



Post-Fidel Cuba — Is the New Boss Just Like the Old Boss?

With the death of long-time communist dictator Fidel Castro, some expressed hope and even predicted that Cuba would move to a more open society, with greater respect for freedom generally, and toleration of political dissent specifically.

But in the weeks following the demise of Fidel Castro, dozens of dissidents have been arrested, and others have been prevented from participating in protest marches. If anything, the situation in the island nation 90 miles off the coast of Florida has deteriorated, from a human rights perspective. The Ladies in White, female relatives of jailed dissidents, have long been allowed to march regularly in their call for their release.

Now, the government has now cracked down on the Ladies in White, preventing about 20 of them from conducting what had become a weekly protest outside an Havana church. Since the authorities know who these protesters are, they have simply kept them from leaving their homes to go to the weekly march.

Fidel's brother, Raul Castro (shown on right), has been the face of the communist dictatorship in recent years, anyway, since Fidel Castro had begun suffering serious health problems. Peter Kornbluh, a senior analyst for the National Security Archive, is typical of those who have long contended that Raul was a more "moderate" communist, and things would be different once Fidel was in the grave. As he told ABC News recently, "Raul has been a reformist, pushing pragmatically for slow but steady change — 'without haste, but without pause,' as he likes to say. There are others in the Communist Party politburo who oppose the range of his efforts to privatize and modernize the economy."

It has been common for these so-called experts to cast communist dictators as "reformists" who are having to fight their more hard-line comrades in the party leadership. While many Americans can still remember the lionization of Mikhail Gorbachev in the Western media and academia, similar assertions were made, for example, of the supposed moderation of Nikita Khrushchev and Yuri Andropov before him. Even the monstrous tyrant Mao Tse-tung was referred to as an "agrarian reformer" before he came to power in China. Castro himself was even referred to as the Robin Hood of the Caribbean.

So the liberal media and academics are surprised — or at least feign surprise — that Raul Castro is now cracking down on dissent in Cuba. Jose Daniel Ferrer, who is the leader of the Patriotic Union of Cuba, reported that homes were recently searched in Cuba, with 20 arrested in Santiago, 12 in Palma, and 10 in Havana. Ferrer said those arrested are for "political" reasons, while Raul Castro dismissed them as just "lawbreakers."

Ferrer was picked up in Santiago. "They threatened me, and said by calling [for] the demonstration I





Written by [Steve Byas](#) on December 19, 2016

was facilitating public disorder ... disobedience and espionage.”

An American human rights lawyer, Kimberley Motley, was detained Friday, along with two Cuban dissidents, Luis Alberto Marino and Gorki Avila. They were going to visit Danilo Maldonado, a “graffiti artist.” Maldonado, known as “El Sexto,” was arrested in November, the day after Fidel Castro’s death, because she painted the words, “He’s gone,” on a wall in Havana.

Motley was soon released.

Many within Cuba are not fooled by the soothing talk of a less-oppressive Cuba. In the past couple of weeks, dozens of Cuban migrants have landed in the Florida Keys. They are concerned that talk of better relations between the United States and the Cuban regime could lead to a change in the special status of Cuban refugees, in place for the past few decades. According to U.S. law, any Cuban seeking asylum from the communist dictatorship who can somehow make it to the United States is allowed to stay. So they have apparently decided that now might be the only opportunity they will have to escape communism.

Others, however, blame President-elect Donald Trump in advance for any worsening of the civil liberties situation in Cuba. For example, Kornbluh warned, “If Trump pursues an arrogant imperial and threatening policy toward Cuba, the leadership will gravitate toward hardline security officials who will focus on national security.”

Ted Piccone, a senior fellow in the Project on International Order and Strategy in Latin America Initiative in the Foreign Policy program at the Brookings Institute expressed similar views in comments to ABC News. “Trump is taking a completely backward approach,” Piccone said of Trump’s insistence that U.S. economic sanctions continue. “He’d just provoke them and hardliners in Cuba to repress people rather than open up.”

John Kavulich, president of the U.S. Cuba Trade and Economic Council, however, argued that Trump is “focusing upon the requirements of the Libertad Act of 196, which created conditions for the resumption of full commercial, economic and political relations with Cuba.”

“President-elect Trump is sharing that he desires a ‘better deal.’ He may get one,” if Raul Castro were to actually step down in 2018. “A provision of the Libertad Act requires that neither Fidel Castro nor Raul Castro be in government.”

The Libertad Act is better known as the Helms-Burton Act, which requires Cuba to hold “free and fair” elections and a Castro is not in power before the embargo can be removed.

Kavulich has argued that the communist system in Cuba is too deeply entrenched to expect much change. He dismissed expectations of immediate change as “delusional thinking,” adding, “The next months will be focused upon confirming for the 11.3 million citizens of Cuba that the ‘Revolution’ was not because of one man or only endured with that one man. It is the fabric that wraps the country and there will be no holes in that fabric.”

Raul Castro announced in 2013 that his years as “president” of Cuba will end in February 2018. His expected replacement will be Miguel Diaz-Canel Bermudez, who was appointed as “vice president” by Raul Castro in 2013. Media reports are already speaking of Diaz-Canel as a more moderate communist, saying he has spoken out for a more open press and more Internet access.



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