

Does Fidel Have More Lives than a Cat?: Implications for President Raúl Castro

By Jorge I. Domínguez, Harvard University

To the cheer of his supporters and the consternation of his adversaries, Fidel Castro survived the attack on the Moncada barracks in 1953, the shipwreck of the boat *Granma* in 1956, multiple assassination attempts over the years and, in August 2006 and several times since then, death itself.

In February 2008, Fidel took charge of engineering his own resurrection. He stepped down as President of the Council of State, which under the Constitution requires as well his stepping down as President of the Council of Ministers. He has been born again as “Compañero” Fidel, occasional long-form Op Ed columnist for the Cuban mass media. More importantly, he has fashioned a succession strategy that emphasizes political continuity within the core leadership and structures of power while perhaps permitting other significant changes.

A symbol and reality of his overwhelming desire for leadership continuity is how the succession at the top of the Council of State was handled. There is the president, a first vice president, five vice presidents, and a secretary of the Council of State. Incoming President Raúl Castro did not spend his time choosing which individuals to appoint vice president. Instead, the decision was to reappoint the entire Council of State as it had been configured for years, with just a single vacancy – Fidel’s. In that context, Raúl moved up to president, José Ramón Machado to first vice president, and Raúl’s successor as Armed Forces Minister, Julio Casas Regueiro, became vice president. Symbol of the same continuity is that the median birth year for this leadership is 1936, with first vice

president Machado actually a year older than Raúl Castro. “Unity” comes perilously close to immobilism.

Yet, there is a more subtle use of the theme of continuity that may permit significant changes. Consider three possibilities.

One is Raúl Castro’s authoritative capacity to quote Fidel’s texts as if choosing favorite verses from a secular Bible. In Raúl’s presidential acceptance speech, for example, Fidel, born again as Oracle, is cited to authorize a possible major exchange rate and monetary policy reform, with lags and adjustments, to be sure, but potentially the most significant economic policy reform of this decade. Yet, Fidel is also the architect of the dysfunctional dual currency structure under which Cuba has been governed for a decade and a half, with severe adverse effects on poverty and inequality. In a delicious irony, Fidel has been re-born as the agent of economic change.

A second example of possible significant change is also featured in Raúl Castro’s acceptance speech, echoing themes developed in previous remarks in the “state of the country” speech on 26 July 2007 and to the National Assembly in late December 2007. Cubans, Raúl urges, should feel encouraged to criticize whatever is not working well. He took note before the December 2007 National Assembly that he sympathized with many suggestions about ending the excessive regulations that micro-manage the lives of Cubans. And in his February 2008 acceptance speech, he reached yet again into the goody-bag of sacred Marxist texts to announce that the absence of social class contradictions in his Cuba, heir to revolution, now freed all Cubans to express their disagreements. In so doing, Raúl demonstrated the utility of being seen as the apostle of orthodoxy and continuity to enact change.

A third possibility for change is that official Cuba, accustomed may tolerate and even accept some of the suggestions from Raúl Castro's daughter, Mariela, director of the center for the study of sexuality (CENESEX) to expand the spaces of freedom for Cuban homosexuals (gendered and transgendered) through changes in legislation, decrees, and in most practical terms treatment in hospitals, police stations, and so forth. Cuba is also heir to two years of severe repression of homosexuals – sending them to forced-labor camps – in the mid 1960s (the so-called Military Units to Aid Production, UMAP), *de facto* deportation of homosexuals through Mariel harbor in 1980, and in the mid and late 1980s automatic deprivation of liberty for testing HIV positive. In that context, any and all of the changes that Mariela Castro has proposed are significant.

Most interesting has been the return to Cuban foreign policy practice adopted in the 1990s, namely, a systematic diversification of international policy partners instead of relying on one or two international patrons. By the start of the current decade, Cuba's lead partner was different in such areas as exports, imports, tourism, foreign investment, and financial debt. By the middle of the decade, Venezuela, especially, and China had emerged as the privileged partners.

Raúl Castro's foreign policy seems designed to give Cuba more options again. Prudently, he has welcomed Hugo Chávez at various times, including days after Venezuelan voters in December 2007 defeated in a plebiscite Chávez's bid for ever greater power. But Raúl Castro has also taken a major initiative to welcome Brazil's President Lula, signing several economic agreements that could make it less necessary for Cuba to depend on Venezuela. Raúl Castro's government also reached an agreement

with Mexican President Felipe Calderón's government to settle the dispute regarding Cuba's \$400 million financial debt to Mexico.

If these various subtle trends persist and gather force, Fidel's next resurrection may feature a Cuba rather different from the one he once governed.