Still Castro's Cuba

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

Two-thirds of Cuba's 11.4 million people were born after Fidel Castro came to power nearly five decades ago. Having known no ruler other than Castro, they will have to wait yet a while longer before getting a leader by any other name. To no one's surprise, the ailing dictator's younger brother, 76-year-old Raul, has been named his successor as president. For the foreseeable future, then, Cuba will remain the personal domain of the Castros. Even Raul himself, upon assuming the presidency, reminded Cubans in a nationwide broadcast that Fidel will continue as commander in chief and is, of course, "irreplaceable."

As if to underscore that the island's sclerotic, geriatric leadership will remain the same, Raul passed over younger candidates and appointed a Cabinet composed of old guard, septuagenarian (or older) revolutionaries. The No. 2 post, for example, went to Jose Ramon Machado, 77, who fought with the Castro brothers in the Sierra Maestra half a century ago in their drive to overthrow the Batista dictatorship. Machado is a fervent exponent of the same stale Communist Party ideology long ago discarded in Moscow. Four of the regime's other top posts went to entrenched members of the Castro mafia.

This is not a group to move Cuba even an inch toward a democratic, free-market society. Even so, some optimists view Raul as a closet reformer who will gradually chart a different course as soon as Fidel, 81, dies. Yet it's hard to buy the fanciful notion that Raul will turn out to be another Deng Xiaoping launching broad-scale economic changes in his twilight years. Nor does it seem at all likely that the longtime dream of exiled Cubans in Florida will be realized in the sudden collapse of Communist rule.

The dismaying reality is that Cuba's calcified government is likely to perpetuate itself for years to come. This means Cubans will continue to subsist on shockingly poor living standards imposed by Communist Party central planning. And dissidents who dare to criticize the Castro orthodoxy will face long prison sentences, if not firing squads.

The question that ought to be asked today in Washington is whether the long-standing U.S. trade embargo is helping or hurting the cause of political and economic change in Cuba.

Certainly the embargo has failed its central goal of strangling the Cuban economy and forcing the Castros from power on a wave of popular discontent. On the contrary, a sound argument can be made that the embargo has helped cement the Castro brothers' grip on power through 10 U.S. presidents by helping unite the country against American "imperialism."

Regrettably, there is no sign the Bush administration is prepared to begin a serious debate about American policy toward Cuba. In fact, the White House appears to be as incapable of doing things differently as is Raul.

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