, not the security threat that Cuba was during the Cold War. Helping to improve Cuba's economy may facilitate a move in that direction.

Managing the Cuban human rights issues is essential. Recent experiences in nation-building have failed. Cuba will evolve, pushed by its economy and its own people, as other countries have done.

Finally, internal dissidents, who have been repressed and whose voices are ignored, also need to tread carefully. They want a space and a voice. International support is useful and necessary. But it can be portrayed as foreign interference, thus neutralizing their influence and forestalling any results.

Let's hope and strive for the best

## Fidel Castro, longtime Cuban president and ardent opponent of US, dies at age 90



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