

CUBA - Fidel's Brother at the Helm (by Jim Lobe, IPS)

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IPS - Uncertain about the condition of long-time U.S. nemesis, Cuban President Fidel Castro, the administration of President George W. Bush said Tuesday it would not alter its policy toward the Caribbean nation with which it has had no regular diplomatic communications for most of the past six years.

"There are no plans to reach out," said White House spokesman Tony Snow, who stressed that Castro's unprecedented transfer of power to his brother, Raúl, should be seen as the latest affront to the democratic aspirations of Cuba's population.

"Raúl Castro's attempt to impose himself on the Cuban people is much the same as what his brother did," according to Snow. "The one thing that this president (Bush) has talked about from the very beginning is his hope for the Cuban people, finally, to enjoy the fruits of freedom and democracy."

Snow's remarks were the most definitive U.S. reaction since Monday night's announcement that Fidel Castro, who turns 80 this month, had temporarily ceded power to his brother, 75, pending a medical operation from which he is not expected to recover for some weeks.

The announcement set off all-night celebrations in Miami's Little Havana, a stronghold of anti-Castro Cuban Americans who have strongly supported Bush's hard-line policies toward the island.

U.S. officials and independent Cuba experts alike spent much of Tuesday trying to assess the news out of Havana and specifically whether, by transferring power to his brother, Fidel Castro had initiated a succession process that was irreversible or whether he would indeed return to power if he recovers.

"This must be very serious, because he's never handed off power before, even for occasions in the past when he was ill or traveling for long periods of time when it was clear he wasn't running the government day to day," said William LeoGrande, a Cuba specialist at American University in Washington DC.

"At the same time, this may be an opportunity for him to have a kind of dry run to see how well Raúl can step into the role of symbolic leader of the revolution, as opposed to the guy behind the scenes who make the trains run on time," he added.

That uncertainty, according to U.S. officials, appeared to be a major reason for the administration's cautious response to events in Havana.

The transfer of power came just three weeks after the administration's release of 93-page plan for transforming Cuba into a democratic state with a free-market economy.

Among other things, the paper, the product of a commission headed by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez, calls for the creation of an 80-million-dollar "Cuba Fund for a Democratic Future".

Under the plan, Washington would provide 31 million dollars to "pro-democracy groups" in Cuba and another 24 million dollars on "efforts to break the Castro regime's information blockade." The latter would be in addition to some 30 million dollars that Washington currently spends annually on television and radio broadcasts to the island.

At the same time, it calls for continuing efforts to tighten enforcement of Washington's 46-year-old trade and travel embargo, an effort on which the Bush administration has been eagerly engaged since 2004, after a major crackdown by Havana against scores of well-known dissidents.

The report also includes a secret annex that has been the subject of considerable speculation regarding assistance to exile groups and possible covert action to influence internal political developments in Cuba.

As to a post-Castro government, the report made clear that the administration would only be willing to provide assistance if asked by a "transitional" — as opposed to a "successor" — government which committed itself to transform the country into a free-market democracy within 18 months.

A "successor" government headed by senior members of the current government or the Communist Party, would not be eligible for such assistance; indeed, it defines Washington's goal as preventing a "successor" government from taking power.

Critics of the administration's policy have long warned that such a distinction may very well work to Washington's disadvantage precisely because it precludes the kind of aid and diplomatic engagement that could be used to encourage reform and liberalisation as, for example, has been the case with Vietnam, another Communist-ruled state.

"The U.S. has spent a lot of time planning for what really is the least likely scenario, which is a rapid transition to a pro-U.S., democratic government," said Dan Erickson, a Cuba analyst at the Inter-American Dialogue (IAD). "What we're seeing instead is a kind of gradual succession process where Raúl is taking control."

"The best thing would be for the U.S. to re-engage Cuba, because there are a lot of people there we should be talking to," according to Geoff Thale, a Cuba specialist at the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA). "I don't expect the Bush administration to adopt that position at this point, but it would at least be constructive if they let this process (of succession) move forward."

To some analysts, the current situation underlines some of the disadvantages of the administration's refusal to engage in Cuba, even in regular diplomatic contacts.

"The U.S. government should try to establish channels of communication to the new government in Cuba, whether directly with Raúl Castro or through intermediaries," Erickson told IPS, noting that the uncertainties created by the succession could result in a new outflow of Cubans from the island. The Bush administration ended regular bilateral talks initiated by the Clinton administration on migration issues shortly after taking office in 2001.

Thale described what he called a worst-case scenario where anti-Castro Cuban-Americans, believing that population is ready to be "liberated", try to take boats to Cuba and are arrested — or worse — in Cuban waters.

"It's possible," said LeoGrande, "but you've got to figure that the Cubans are on a heightened state of alert on the expectation that crazy people in Miami might try to do something like that. In fact, I hope that the U.S. is on the alert, too, and both sides are very much aware of the potential for Cuban-American adventurism to provoke a serious conflict between the two countries."

"Having regular diplomatic contact is a way of preventing misunderstandings that could escalate into conflict, and it's especially important to have them at a time of uncertainty," he noted. "And it's almost certain that this administration won't do it."

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