

Goodbye, but Not Farewell, by Jorge I. Domínguez

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CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — Fifty years of victory, 50 weeks of goodbyes: it has an appealing symmetry. It was 50 years ago tomorrow that Fidel Castro led the assault that would eventually topple the Cuban government and bring him to power. He is sure to use the anniversary over the next year to remind Cubans that while they must plan for his succession, they should not expect a new regime.

The assault on the Moncada barracks launched Mr. Castro onto the world stage. Against all odds, he has triumphed time and again.

The army of President Fulgencio Batista eventually shriveled in the face of rebellion, and Batista fled on New Year's Eve 1958. Mr. Castro's militias defeated an American-sponsored exile brigade invasion at the Bay of Pigs and his secret police foiled many American-induced assassination attempts. In the 1970's and 1980's, Cuban armies did three times on African soil what the United States could not in Vietnam, nor the Soviet Union in Afghanistan: they won the wars they fought, twice defending Angola against South African invasions and once defending Ethiopia against a Somali invasion. Mr. Castro's regime survived the collapse of the Soviet Union and Communist governments in Europe.

His leadership also helped Cuba forge a strong sense of peoplehood and solidarity. Cuban schoolchildren are among the world's best performers, with Cuban fourth graders outscoring all Latin American students in mathematics tests. And the rate of infant mortality is lower in Havana than in Washington.

Much also went wrong during Mr. Castro's decades in power. In the 1960's and 70's, his government jailed more political prisoners relative to population, and held them longer in prison, than any right-wing military dictatorship in the Americas. As recently as last spring, his government imprisoned dozens of opposition activists for their "crimes" of political opinion and association. The death penalty was used repeatedly, mainly in the 1960's but also last spring, in trials woefully lacking in due process. During the 1960's, torture was an administrative practice.

Only the Communist Party is legal. National Assembly elections are uncompetitive. The government owns and operates all newspapers and television and radio stations. The economy collapsed in the early 1990's. From 1985 to 2000, per capita income fell by one-quarter. Since the early 1990's, poverty has increased, inequality has grown worse and shortages of basic necessities have spread.

Starting about a year ago, Fidel Castro began his long goodbye. The National Assembly formally opened his succession process by amending the Constitution to make it impossible to alter the regime's fundamental principles after his death. Born in 1926, Mr. Castro has been in poor health; he fainted in the middle of a speech in June 2001. His designated successor is his brother, Raúl Castro, Cuba's defense minister, who is 72.

But will there be just a succession to Raúl -- or will there be a wider and deeper political transition? Cuba's domestic opposition seeks a full transition. Twenty years ago, there were few activists for human rights or the political opposition. During the past dozen years, thousands have emerged.

What is striking about Cuba today is not that its government represses the opposition. It has done so for more than four decades. What's new is that the government no longer succeeds when it tries to repress the opposition. Since 1990, every time activists have been imprisoned, new members and leaders have arisen to take their places. The arrests in 2003 resemble previous episodes, except for the greater severity of the prison sentences, which are widely believed to have been imposed to keep popular opponents out of public life during this sensitive moment in history.

The battle between succession and transition is the key to Cuba's politics. In late 2002, Cuba held local and national elections. Last March, the National Assembly elected the Council of State, which will serve for five years. The assembly and the council will formally choose Cuba's next president. Also in March, six prominent activists announced a hunger strike, and the opposition lobbied the European Union to reject Cuba's application for preferential trade treatment and assistance. The crackdown on the opposition followed.

Significant elite personnel changes have also been under way. Cuba's finance minister, the party's secretary for ideology, several provincial party first secretaries, and other government and party officials have been replaced. The person in charge of economic reform, the minister of economy and planning, lost four of his six deputy ministers.

These steps are preparations for the Sixth Congress of the Cuban Communist Party, which may meet later this year or early next. The Congress will choose a new central committee and political bureau to hold office for about six years. Their members will ratify Raúl Castro as Fidel's successor, and will be among the most influential in choosing Raúl's successor.

Along with a few other notables, these members constitute the "selectorate" -- that is, the few hundred people who will determine the succession to the Castro brothers and its success or failure. They seek to protect the succession from the equivalent of a panicky rush on the bank that might set off a regime transition. Repression and succession are two sides of the same coin -- the currency to ensure regime survival and avoid regime transition.

Fidel Castro's long goodbye opens Cuba's most important political struggle in more than four decades. Top officials want to ensure that only they can shape the nation's future. Yet "Fidelismo without Fidel," they know, has at best uncertain prospects. This may be not just the start of Fidel Castro's goodbye, but also his regime's.

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