Island mentality
Since Fidel Castro left office, Cuba has been carrying off a transition with minimal fuss - a sign that the regime enjoys more support than the US will admit

Joshua Jelly-Schapiro

On a warm early morning late last July, a large crowd stood in the concrete plaza on the outskirts of the central Cuban city of Camaguey. Raúl Castro Ruz, first vice-president of the Councils of State and Ministers and Maximum General of the Cuban armed forces, was there to address the nation. In thick glasses and his customary ball-cap, Raúl stood in for his ill older brother Fidel, who due to illness was unable to deliver one of his usual everlasting speeches. Never known for his charisma, and not fond of public-speaking, Raúl extolled his people's fortitude. He urged increased milk production, decried the price of chicken and described the meaning of Revolution - "the profound conviction that there is no force in the world capable of crushing the strength of truth and ideas," and "criticising what needs criticising." And he also stated "Cuba's willingness to discuss on equal footing the prolonged dispute with the United States".

On that day in Camaguey, I watched as Raúl delivered the customary oration for the national holiday, the 26 de Julio. (The date honours the 1953 day when a young Fidel led a quixotic assault on an army barracks of Fulgencio Batista, the dictator he would depose six years later.) As Raúl's concluding cry of Viva Fidel! faded from the loudspeakers and the crowd filed from the square, conversations turned to the fiestas that were for most Cubans the real focus of their holiday. The speech seemed to resonate little. Yet what is significant about the speech is what it (and its aftermath) illustrates about the continuity within Cuba, and also the chance Raúl Castro represents for the US to establish a sane policy toward the island.

Last month headlines worldwide blared that Fidel Castro was officially standing down. Soon after, Raúl Castro was officially installed as Cuba's first new head-of-state in 49 years. Castro's departure, which has preoccupied the last nine US presidents, was met in Cuba with quiet. "When Cubans rise up to demand their liberty," George Bush asked members of the Cuban armed forces last October, "will you defend a disgraced and dying order?" Three weeks ago, as in July 2006 when Fidel took ill, there was no rising up in Havana's streets.

Cuba's government - staffed by capable and canny bureaucrats in firm control of the military and police - is carrying off a transition with minimum apparent fuss. A dearth of stories about dissidents or demonstrations since Fidel handed off power has revealed what to many Americans is a vexing truth: that the quiet is owed to much more than repression. "What the past year has shown," said Julia Sweig, author of Inside the Cuban Revolution and director of Latin American Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, "is that the regime has sources of legitimacy that Washington for many decades has not wanted to recognise, and those sources of legitimacy go beyond Fidel."
Life in Cuba remains as it has long been: an often grim struggle to provide for one's family in a broken economy. The press is censored, the dual-currencies put consumer goods and basic supplies beyond Cubans' reach, the infrastructure is crumbling. For its many failings, however, Cuba is a society with safe streets and good schools, with a state that still looks after its young and old and keeps all its citizens healthy and housed. And as recent months have shown, it has a stable government, albeit one with a growing sense that its stability will soon depend on enacting reforms to better the lot of its people.

Last September, the state distributed a document throughout the island citing the "transcendence" of Raúl's speech, highlighting his injunction to "criticise what needs criticising". The document initiated an unprecedented process: a set of meetings in workplaces and community centres wherein all citizens were meant "to analyse and make proposals on the direction of the Revolution" - as the guía de debate put it, "in an environment of absolute freedom and sincerity".

The stated expectation was that the views taken down at these assemblies - with no names attached - would serve as the basis for reforms aimed at salving the ills of a society wherein "wages are clearly insufficient," as Raúl balefully acknowledged in his speech, "to play a role in ensuring the socialist principle that each should contribute according to their capacity and receive according to their work."

The meetings have taken place since October. Participants indicate that the gatherings have been freewheeling affairs with little self-censorship in evidence. "Why don't the Cuban people have the real possibility to stay at hotels or travel to different places?" asked one college student in a January forum attended by National Assembly head Ricardo Alarcón. "Why can't we use Google and Yahoo to access the internet?" demanded another. The spirit of critique has found expression in the state press. Last fall, Juventud Rebelde, the national daily of the Communist party's youth wing, ran a series of articles on shortcomings and graft in the nation's healthcare system - normally an untouchable topic.

The process's timing expressed the political intent behind it. The sanctioned airing of discontent ended in time for the newly elected National Assembly to appoint a new Council of State. In his speech accepting the council presidency three Sundays ago, Raúl Castro alluded to the meetings, and their coverage abroad. "The international doomsayers ... tried to capitalise on the criticisms made during the study and discussion of the speech made on July 26," he intoned. "They overlooked the fact that it was criticism and debate within socialism." The airing of grievances, it would seem, is meant to expand the new government's legitimacy - and Raúl Castro's authority to enact reforms. In his inaugural speech he mentioned some of those measures. He indicated that they could include a substantive increase in state-salaries and a relaxation of laws against earning dollars through private means. He also mentioned "an excess of prohibitions and regulations", which "in the next few weeks we will start removing".

Which "prohibitions and regulations" he meant was unclear at the time. This past Thursday, however, came news of the first to be lifted. Reuters reported on an internal government memo declaring an immediate end to the domestic retail ban on computers and DVD players, with air conditioners and toasters - all products nominally prohibited in order to save electricity - to become available soon. (In recent years, Fidel's most vocal obsession was energy conservation.)

http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/mar/16/islandmentality
Though few Cubans can afford expensive electronics, the legalisation of such goods will send an important signal.

Raúl, the long-time army chief and dour party man, is now cast in the unlikely role of reformer. As he embarks on this delicate task, he will do so at the helm of a government bolstered from many sides. First among these is the petro-largesse of Hugo Chávez - estimated currently at $4-5bn annually in free fuel, for which Cuba pays in kind with the doctors, social workers and consultants who are essential to the functioning of Chávez's social misiones. Beyond ties with Venezuela - a relationship likely more valuable to Caracas than Havana - Cuba has in the past two years entered a preferential trade agreement with Mercosur, the South American trading block; increased economic cooperation with China; and augmented ties with northern nations such as Canada, which recently stepped up its investment in Cuba's energy infrastructure. In other words, many countries have invested in Cuba's stability - and possibly enjoy a position from which to influence its affairs. The United States has not.

It is for this reason, if no other, that current events on the island should prompt a re-evaluation of US policy toward it. The embargo, now nearing a half-century old and codified as law in 1992's Cuba Democracy Act, has had many effects. It has denied Cuba's people basic goods and given its government a steady scapegoat for its failings. It has prevented Americans from travelling to the island and prohibited US firms from trading with Cuba. And, since the Helms-Burton Act in 1996, it has further alienated third-countries by penalising foreign companies in the United States who do business on the island. None of these effects hastened Castro's demise. The policy - it is an open secret in Washington today - is a monumental failure.

Thankfully there are signs that change could come. In a presidential debate before the recent Texas primary, Barack Obama reiterated that he'd be willing to hold talks, without preconditions, with Cuba's new leader. The Democratic frontrunner has also voiced support for repealing restrictions on Cuban-Americans sending remittances to and visiting their families on the island. Hillary Clinton calls Obama's position "irresponsible". John McCain calls it "dangerously naïve". However, a new approach to Cuba - a country that according to the Pentagon ceased many years ago to represent a security threat to the United States - reflects not merely a refreshing realism but canny politics as well.

US-Cuba policy, goes the cliché, is not a foreign policy but a domestic one aimed at Florida. The calculus regarding Miami's Cuban voters may be changing, however - in part due to those rules instituted by the Bush administration in 2004 that candidate Obama advocates lifting. The new rules cap family visits at one every three years. Such measures have traditionally intended to placate the clique of hard-line exiles long granted de facto oversight of US-Cuba policy. With the Miami old guard itself growing old, however, many Cuban-Americans harbour deep frustration at the Bush administration's retrenched efforts to "isolate Cuba". The new rules are loathed by many, especially newer arrivals. In the upcoming US election, Cuban-Americans could well support a candidate, Democrat or otherwise, who supports their repeal.

While shifting dynamics in Miami may alter the political calculus for a new American administration, other factors could provide the weight necessary to actually change the policy. Should oil reserves discovered in Cuban territorial waters in 2006 prove as substantial as some
experts predict, that will spell, according to Cuba experts like the Council on Foreign Relations' Sweig "game over" for the US bloqueo. Last month, more than 100 members of Congress signed a letter to secretary of state Condoleezza Rice stating that "it is time for us to think and act anew" toward Cuba. For now, these advocates of lifting the embargo - among them farm-state Republicans from Nebraska and Kansas seeking access for their constituents to Cuban markets - are unlikely to force a winnable vote in Congress to do so. With the added entreaties of Big Oil to access crude 50 miles from Florida's Keys, this balance will surely change.

The ultimate trajectory of a Cuba sin Fidel remains to be seen. At least one essential fact about how it will be realised, though, is by now clear. As George Bush himself put it after Castro first took ill 19 months ago, in a statement that surely rankled those dwindling few still nurturing hopes of succession from without: "Cuba's next leader will come from Cuba."

The choice facing whomever occupies the White House next year is whether to deal proactively with this fact or to persist in a policy that is today a relic of the cold war. Last July in Camaguey, in addition to remarks addressed to his countrymen, Raúl Castro also offered, as he has repeatedly since, to enter into bilateral talks with the United States to discuss the two countries' "prolonged dispute." Our next president would do well - by Cuba's people, and by us - to accept.

guardian.co.uk © Guardian News and Media Limited 2009