

# Havana

Hello from



Advanced but unmistakable stirrings of change in Cuba

by *Forge J. Domínguez*  
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**P**RESIDENT RAÚL CASTRO'S principal contribution thus far to the lives of ordinary Cubans has been that television soap operas now start on time. He often reminds his fellow citizens of this seemingly impossible accomplishment, after decades during which his elder brother commanded the airwaves and disrupted all public and personal schedules. But he alluded to this achievement most cleverly last December, prompting laughter with the opening sentence of his remarks before a summit meeting of the presidents of the Latin American countries in Bahia, Brazil, hosted by Brazilian president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. According to Cuba's official press reports, Castro began, "I hope that our colleague and dear friend Lula will not complain because I give shorter speeches than Chávez's."

The presidential summit was one stop on Raúl Castro's first international trip since becoming Cuba's acting president in August 2006 (when Fidel Castro was rushed to the hospital), and in that one sentence, he made several points. To most of the Latin American presidents, who did not know him well, and indeed to his fellow Cubans, he demonstrated that even a 78-year-old General of the Army could have a sense of humor. To the same audiences,

but also to the incoming Obama administration, he demonstrated some distance and independence from Venezuela's president, Hugo Chávez, notwithstanding the tight economic and political bonds between their two countries. This was only the most recent and most public instance of Raúl Castro's reiterated mocking comparison between Chávez's propensity to speak forever and his own much shorter and self-disciplined speeches. (Of course, all those in the audience also knew that he was poking fun not just at Chávez but at his brother, who never met a time limit he did not despise.) And, finally, he highlighted, especially for his own people, that he honors and respects the time of others.

Raúl Castro's military style of life cherishes punctuality and efficiency. Schedules, all schedules, even those for TV *telenovelas*, should be observed. Even during the waning moments of Fidel Castro's rule, the time of Cubans was frequently occupied by marches, mobilizations, and the need to listen to the logorrheic Maximum Leader. There was even a cabinet minister in charge of what Fidel Castro called the "Battle of Ideas." Now, marches occur on designated public holidays. And the minister in charge of the Battle of Ideas lost his job in March—and his ministry was disbanded.

## Economic Evolution

THE NUANCES IN CUBAN PUBLIC LIFE since Raúl became president in his own right in February 2008 are evident as well in the enactment of economic-policy reforms that were rolled out immediately following his formal installation. Consider some examples. Previously, Cubans had not been able to stay at hotels or eat at restaurants designed for international tourists, even if they had the funds to pay, unless they were on official business; now they were given access to all these facilities, so long as they could pay. Cubans had also been prohibited from purchasing cell phones and subscribing to such services unless officially authorized to do so. They were not allowed to purchase computers or DVD players. Now they were able to purchase such products so long as they had the funds.

How the Cuban government adopted these changes is important. It could simply have announced a general deregulation of prohibitions regarding purchases of consumer durables, for example. Instead, the government made each of these announcements separately: one week you could stay at tourist hotels, the next week you could purchase a computer, the following week you could obtain cell-phone services, and so forth. The government even announced that some products would be deregulated for purchase in 2009 (air conditioners) or 2010 (toasters).

This method of deregulating implied a desire to win political support over time, not all at once. It communicated that the government retained the right to micromanage the economy, deregulating product by product and service by service. The government also signaled that it expected to remain in office for years to come, behaving in the same way. Finally, most Cubans knew that they could have been purchasing these same consumer durables all along, albeit only on the black market. Thus the policy of postponed deregulation implied an official tolerance of some current criminality (knowing that some Cubans would buy toasters illegally in 2008, instead of waiting for 2010), because the government valued its economic micromanagement more.

Whom the government sought to benefit was equally newsworthy. In its most revolutionary phase, during the 1960s, the Cuban government adopted strongly egalitarian policies. Many Cubans came to believe in egalitarian values and resented the widening of inequalities in the 1990s. Consider, then, Raúl's reforms. Hotels and restaurants designed for international tourist markets are expensive; so, too, are computers and DVD players. When these economic changes were announced in 2008, the median monthly salary of Cubans amounted to about \$17: that is, the average monthly salary was below the World Bank's worldwide standard for poverty, which is one dollar per day. To be sure, Cubans had free access to education and healthcare and subsidized access to some other goods and services. Nevertheless, only a small fraction of Cubans could take advantage of these new economic policies, because the



Cuban president Fidel Castro confers with his brother Raúl, then Minister of the Revolutionary Armed Forces, in December 2003.

purchases of such consumer durables and the access to such tourist services had to be paid for in dollar-equivalent Cuban currency at *dollar-equivalent* international prices. (Cuba has two currencies; the *peso convertible* is a close equivalent to the dollar, whereas the *peso* is worth about 50.04.) Raúl's government was appealing to the upper-middle-class professionals.

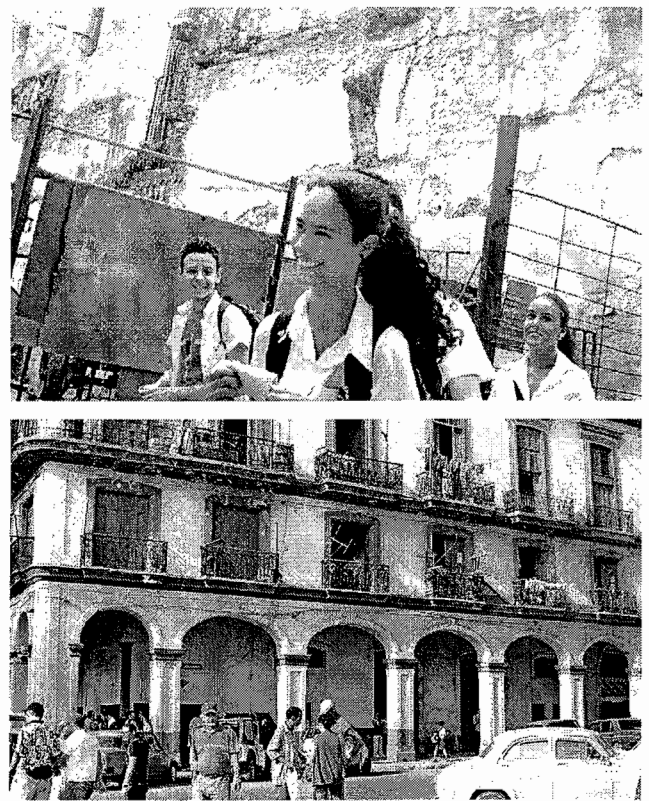
## Making Difficult Decisions

I HAVE EMPHASIZED Raúl's penchant for humor and nuance because Washington and Miami have not taken much notice of these traits. At the same time, no one should underestimate his capacity for decisiveness. A salient feature in his biography is his long-standing role as Cuba's equivalent of a chief operating officer. President Fidel Castro made the decision to dispatch some 300,000 Cuban troops to two wars in Angola and one in Ethiopia from the mid 1970s to the early 1990s, but it was Minister of the Revolutionary Armed Forces and General of the Army Raúl Castro whose officers recruited, trained, promoted, equipped, and steered these armies for battle. The United States lost the war in Vietnam. The Soviet Union lost the war in Afghanistan. Cuban troops won the three African wars in which they fought. Cuba's was the only communist government during the entire Cold War that successfully deployed its armed forces across the oceans. And the "worker bee" for those victories was Raúl.

Within the first calendar year of his presidency, Raúl gave another example of this decisiveness: the reform of Cuba's pension laws. Cuban law authorized and funded the retirement of women at age 55 and of men at age 60. In December 2008, the retirement ages were raised to 60 and 65 respectively. The speed of the change signaled as well a key difference between the Castro brothers.

It had long been a matter of public record that Cuban life expectancy had lengthened to reach the levels of the North Atlantic countries. Cuban demographers had also faithfully recorded that Cuba has been below the population replacement rate since 1978. They had developed various forecasts that showed that its population would age rapidly, creating a vast problem of pension liabilities, and then decline. The demographers committed only one error: they expected the demographic decline to set in near the year 2020, but the population has already declined (net of emigration) in two of the last three years.

Notwithstanding this abundance of information, Fidel chose *not* to act. The fiscal crisis of the state was much less fun than leading street marches to denounce U.S. imperialism. But Raúl's prompt and effective change of the pension laws, making use of information supplied by social scientists, is yet another illustration of the difference between the brothers as rulers. And, of course, the one obvious change that was *not* made to the pension laws demonstrates as well that even a powerful government senses some limits to its power: although the life expectancy of women is longer, the pension



reform retained the lower retirement age for them. Raúl Castro doesn't dare take a perk like early retirement away from Cuban women.

### Political Authoritarianism

THE CASTRO BROTHERS' STYLES OF RULE of course show important similarities on matters that do and should matter in assessing their political regime. Cuba remains a single-party state that bans opposition political parties and independent associations that may advance political causes. The government owns and operates all television and radio stations, daily newspapers, and publishing houses. The number of candidates equals the number of seats to be filled in elections for the National Assembly. The constraints on civil society remain severe, even if there has been since the early 1990s a somewhat greater margin of autonomy for communities of faith, some of which (including Roman Catholic archdioceses) are permitted to publish magazines.

The two brothers have also demonstrated a strong preference for ruling with a small number of associates whom they have known for many years. For example, when Raúl became president formally in February 2008, he had the right to make wholesale changes in the top leadership. Instead, the president and his seven vice presidents had a median birth year of 1936. Raúl went a step further. He created a small steering committee within the larger Political Bureau of the Communist Party—and the members of the new committee were the exact same seven. Raúl's buddies are the gerontocrats with whom he chooses to govern.

Yet there are stirrings of change. Although National Assembly elections are uncompetitive, they provide a means to express some opposition to the government. The official candidates are presented in party lists; each voting district elects two to five deputies from those lists and the number of candidates equals the number of posts to be filled in that district. The government urges voters to vote for the entire list, but voters have been free to vote for some but not all candidates on the list, thereby expressing

some displeasure. The number of nonconforming voters (voted blank, null, or selectively) exceeded 13.4 percent of the votes cast in the most recent (January 2008) National Assembly elections—1.1 million voters. Both the percentage and the number of nonconforming voters were slightly larger than in the 2003 election, with the largest expression of nonconformity recorded in the province named City of Havana.

Yet another sign of change arises from Raúl's own family. His daughter, Mariela Castro, has been for some years the director of Cuba's center for the study of sexuality. This center has been principally known, however, for its advocacy for, and defense of, the rights of homosexuals, including special training for Cuban police officers, formulating changes in regulations, and disseminating information designed to create safer spaces for homosexuals.

From the 1960s to the 1980s, the Cuban government pursued very harsh policies toward homosexuals. In the early stages of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, those who tested HIV-positive were automatically compelled to enter a quarantined facility at the cost of their jobs and family lives. At the time of the Mariel emigration crisis in 1980, the government activated its affiliated mass organizations to make life impossible for homosexuals, fostering their emigration under duress. And in the mid 1960s, the government had established the "military units to aid production" (UMAP). These were concentration camps to which "social deviants," mainly but not exclusively male homosexuals, were sent to be turned, somehow, into "real men." The commander in chief of the UMAP was, of course, Armed Forces Minister Raúl Castro.

It is unlikely that Raúl is a closet liberal, though there is evidence that he has been a loving father. It is not impossible, however, that he regrets having served as an architect of repression over the lives of many Cubans—not just homosexuals—especially in the 1960s, but also at other times. His daughter's work during the current decade may be an instrument for elements of social liberalism.





una ciudad mejor.



## U.S.-Cuban Relations

RAÚL CASTRO UNDERSTOOD earlier than his brother that the collapse of the Soviet Union and European communist regimes implied that Cuba had to change more and faster than Fidel wanted. In 1994, in the most public difference yet between the brothers, Raúl favored liberalizing agricultural markets, allowing producers to sell at market prices, even though Fidel remained opposed. Raúl showed more sustained interest in the economic reforms of China and Vietnam than did Fidel. And by the late 1990s, Raúl began to give the speech that he has now repeated many times, most notably this April in response to the Obama administration's beginning of changes in U.S.-Cuba policies (authorizing Cuban Americans to travel and send remittances to Cuba): his government is ready to discuss anything on the U.S. government agenda.

In January 2002, Raúl even praised the Bush administration for having given advance notice of the incarceration of Taliban prisoners at the U.S. base at Guantánamo Bay. He also praised the professional military-to-military cooperation between the two countries' officers along the U.S. base's boundary perimeter, as well as between the coast guards in the Straits of Florida. In August 2006, his first public remarks upon becoming acting president made just two points: he did not much like to speak in public, and he was ready to negotiate with the United States. And this April, he took the time to make it clear that negotiating with the United States about any topic did, indeed, include discussion about political prisoners in Cuban jails. He made a specific proposal to exchange such political prisoners (estimated by Cuban human-rights groups as between 200 and 300 people) for five Cuban spies in U.S. prisons.

## The Context for Change

THE PACE of political and economic change in Cuba has been slow by world standards. But the pace of social change has been very fast. Cuba's people live long lives, thanks in part to good,

albeit frayed, healthcare services—free of charge. Cuban children go to school and many become professionals. Indeed, Cuba's principal area of export growth is the provision of healthcare services to the people of other countries. Until this most recent development, however, Cuba had exemplified how a half-century of investment in human capital could generate very poor economic-growth returns. Yet Cubans since the early 1990s have demonstrated entrepreneurial capacities in creating small businesses, whenever the government has permitted them, suggesting that with better economic incentives there could be a productive combination that would lead to economic growth. Cubans can talk seemingly endlessly at officially sponsored meetings, yet they demonstrate in other settings a capacity for insight, criticism, and imagination that could readily contribute as well to much faster political transformation.

U.S. policy toward Cuba for the bulk of this past decade has assisted the Castro government's state security in shutting out information from the outside world: the United States banned the shipment of information-technology products, instead of facilitating Cuban electronic access to the world, and allowed Cuban Americans to visit their relatives only once every three years, instead of enabling cousins from both sides of the Straits of Florida to speak face to face about how a different, better Cuba might be constructed. (The United States has even protected ordinary Cubans from the Harvard Alumni Association, which could not lead tour groups there.) Perhaps the United States will stop being an obstacle to change in Cuba during the century's second decade. ▽

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