

# CUBA - On the Threshold of a Critical Year

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*IPS - After a year marked by great uncertainty as to the future, Cubans are awaiting 2007 with a sense that it will bring major changes to the lives of every one of the 11.2 million people who live under the government of Fidel Castro.*

Will the 80-year-old leader return to power? If he does, will he do it with full capacities? What will happen if he is no longer around? Would Raúl Castro remain the man he seems to be, or would he surprise Cuba and the world with changes? Would it be possible for the country to experience such crucial times without violence? What would the United States do?

The questions arise again and again on the streets of Havana and other cities. Academics, labourers, homemakers — everyone in Cuba, regardless of political orientation, is talking about the same thing as the year comes to a close.

"I would die if something happened to my sister," said a 42-year-old Cuban émigré who returned to Cuba to spend the year-end holidays with her family. "Whatever happens, I just hope that peace continues to reign. We have to be able to understand each other, without anyone meddling from outside," she told IPS.

There are some who fear a social explosion, with violence in the streets, witchhunts or acts of vengeance, a mass exodus, legal claims from the most radical sectors of the Cuban exile community, or even a military invasion by the United States.

"I hope nothing perturbs the social coexistence; that the overall situation improves next year; and that well-being grows, so that we can live in tranquillity," Cardinal Archbishop Jaime Ortega of Havana said in his Christmas message published Dec. 23 on the web site of the Cuban bishops' conference.

Ortega said that in the six Catholic celebrations held between September and December this year, "a unanimous clamour for peace" was heard from those attending. "How many things are Cubans referring to when they call for peace at this special moment in our national history!" he added.

On the verge of his 25th anniversary as archbishop of Havana, the cardinal called on Cubans to resist "the temptation of anxiety over the future," and reflected that violence can be used and even justified with "apparently very noble motives."

Cubans were shaken on Jul. 31 when Castro's personal secretary Carlos Valenciaga read out a statement by the president "to the people of Cuba."

The statement, signed by Castro, announced that he had undergone emergency surgery and that for the first time since 1959 he would have to temporarily hand over power to his brother Raúl, the defence minister and chief of the armed forces.

Nearly five months after that announcement, which triggered wild celebrations among the Cuban exile community in Miami, Florida and a strange sort of inertia in Cuba, Castro has not yet made any public appearance. And no video images of the president have been aired since Oct. 28.

Rumours that Castro has terminal cancer were refuted this month by a Spanish surgeon who examined him in Havana.

"President Castro has no malignant inflammation. It's a benign process in which he has had a series of complications," José Luis García Sabrido, head of surgery at the Gregorio Marañón Public Hospital in Madrid, said Tuesday. The doctor also said Castro's "intellectual activity (is) intact."

That news, which made headlines around the world, was not reported by the national media, which is a state monopoly. The same thing has happened with other information: follow-ups on Castro's health; the controversy over Cuba's future; the concerns of different sectors; isolated incidents of social tension; and even Ortega's Christmas message.

Local authorities, the state-controlled media and political propaganda reiterate patriotic messages and the idea that the revolution will outlive Fidel and even his brother Raúl.

At the same time, the government has limited its calls for mass demonstrations, local television has limited the re-broadcasting of political events and ceremonies during prime-time, and especially during the sacred time slots devoted to popular soap operas, and the number of films broadcast at night and into the morning hours has been increased.

Local observers say these changes indicate understanding on the part of the authorities of the need to avoid greater tension or situations of discontent among the populace, and to increase entertainment options available without the need to leave home at night.

Dissidents are divided when it comes to interpreting the current atmosphere in Cuba. Some say repression has been eased and that the army could serve as a guarantee of stability and openness at a time of change, while others say arrests of government opponents have gone up and that a future under the leadership of Raúl Castro would only bring a strong-arm approach to opposition.

Raúl, who does not exercise the absolute leadership of his brother, and whose personality is very different, has emphasised the need for collective leadership, and says that in his last few months as acting president, he has focused on making sure everyone lives up to their responsibilities in running the country.

"Fidel is irreplaceable, unless we all replace him together, each one in his place," the provisional leader said Dec. 20 in a half-hour speech at a congress of the Federation of University Students.

Showing a different face, he had harsh words for shortcomings in the agriculture and transport industries, during a Dec. 23 session of parliament. "We are tired of justifications in this revolution," he said, analysing the situation in the countryside.

Some analysts say that the status quo could be maintained if the Cuban government, under Raúl's leadership, is able to make the economy more efficient, curb inflation, upgrade urban transport systems, make some economic regulations more flexible or allow a stronger role for private enterprise.

Others say transformations are also necessary on the political front, in terms of individual liberties like freedom of speech or political association, and the opening up of greater spaces for participation by the entire range of civil society.

"We believe the construction of participative socialism is both desirable and possible, even if there is a lack of dialogue and participation. United and together we can do it. We do not want to undo what has been done in forty-some years; we just want it to be improved on. But that requires dialogue and participation," Baptist preacher Raymundo García commented to IPS.

The director of the Christian Centre for Reflection and Dialogue, located 140 km from Havana, García said he is confident that Raúl Castro will assume with intelligence the responsibility that falls to him, although he recognised that "not everyone thinks the same."

"Why can't civil society participate in these issues? Why can't we reach agreements? And why preserve

the verticalism of party and state, one of the biggest flaws in the former Soviet Union, when we are neither enemies nor in favour of the United States?" he wondered.

Any in-depth change, however, will depend to a large extent on Washington and its Cuba policy. President George W. Bush's plan for a political transition in Cuba, which was released in 2004, is seen as a constant threat of external meddling and influences all internal processes.

Some dissident sectors also reject U.S. aid, which they see as counterproductive, actually strengthening the government's arguments that all opposition groups are organised and financed by the United States with the aim of overthrowing Fidel Castro.

"Cuba and the United States should have the capacity to put an end to their cold war at the negotiating table," Manuel Cuesta Morúa, spokesman for the moderate dissident coalition Arco Progresista, told IPS.

Dialogue is seen for now as a distant possibility by another leader of the opposition, Eloy Gutiérrez Menoyo, who wants Cuba's problems to be resolved "by Cubans," and who is convinced that the confrontation will continue as long as Bush is in office. And confrontation, he said, "does not contribute to the democratisation of Cuba," he added.

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