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Close, but no cigar

Can Cuba's imminent economic, social and political overhaul provide the brighter future it has craved since Castro?

After the death of former Cuban President Fidel Castro in 2016, commentators predicted a huge social shift – the so-called "Cuban transition". But Cuba hasn't stuck to the script.

Controversial Castro's passing was expected to cause a rift within the Cuban political elite, sparking huge change. It was thought we would witness attempts to legitimise and develop the country, pushing it to become a market economy with a multi-party political system. This new Cuba would enjoy a "national reconciliation" and build bridges with the United States, who would duly see fit to lift their sanctions against the island nation.

But none of this actually happened. In 2017 we have only just started to discern the first elements of a truly Cuban transition.

Back in 2006, Fidel Castro's retirement from Presidential duties brought with it the beginning of the *Raulist* reforms, named after Castro's brother and successor Raúl Castro. Yet in public, neither President Raúl Castro nor anyone in his government used the word "reform". They preferred to talk of "updating the model" to help create "prosperous, sustainable socialism". Raúl himself has occasionally gone as far as "economic update", but has also talked about "social modifications". Upon leaving an audience with Pope Francis at the Vatican, Raúl made his first and only reference to "political" change.

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Now, following the death of former President Fidel Castro and Raúl Castro's imminent retirement (almost certain to be announced before the end of the year), the country finds itself in the throes of substantial transformation: one era is very clearly giving way to the next – and Cuba has no choice but to embrace the change.

Does Raúl have a plan for the future?

So what do we actually know about the Cuban government's plans for 2018? Constitutional reform is almost guaranteed, but how it will happen, and what role society will play is somewhat hazy.

We also know that the government will work towards something approaching a political reform agenda, which will transform the way parliament works in a number of ways:

1. There will be fewer members of parliament (there are currently 612 but the Chamber of Representatives, the building that will host the new National Assembly, has less than 200 seats)
2. Parliament is set to become "more pluralistic" (although only time will tell what the Cuban government actually means by this).
3. Parliament and its members will become more professional. There has been a statement announcing new electoral legislation and all levels of state political office will be limited to a maximum of two terms, each of five years in length.
4. The government will aim to devolve socio-political and economic power to municipal councils across the country. This is an old dream of the Second Republic enshrined in the constitution of 1940 and is currently being trialled in the provinces of Artemisa and Mayabeque.

We also know that President Raúl Castro hopes to retire on 24 February 2018 (some think he will remain Chief Secretary of the Cuban Communist Party) and that Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez is his chosen successor vis-à-vis state councils and the ministries.

But really we know very little of what is to come and any fragments of information flicker like lights in a dense fog. It is simply impossible to find out what the Cuban government is plotting in any great detail, and to learn how far the changes will go.

In what context will the transformation take place?

The backdrop for these changes is not ideal. Economic growth has stalled following the Venezuelan crisis (linked to low oil prices) and Cuba is losing its main allies in Latin America as the political right launches its offensive in the Southern hemisphere. Furthermore, in the midst of this economic crisis, and as a result of renegotiations of Cuban debt to the likes of Mexico and Japan, Cuba has been forced to start repaying large sums of foreign currency to international creditors.

Crises do not happen in a vacuum, and Donald Trump's shock election victory has certainly had a negative impact on Cuban-US relations. Trump's speech in Miami, surrounded by right-wing Cuban-Americans living in exile, gave every impression of a return to "old-style" politics. Although many of the Obama administration's core policies remain in place, a significant drop in the number of North Americans travelling to Cuba is forecast – with all the negative effects this will have on the emerging private sector.

Meanwhile the embargo regime imposed by the US is once again being exploited by sections of the Cuban-American community in their eagerness to "crush communism in Cuba". By contrast, the anti-embargo voices - both in Miami and Washington - seem stunned into silence and divided in the face of this new surge. Elsewhere, fatigue has prompted apathy from numerous demographics on the island, particularly young people.

What political challenges will the "historic generation" have to face?

The Cuban government has a tendency to ignore the very groups they should be encouraging, and whoever takes over from Raúl Castro will be forced to confront pressing questions about the island nation's future. It will be down to this leader - perhaps someone who takes a more "collegiate" approach to leadership - to unpick the Gordian knot of economic reform in Cuba: the dual currency system with all its implications for economic and social stability.

He or she will need to decide how to reshape the huge socialist cooperation - as a mechanism for keeping the strategic resources of the country in the hands of the state - while outlining a new approach to Cuba's place in the international economy both in the public and private sectors. He or she will also need to reach direct foreign investment targets of $2-2.5 million (USD) annually to guarantee GDP growth of 5-7% each year. And he or she will have to do this while keeping enough political stability to avoid sacrificing any more national sovereignty. They cannot afford to give a single inch in the face of possible calls to dismantle the universal social and healthcare security systems, which are defining achievements of the Cuban nation.

Another task will be to achieve unquestioned leadership of the Revolutionary Armed Forces, the state security services, the Communist Party of Cuba, and a society that is becoming ever more international and pluralistic each day. At the same time, the new leader will have to rebuild

the political consensus, surmounting the party's inability to transform itself. They must shape it into a grass-roots force based on an open, welcoming brand of nationalism that uses its institutional clout to unite a system of political thought dedicated to national sovereignty, economic development, social justice, and a genuinely Cuban approach to democratisation.

He or she will also have to deal with North American power (both of the soft and the hard kind), paving the way for more dialogue and cooperation with Cuban *diasporas* (ex-pats), especially the community in the US. This will mean delicate negotiations with the business elites in Florida.

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It will be crucially important to accommodate the social and political forces on the island, allowing them access to the public sphere and opening up the political system to participation: a trio of laws on associations, freedom of the press, and the electoral system will show how the new leader intends to solve the Cuban jigsaw puzzle (and, indeed, if they intend to make a serious effort to do so).

Moreover, there will need to be a far-reaching national debate on social justice and what it means, making equality the principal issue around which the whole spectrum of politics in Cuba can unite and bring about a stable, sustainable Republican consensus. Universal healthcare and education systems must be maintained and improved while the strong union movement must also remain.

Ultimately, Cubans must be given the opportunities, freedom and confidence to start building the kind of country they want to live in in the 21st century.

President Raúl Castro's retirement from the forefront of national politics this coming February will force Cuba to face its own shortcomings. When he goes, the nation will lose its last central figure of authority. Whoever replaces him in governing the country must build their own legitimacy. The new leader will need truly statesman-like qualities to steer the island nation through the unsettled seas of the 21st century.



Lenier González Mederos

Havana

Lenier González Mederos is founder and deputy secretary-general of Cuba Posible, a Cuban think-tank. He studied social communication at the University of La Habana.