

# Cuba, between continuity and change

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## The transition from Castro to Castro

On the 24th of February 2008, the Cuban parliament chose the 31 members of the State Advisory Council. There were no surprises. Raúl Castro was proclaimed President of the maximum state organ, and José Ramón Machado, a veteran of the revolution, will occupy the second Vicepresident's office. This suggests continuity rather than change. However, a new stage of the revolution within the established political framework has begun, the outcome of which depends upon a difficult balancing act between necessary adjustments to the system and the maintenance of unity within the regime, in the absence of its alter ego, Fidel Castro. The most likely outcome is that of a gradual reform process within the logic of the one-party state.

State Advisory Council

President	Raúl Castro Ruz (76)
First Vicepresident	José Ramón Machado Ventura (76)*
Vicepresidents	Juan Almeida Bosque (81), Juan Esteban Lazo (63), Abelardo Colomé Ibarra (68), Julio Casas Regueiro (72)*, Carlos Lage Dávila (57)
Secretary	José Miguel Miyar Barruecos
Members	José Ramón Balaguer Cabrera, Pedro Sáez Montejo, Roberto Fernández Retamar, Felipe Pérez Roque, Leopoldo Cintras Frías**, Orlando Lugo Forte, Ramiro Valdés Menéndez, Tania León Silveira, Álvaro López Miera**, Francisco Soberón Valdés, Julio Martínez Ramírez**, Inés Chapman Waugh, Iris Betancourt Téllez, Guillermo García Frías**, Luis Herrera Martínez**, María Ferrer Gómez, Regla Armenteros Mesa**, Dignora Montano Perdomo**, Salvador Antonio Valdés Mesa**, María Concepción González**, Carlos Manuel Valenciaga, Juan José Rabilero Fonseca**, Surina Acosta Brook**

Source: Granma, La Habana, 24 February 2008.

\* Rose to the highest echelon of the State Advisory Council \*\* New members

The composition of the Advisory Council reflects the gradual transition from "Fidelism" to "Raúlism", representing continuity above all, but also a new style of leadership which is more collective in nature, more self-critical, more pragmatic in its approach and institutionalised within the limits set out by the regime. In this gradual handing over of power from one Castro to another, the new State Advisory Council includes all of the members of the political leadership named by Fidel Castro towards the end of July 2006.

### Political leadership named by Fidel Castro

*José Ramón Balaguer Cabrera.* Doctor, Minister of Health and Member of the Political Bureau – historic ideologue of the revolution and one of the founders of the PCC.

*José Ramón Machado Ventura.* Doctor, First Vicepresident and Member of the Political Bureau – historic ideologue of the revolution .

*Esteban Lazo Hernández.* Economist, ex-First Secretary of the PCC in La Habana y Member of the Political Bureau – orthodox.

*Carlos Lage Dávila.* Pediatrician, Vicepresident of the State Advisory Council, Member of the Political Bureau and Secretary of the Executive Committee of the Council of Ministers – reformist.

*Francisco Soberón Valdés.* Economist and political expert, Minister President of the Cuban Central Bank – pragmatist and technocrat.

*Felipe Pérez Roque.* Electrical Engineer, Minister of Foreign Affairs – loyal to Fidel Castro.

Although the new State Advisory Council also includes representatives of Carlos Lage's generation and some young leaders, there is a preponderance of "historics" from the time of the revolution, something which limits the prospects for change. Besides, with Raúl Castro as President, the possibility of opening a political dialogue with the United States of America are almost zero, given that the Helms-Burton law prohibits the recognition of any Cuban government headed by Fidel or Raúl Castro.

The regime's number two, José Ramón Ventura Machado, is a PPC ideologue who represents the most orthodox tendency, little inclined to any kind of reform. His election reflects the priority which Raúl Castro gives to consensus and the unity of the regime around the "old guard", which includes somewhat unpopular figures such as José Ramón Machado Ventura or Ricardo Alarcón. With the power vacuum created in the wake of Fidel Castro's departure, all the signs point to Raúl Castro avoiding any friction within the political elite, which might have been the case had supposed reformists such as Carlos Lage been promoted, preferring stability to stepping up the pace of the necessary and institutional reform. It can be anticipated that with this political common denominator, the more orthodox elements within the regime will determine the rhythm of any reforms.

The election of Machado Ventura leaves less room for maneuver to the future promise of Carlos Lage, who has worked with both Castros, and who was the architect of the wave of economic reforms of the 1990s. Lage was, in the opinion of many, destined to occupy the post of First Vicepresident. Another representative of the "intermediate generation" has also failed to rise to the highest echelons of the State Advisory Council: the Foreign Affairs Minister, Felipe Pérez Roque who, having been Private Secretary of the Commander in Chief, is considered very close to Fidel Castro's way of thinking.

Julio Martínez Ramírez stands out from the ranks of the new, younger members of the State Advisory Council. He has been First Secretary of the Union of Young Communists (Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas or UJC)<sup>1</sup>, since 2004. He represents the more moderate and tolerant wing of the PCC's youth organisation and is considered a supporter of Raúl Castro. The absence of Carlos Lage's son is noteworthy, the 26-year-old is President of the Federation of University Students (Federación de Estudiantes Universitarios or FEU), a position which his father previously held and which was one of the main springboards to political power during Fidel Castro's reign.

<sup>1</sup> He substituted the young Taliban Hassan Pérez Casabona who was recently named President of the powerful Habana business, Habaguanex.

The Council of Ministers also includes three Generals. Besides being one of the Vicepresidents of the State Advisory Council, Julio Casas Regueiro takes over from Raúl Castro at the Ministry of Revolutionary Armed Forces (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias or FAR). Considered to be Raúl Castro's closest collaborator, the fact that Casas Regueiro is responsible for co-coordinating the economic affairs of FAR's businesses indicates a possible future involvement in economic reforms. Two other military newcomers are Chief of Staff Álvaro López Miera (64), and the Head of Western Army, Leopoldo Cintras Frías (66), both of them loyal to Raúl Castro.

Both the make-up of the State Advisory Council and the subsequent speech given by the President on the 24th of February suggest that Raúl Castro will strengthen Cuba's strongest institutions: the PCC and the FAR. Those who expect a renovation or a changing of the political guard will be disappointed. The average age of the political elite is around 70 years old, the supposed reformists did not increase their numbers, and women, who racked up 44.3 per cent of the vote in the new Parliament, have only seen that reflected by a quarter of its members and none at all have taken possession of any of the highest posts of the State Advisory Council.

## The two surprises of the legislative elections

It is striking that the make-up of the State Advisory Council scarcely reflects the result of the legislative elections held on the 20 January 2008, the first surprise of which was that Fidel Castro obtained a far lower percentage of the vote than his brother, coming in at joint 17th on the list along with another candidate.

The most voted elected representatives of the January 2008 elections.

District	Elected Representative	Percentage
1. Raúl Castro Ruiz	Santiago de Cuba	99,372
2. Antonia Cámbara Isaac	Granma	99,327
3. Jorge Luis López Leguén	Guantánamo	99,119
4. Jesús Antonio Infante López	Granma	98,981
5. Víctor Julio de la Paz Hernández	Granma	98,722
6. Roberto Medrano Ledesma	Las Tunas	98,590
7. Inés Lourdes Ferrera González	Granma	98,490
8. Roberto Bazán Osoria	Holguín	98,468
9. Osmany Delfín López Soto	Camagüey	98,463
10. Ulises Rosales del Toro	Santiago de Cuba	98,448
11. Mirian Milán Taset	Granma	98,446
12. Nidia Dolores Lluch Nápoles	Las Tunas	98,445
13. Inés María Chapman Waugh	Holguín	98,424
14. Susana Virgen Caballero Pupo	Holguín	98,409
15. Luz Marda Arrieta Hechavarría	Las Tunas	98,396
16. Arais Miralles Espinosa	Ciego de Ávila	98,352
17. Fidel Castro	Santiago de Cuba	98,268
17. Osvaldo Martínez Martínez	Holguín	98,268

Source: Juventud Rebelde, La Habana, 31 January 2008.

That was just another indication that Fidel Castro's exit from the political stage was on the horizon, an exit which, despite ill health, he himself staged in three acts; the first act saw him name an interim political ruling body on account of his illness; the second act took the form of a letter he wrote at the end of December 2007 to the television programme *Mesa Redonda* (Round Table); and the third act was his announcement on 19 February 2008 in a public message published in the newspaper *Granma* that he was resigning his post. With that, he departed during "Year 50 of the Revolution" and by doing so, carried out his promise that "80 years are too many to carry out state duties".<sup>2</sup> His long awaited exit from the political stage reflects, on the one hand, his position of power; and on the other, the need to get a "new-old" political leadership in place in order to gain time to prepare for the revolution without Fidel Castro himself. Even without holding political office, he will continue until the day he dies to be the figure of cohesion, although his presence has been reduced to that of a guardian or official historian of the Cuban Revolution, invented and reinvented by Castro himself on several occasions in his time in power.

<sup>2</sup> In Tomás Borge's, *A grain of corn, conversations with Fidel Castro*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, México D.F. 1992, p. 255.

The second surprise of the legislative elections was the majority vote for little known candidates. Only two high profile leaders are to be found amongst the top ten positions on the list: Raúl Castro himself, the most voted candidate, and his right hand man, the ex-General and current Minister of Sugar, Ulises Rosales del Toro. With the exception of Raúl Castro, none of the other ten most voted candidates entered the State Advisory Council. The high percentage obtained by women is also striking, although they have no voice either in the political *politbureau* named by Fidel Castro or in the higher ranks of the State Advisory Council.

The legislative elections also served to take the political temperature of the country's different provinces. In this sense, the highest number of selective votes (*voto selectivo*) was registered in the Cuban capital where no elected member received more than 98 per cent of the vote. The greatest number of united votes (*votos unidos*) was recorded in the province of Granma which, on account of its approval of the official candidates, can also be considered the "most revolutionary" in the country, followed by Guantánamo and Santiago de Cuba. The results of the Isla de la Juventud, which have not been released in detail, is noteworthy for the "poor results" there - none of its elected members achieving 87 per cent of the vote and two receiving less than 78 per cent.

Now that both Parliament and the State Advisory Council have been chosen, Cuba awaits the much needed and keenly desired package of reforms which the government might approve in the near future. Conscious of this, and keen to lower expectations, the President has announced on several occasions that the aforementioned process will be slow and gradual. With the first wave of reforms of the 1990s in mind, events are likely to unfold in a manner similar to what the then Minister of Foreign affairs Roberto Robaina described as "ordered change". From the perspective of the ruling political elite, both concepts are intrinsically linked, but on this occasion it seems highly unlikely that order can be maintained at the expense of change.

## The future: between order and change.

Thus far, the post-Fidel Castro government has managed to achieve the former, to maintain order, but the latter, change, has yet to come. It will be far from straightforward to pull off a balancing act between these two objectives. In his first year in charge, Raúl Castro has opted to preserve the status quo but also to begin, from his speech on the 26th of July onwards, a wide-ranging consultation process about the future. The results of what in Cuban terms is called the "national catharsis" are still uncertain and, at the current snail pace, it seems unlikely that there will be an immediate response from the government to this process.

Of the "more than two million proposals" made by Cuba's citizens in the last six months, it is clear that there is a firm desire to introduce substantial changes to the socialist system which began to run into serious trouble after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Although macroeconomic data improved significantly after the collapse of 1990 and the island's economy is growing at an annual rate of over 5 per cent, it has had little effect on the day to day lives of most Cubans whose chief demand is not democracy but a greater increase in individual liberties and less state control. In his few public appearances, Raúl Castro himself has recognised that serious difficulties exist and has promised to satisfy the basic needs of the country.

This suggests that the new-old government distinguishes itself from its predecessor by a greater capacity for self-criticism and correction, within the narrow margins of a one-party state. It is the first time in many years that ordinary people have been able to talk openly about endemic

problems such as corruption, an excess of prohibitions on private initiative, restrictions on travel, centralisation, the lack of real participation, growing social inequality, bureaucracy and other maladies created in almost 50 years of institutionalised revolution.

It's important to remember that this is not the first, but the second time that the Cuban government has opened a space for debate on the country's future. It's worth recalling that it was during the worst crisis Cuba has ever suffered that important political and economic reforms were approved. The liberalisation period began in 1991 with the IV PCC Congress and ended in March 1996 after a speech against "free thinkers" by Raúl Castro. To a certain extent it is paradoxical that 15 years later, it is Raúl Castro himself who has called for what he described as a "critical debate within Socialism" and that he will have to turn his attention to addressing unfinished business from the past.

The second great national debate takes place in a very different regional, national and international context. By diversifying its business partners and partially opening up its economy, Cuba recovered from the post-soviet shock; thanks to Hugo Chávez and the social injustices predominant in most of Cuba's neighbouring countries, its political model is on the ascendency in Latin America; and the exchange of Venezuelan petrol for Cuban skills and expertise has substituted the old alliance with the Soviet Union. So the Cuban regime is more consolidated than it was at the beginning of the 1990s, yet at the same time, the situation it faces is much more difficult than was previously the case, with an increasingly heterogeneous and demanding Cuban society to placate.

## "Raúlism" in power

Raúl Castro's position is an ambiguous one. He is known both as a hardliner and as conciliatory figure at the same time. On the one hand, he announces changes, and on the other, he safeguards the integrity of the regime. And although he stands for a different kind of decision-making process, less personalised and arbitrary, more consensual and conciliatory, he does not want, nor can he afford, to put the regime's unified image at risk. At the same time, the second Castro lacks charisma and is a faithful servant of the revolution's institutions: the PCC and the FAR. The PCC sets the political and ideological boundaries of tropical socialism. The Cuban FAR is a watchword for order and discipline along with efficiency and problem solving. Whilst Raúl Castro calls for the former, most Cubans expect the latter.

The first sign of future change was Raúl Castro's announcement in his inaugural speech that certain prohibitions will soon be lifted. This might at least provide some respite to Cubans trying to live with the contradictions of capitalism within a Socialist framework without falling foul of the regime by being fined or even imprisoned for carrying out certain activities necessary for survival, such as renting out private rooms or vehicles, selling state products or providing other private services.

In his inaugural speech, which was extraordinarily short, Raúl Castro announced certain specific measures; a reform – probably a reduction – of state institutions to increase their efficiency, changes to the current government, a solution to the problem of the dual currency (the dollar and the peso), a salary structure based on merit, the elimination of the ration book, fewer state subsidies, more decentralisation and a stronger and more productive economy. The last of these measures could open the way to greater private initiative, adapting the Chinese model which Raúl Castro is known to sympathise with, to the Cuban context. In a similar vein, the President

announced greater popular participation which included the possibility of “direct consultation with the people” in matters of “great importance”.<sup>3</sup>

What can be expected from the political elite under Raúl Castro is not so much democratic reform as a gradual transition towards a socialist regime which is more efficient and predictable, an absence of personal charisma and more reliance on the FAR and the PCC. In the face of Cuban society’s high expectations and the proposals raised in the national debate, without some kind of reform it will be impossible to maintain order in Cuba. The aforementioned reforms must take place in a relatively short time period, and with the participation of the people; at least on this occasion, they have been consulted by the island’s maximum political authorities.

The first step to approving specific proposals would be to convene a PPC congress. The last one was held more than ten years ago, in 1997. Reactivating the role of the Communist Party has always been a position defended by Raúl Castro, in contrast to the distrust which his brother Fidel showed the PPC since 1959. Raúl’s predecessor preferred to create “governments in the shadows” with minimum transparency and little institutional accountability. One particularly noteworthy example of this being the Commander in Chief Coordination and Support Group, which was comprised of his intimate circle of power and reached far beyond the state.

With Raúl Castro’s government, the FAR will gain in economic and political power. Taking into account the fact that the main state businesses are run by military personnel, who also coordinate the powerful Group of Business Administration (Grupo de Administración Empresarial or GAESA), the FAR will take on special relevance in any economic opening. In contrast to the Armed Forces in many Latin American countries, the FAR are a prestigious institution and, due to their interventions in Latin America and Africa, they have a track record outside of Cuba which is significant. Up until now, the FAR have not acted as a repressive force at the regime’s beck and call, but rather as a state within the state, the institution most separated from Fidel Castro. As the main economic and political force in the country, the FAR will determine the trajectory of the new stage of the revolutionary regime, the outcome of which depends on the difficult balancing act between maintaining order and introducing the changes which the vast majority of Cubans demand.

But it should not be forgotten that the FAR, which emerged in 1959, are also the essence of the revolution and, consequently, the main defense against the external enemy in the shape of the USA, whose policy has always served as an argument against change in Cuba. In this regard, the Cuban transition will have little or no bearing on bilateral relations between the two countries; as long as Raúl Castro is in power it seems unlikely that the USA, whether led by a Republican or Democrat administration, will alter its “National Interest” policy of boycotting and isolating Cuba. Most probably, the USA will continue to carry out its customary role of providing a rallying point for Cuba in the shape of its external enemy.

The perspectives for the relationship between Cuba and the European Union (EU) seem more open. The EU is at present considering whether to adopt Spain’s dialogue-based approach, re-establishing ties with Cuba, even at the level of state cooperation. Having a political and economic presence on the island is, without doubt, the only way to at least witness events there and perhaps even to promote the process of reform which in the short or long-term is on the agenda in Cuba today.

Unlike the USA, with its “road map” for the “day after”, the EU’s Common Position, which dates back to 1996, sets its sights on change from within, which would seem a more realistic

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<sup>3</sup> Speech given by comrade Raúl Castro Ruz, President of the State Advisory Council and the Council of Ministers, in the conclusions of the constitutive session of the VII Legislature of the National Assembly of Popular Power, *Granma*, La Habana, 24th of February 2008.

prognosis than the scenario of rupture which Washington has been promoting for the last few decades. It is for this reason that the EU, which has kept communication channels open with the regime, will carry out a more important role than Washington in the new "Raúlíst" stage of the Revolution.

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