

Raul Castro: Confronting Fidel's Legacy in Cuba

On July 31, 2006, after more than 47 years in power in Cuba, Fidel Castro ceded his government, Communist Party, and military responsibilities to his brother Raul. As of late April 2007, the 80-year-old Fidel had not appeared in public since ceding power, even at events designed to revere him. No new policy initiatives have been taken in his name, and no line of obsequious officials has been reported waiting at his door. Now, even as the state-controlled media continue to lionize him, Castro is transubstantiating into a historical artifact, even though he remains the official head of state.

As the seasons change and the Cuban people stoically go about their business, the possibility that Fidel will return to power seems ever more remote. He has been glimpsed briefly a few times on Cuban and Venezuelan television, looking emaciated and confused following complications from as many as three major intestinal surgeries. In late February 2007, he spoke by phone with Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez in a live broadcast. He has publicly complained several times about global climate change and the use of food crops to produce ethanol, apparently his new consuming interests, while seeming oddly disinterested in conditions and developments at home. In late March 2007, he appeared for the first time outside of his convalescent quarters in Havana, standing in a garden with Colombian novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez. In these and a few other televised clips, Cubans have seen and heard a pallid, vacated version of the previously acute and always voluble Fidel, the familiar grandstanding figure who for so many years posed and strutted on the world stage.

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Some foreign observers in Havana have concluded that these appearances have been choreographed at least in part by his successors to dampen whatever expectations may be left that Fidel will be able to fully function again in office. Nothing of what was seen of his diminished physical condition seemed calculated to reassure those who hope for his return. Although he could yet reappear in the halls of power in Havana, the evidence of his physical debilitation and cognitive inconsistencies suggests

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that if he does return, it will be in an emeritus capacity. In fact, the new leadership and probably the bulk of the Cuban people seem to have moved on, relieved to no longer endure his endless monologues while suppressing all hope of relief from his strangling ideological intransigence.

There is even reason to suspect that Raul and others around him do not want Fidel back.

For example, surely it was not happenstance that Raul commented, perhaps in jest and perhaps not, in an impromptu discussion he initiated with foreign reporters in Havana in February 2007 that although his brother speaks by phone with other government officials, "it is my good fortune that he never calls me."¹

The fading Fidel still has many ardent followers on the island. Yet, most Cubans have high expectations that his abdication will soon make important changes possible. They have been feeling the first blush of hope that a more tolerant, economically liberalized, outwardly oriented era may be dawning. In a departure from Fidel's standard rhetoric, for example, the new regime is admitting that the country's economic problems are systemic, the results of corruption, inefficiency, and overly rigid central planning. Internal scapegoats and the U.S. economic embargo are no longer incessantly being blamed. Previously persecuted groups, including intellectuals, artists, and homosexuals, as well as deeply disaffected youth are beginning to see in Raul the makings of a Communist reformer. It is not yet clear, however, whether or not those hopes will be viciously dashed.

In early April 2007, his regime began implementing a tough new labor code intended to wring corruption, inefficiency, and malfeasance out of the workplace. Other measures to extirpate illegal satellite television antennas and to restrict Internet use to the approximately 2 percent of the populace now with access have also demonstrated the new regime's determination to maintain absolute political control. Raul has often in the past taken the lead in implementing such unpopular, draconian measures. As a result, he is mostly hated and feared by the Cuban people, remembered as his brother's most brutal executioner and hard-line enforcer. Unlike Fidel, he is dour and uncharismatic and will therefore

have difficulty softening his image or making restrictive new policies seem palatable to the populace. As long as his brother lingers on the scene, Raul's room for maneuver and innovation will be severely constrained.

Managing the Transition

Nonetheless, the first months of Raul's provisional government augured well for continuity and stability. He made no obvious mistakes, the leadership class showed no signs of fissures, and the streets were calm. The loosening of Fidel's iron grip did not cause the system to collapse or even to quake, as so many foreign observers had always anticipated. Underestimated and misunderstood for decades, Raul has so far been effective and confident in his new role. Moreover, the revolution and the regime proved to be more deeply institutionalized than many had thought.

He has not taken any chances either. The highest priority has been to maintain order. Any serious instability would delegitimize the successor regime in its infancy and could spur cycles of violence, even ruptures within the governing elite. Raul and his security establishment have no illusions that if order were to begin breaking down, a massive and chaotic migration by sea to Florida inevitably would ensue, putting the leadership dangerously at odds with the United States.

Accordingly, reserve military forces of at least 10,000, according to press reports, were called up in the first days after Fidel's withdrawal, and police as well as undercover security personnel were dispersed to potential trouble spots. Havana neighborhoods that had experienced previous unrest and particularly at-risk locales across the island were blanketed. Human rights activists, political dissidents, and almost all of the known pacifist opposition were put under coercive surveillance or detained. Prohibitions against any form of political expression or participation independent of the Communist Party continue to be enforced as ruthlessly as they always were by Fidel. Political prisoners remain incarcerated in mostly deplorable conditions, except for a few released for extreme medical reasons. In these and many other ways, the new regime has signaled that there will be no political relaxation.

Yet, although upholding Fidel's implacable political control, Raul is known to admire China- and Vietnam-style economic reform. He has spoken favorably of the laws of supply and demand, sent trusted military officers abroad to study business and management, and hosted foreign instructors to teach civilian and military officials in Havana. He knows that he must improve the country's economic performance, although the emphasis thus far has been on eliminating inefficiencies and corruption rather than on chipping away at the centrally planned system. The decentralizing reforms that he and many of his

advisers advocate, however, are not likely to be implemented until after Fidel has passed from the scene or is officially incapacitated.

Who Is Raul Castro?

Raul himself is the most important variable in Cuba's immediate future because his leadership abilities and qualities are so poorly understood. He has always deferred to Fidel, functioning mostly in the background, and as a result attracted scant interest in the past. Only one biographical study of him has ever been published in any language.² His complex, contradictory, and protean nature makes predictions about his behavior especially difficult. He has a well-earned reputation for bloodthirsty and brutal behavior dating back 50

years, but family members, former friends, and close associates insist that he also has a compassionate and selfless side. There is also reason to believe he has mellowed and become more pragmatic in recent years.

Since the late 1950s, he has been a full partner with Fidel, his only truly indispensable ally. In fact, Fidel probably could not have survived in power for so many years had it not been for Raul's steady management of

the armed forces. By far the world's longest-serving defense minister and Cuba's only four-star general, Raul has presided over an institution that distinguished itself in the 1970s and 1980s on distant Third World battlefields, notably in Angola and Ethiopia. Unlike nearly every other country in Latin America over the last half century, moreover, his armed forces have never been prone to coup plotting, barracks revolts, or partisan unrest. The steady maintenance of military efficiency and discipline has been Raul's most notable accomplishment.

He has many exceptional leadership qualities: organizational and managerial skills, patience, the ability to delegate and institutionalize, and a certain methodical creativity. He depends psychologically on family, old friends, and trusted colleagues in ways that Fidel never did. Raul is linear and straightforward, whereas Fidel was known for his leaps of imagination. He is cautious and practical, consulting and collaborating with others, whereas Fidel was characteristically audacious and opportunistic. Raul agonizes and temporizes when unpleasant decisions must be made, while Fidel almost always acted with alacrity and unwavering self-confidence. Yet, after so many years of Fidel's flamboyant and hegemonic leadership style, Raul's more stolid and systematic approach may fail to inspire confidence.

Raul's legitimacy and appeal is probably most at issue among Cuba's youth.

Some other key variables rooted in his personality and experiences also raise interesting questions. Will he now instinctively try to run Cuba as he has overseen the armed forces, by applying unyielding praetorian discipline throughout the civilian sector? Will the merciless or compassionate side of his nature be more likely to prevail if he is faced with the need to deal with mounting civilian dissatisfaction? Perhaps most importantly, he has never by himself managed a serious crisis, domestic or foreign. How would Raul deal with a major crisis? Might he and other leaders grossly miscalculate, say, by waiting too long to dampen rapidly rising popular expectations or to stifle protests in the streets? Conversely, he might instinctively revert to his traditional brutality and violently suppress dissent but in the process spawn even more powerful opposition.

Raul's Legitimacy

A hardened revolutionary since the early 1950s, the younger Castro has been leading Cuba in a manner intended to contrast with Fidel's manic, narcissistic style. Even before he assumed the mantle of power, Raul made it clear he would govern in a self-effacing, consultative, and collegial fashion, consistent with how he has managed the military establishment since 1959.³ The country's preeminent organizer and manager—the “producer” of Cuba's revolution in partnership with Fidel, its visionary “director”—Raul is content operating in the background, delegating responsibilities and sharing both power and the lime-light with the military and civilian leaders who reciprocate his confidence.

The legitimacy of Raul's claim to succession was never in doubt, at least within ruling circles. Fidel signed a proclamation making the transfer official, but that document merely reiterated his frequently stated instructions that his brother should succeed him. For the last three decades, Cuba's Communist constitution has also made this clear. Moreover, the highest-level Communist Party and government conclaves have repeatedly ratified the dynastic succession. Even Cubans who despise Raul tend to grudgingly acknowledge that, assuming his health permits, his permanent ascension is all but inevitable.

Most importantly, Raul's claim to succession is secured by the raw power that he holds. Civilians in the governing elite know that as long as he retains the support of Cuba's two most powerful institutions, the armed forces and the Ministry of Interior's intelligence, police, and security agencies, he will be shielded from any combination of civilian intrigue. He also controls the apparatus of the Communist Party, the country's third most powerful institution. In May 2006, he saw to the reinstatement of its secretariat and staffed it with trusted subordinates.⁴ The ultimate organizer, Raul knows that he needs that body so that he can better manage and revitalize the party.

Wisely, Raul has been constructing a broadly based regime, drawing on officials with contrasting revolutionary pedigrees and from different backgrounds and generations. Even perennial rivals in the leadership, notably the hard-line communications and information minister Ramiro Valdes, seem to have committed to collaborate with him. Encouraged to play more conspicuous leadership roles than what Fidel ever permitted, the most influential in this second tier of officials are discreetly positioning for the next succession after both Castro brothers are gone. They are confident their chances will come within the next five or six years or quite possibly sooner.

Civilian officials have no wherewithal or incentive to challenge Raul. It is better for them to rally around him, seeking the best deals possible rather than provoking confrontations that could spark instability. Most believe, in any event, that their prospects for advancement are now more promising than they were under Fidel's self-centered leadership and that Raul is sincere in wanting to govern in a more collegial and ordered regime that enlists their involvement. They undoubtedly also calculate that Raul will be an interim leader. Turning 76 years old on June 3, 2007, and a long-time heavy drinker, he probably suffers from undisclosed health problems.

The legitimacy that he enjoys within the nomenclatura has no parallel among the populace at large, however, and especially not among Cuba's restless younger generations. Thus, although his hold on power so far has been solid, a variety of developments could coalesce at any time to destabilize his regime. Raul knows, for example, that he must provide the populace with more opportunities and material advantages—bread rather than Fidel's revolutionary circuses. During his interregnum, he has already raised their expectations for meaningful change, but he has been loath to begin liberalizing the economy in any way that would seem to demean or repudiate his brother. This dilemma between the imperatives of beginning a reform process and remaining loyal to Fidel will only grow more acute until his brother dies or Raul demonstrates the will to abandon some of Fidel's most cherished but counterproductive policies.

Winning Over the Lost Generation

Raul's legitimacy and appeal is probably most at issue among Cuba's youth.⁵ He ranked last among a dozen Cuban officials in a 1999 poll of recent arrivals in Florida when they were asked which Cuban leader they respected the most. Large numbers are apathetic and alienated from the system that provides them few possibilities for meaningful work or a better life. Approximately one-fifth of the population, Cuba's "lost generation" of about 2.5 million born since 1980, has grown up during times of economic hardship and global isolation. Young Cubans dream about escaping, either illegally on rafts or small boats or by win-

ning the lottery run by the U.S. diplomatic mission in Havana that chooses the approximately 20,000 per year who can emigrate legally to the United States.

Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque spoke at some length about this potentially volatile generation in a remarkably candid speech in December 2005. He reiterated warnings issued one month earlier by Fidel that the survivability of the revolution itself was at risk, admitting that large numbers of youth have little or no “historical memory” and are apathetic, lazy, and frustrated materialists.⁶ In a society that continues to value collectivist virtues, they are individualists lacking in revolutionary convictions. Little has come of the foreign minister’s tirade because the regime has no viable short-term options for motivating or involving the youth.

Few have access to the Internet. Propagandized news and entertainment is provided exclusively by the controlled media. With high unemployment levels, most youths struggle to fulfill their basic needs and face bleak prospects. They realize that the time and energy spent in pursuing higher education yields few advantages because jobs in their professions do not exist and salaries are appallingly low. Those with access to hard currency fare better, but often their higher living standards come as the result of the humiliating, demoralizing compromises they make in dealings with foreign tourists.

Their expectations for meaningful change have been bolstered by Raul’s recognition that many of their complaints are valid and by initiatives he has taken to assuage them. Late in 2006, he engaged a large audience of university students in Havana, imploring them to “fearlessly” engage in debate about Cuba’s problems. *Juventud Rebelde*, the daily newspaper devoted to youth issues, has been transformed into the most appealing and surprisingly honest publication in Cuba. In December 2006, it published a poll surveying 280 youths about their hopes for the country’s future.⁷ Many of their responses were disarmingly candid. Some commented that Cuba will need “efficient leaders.” The editors noted that every one of those interviewed hopes that economic conditions on the island will improve. Such brutal honesty in the controlled press was unheard of when Fidel was in charge.

No variable will be more important to Cuban stability than command and control in the army.

Will the Military Hold Together?

Since its inception in 1959, the military has been the one truly indispensable guarantor of the regime and the most powerful, influential, and competent official institution. It has also been the richest one since the 1990s because of

the large number of for-profit enterprises that active duty and retired senior officers have been allowed to operate, mainly in the tourist sector.⁸

Raul seems to enjoy the support of his generals. The most senior three-star corps general and interior minister, Abelardo Colome Ibarra, is probably closer to him personally than any other officer.⁹ Three other corps generals especially close to Raul will probably also play important roles in decisionmaking for a number of years.

The need to begin solidifying the second round of succession is probably on Raul's mind often.

Ulises Rosales del Toro, a former chief of staff, most recently has served as sugar minister. One of Raul's most trusted and capable intimates, he is said to have been sent to a European country to study capitalist business and management techniques. He is considered a modernizing economic reformer and pragmatist. He is the leading candidate to become defense minister after Raul. The prospects for military unity and proficiency would be good under Ro-

sales's leadership, at least at the outset, although a number of potentially ruinous fault lines may already intersect just below the surface of the institution.¹⁰

Tensions will inevitably multiply as officers and military interest groups divide over policy choices, compete for resources and promotions, and argue about military missions in post-Castro Cuba. Once Fidel is gone, reform-minded officers are likely to advocate a break from his defense priorities, which have changed little since the advent of the revolution. High levels of defense spending and preparedness have been justified by constantly stimulating exaggerated fears of a U.S. invasion. Many modern officers understand, however, that there is really no such threat. The 50,000 to 60,000 regular personnel on active duty, augmented by vast numbers of reserves, militia, uniformed intelligence units, and special forces, constitute a capability that is out of proportion with Cuba's defense needs. When relations with the United States eventually improve, the justification for such bloated military expenditures would be obviated.

The restructuring of the top ranks of the officer corps, mandatory retirements, and reassignments of key commanders that will occur during the next several years could destabilize the institution, especially if handled poorly. In the short term, however, factionalism, officer unrest, and organized dissidence are not known to exist within the armed forces. High-level civilian and military defectors who have arrived in the United States in the last several years have reported no such problems. The high command has had 17 years to assuage the tensions that resulted from jolting purges in the army and interior ministry in the summer of 1989. Nonetheless, reliable information about attitudes in the officer corps is limited.

Of all the variables that could cause instability in Cuba in the foreseeable future, none will be more important than command and control in the army. Continuity and stability will depend on how united and disciplined the officer corps remains. If the top ranks were to divide and prey on each other, Cuba would likely descend into spreading and perhaps regime-threatening instability. One of the most likely causes of such a breakdown of command and control would be if orders were issued from the high command to use lethal force on protesting civilians. The Castros' armed forces have never been known to do that.

The main-line military leadership is more likely to sympathize with the people than to repress them violently, but there are elite units, such as the commandos, special forces, and leadership guard units, including the High Command Reserve, that are probably still fanatically loyal to Fidel. Once he is gone, they may or may not readily transfer their loyalties to Raul and could even become a destabilizing factor over time in the leadership mix. That would be true especially if some now-unknown charismatic commander assumed a politically assertive role.

Unlike the regular military units, the special forces would be likely to carry out orders to use lethal force on civilians. If such bloodshed were to occur, the military could easily rupture, with hard-line and regular forces falling into conflict with each other—a prelude to civil war and another massive sea-borne migration to Florida, which would provoke demands in the United States for a military response. If Cuba's well-armed, well-trained, and well-equipped military were to violently implode, the resulting internecine conflict could be bloody and protracted.

The 'Third Man' Problem

Over the years, there have been many pretenders and aspirants to be next in the line of succession after the Castro brothers. Until now, however, none ever really had a chance of grasping that illusory brass ring for long. There was never a "third man" either constitutionally or unofficially in the hierarchy because the Castros have not permitted anyone else to be in a position from which to challenge them. Although Raul now realizes that a timely process of identifying and legitimizing his successor is imperative for stability and continuity, no such deliberations will likely be revealed until after Fidel has died or is officially incapacitated.

Raul has never explicitly said so, but he will likely turn over the presidency to a prominent civilian. He will probably also retire as defense minister. Long attracted to the first stage of the decentralized Chinese political-economic model, he probably intends to yield those offices to trusted younger men who would be expected to preserve and modernize the revolution. Thereafter, Raul,

like China's Deng Xiaoping, will endeavor to lead from the background, holding on to perhaps only two of Fidel's titles: first secretary of the Communist Party and commander in chief. Those changes would be generally popular with the Cuban people and might also enhance the new government's international legitimacy.

Venezuelan support is critical to the viability of Cuba's economy...

Unless he stumbles politically, Politburo member and vice president Carlos Lage seems to stand the best chance of succeeding Raul. An experienced economic planner, Lage has worked well with both Castros for many years, always keeping his ego and reformist proclivities in check. He is respected by foreign diplomats and businesspeople for his pragmatism

and charm and has led Cuban diplomatic delegations abroad. Given his relative youth (he is in his mid-fifties), intelligence, and political skills, he could grow into an independently powerful chief executive if promoted.

In contrast, Politburo member and vice president Esteban Lazo would be more likely to serve as a figurehead president in the less likely event that he were chosen. In September 2006, Raul selected him to speak for Cuba at the UN General Assembly in New York where, following a precedent twice established by Fidel, he traveled uptown to deliver a speech to a sympathetic audience in Harlem. His performance there was not skillful, probably because he has had little experience representing Cuba abroad. His race, however, would be a strong political asset, considering Cuba's profoundly changed demographics. Today, considerably more than one-half of the population is black or dark skinned, and Lazo is attracting increasing attention as the country's highest-ranking African-descended leader.

Two others often mentioned as candidates for third-man status actually seem to have little chance. National assembly president Ricardo Alarcon is suave and articulate but has no top management or policymaking experience. Like Perez Roque, Alarcon is believed to be out of favor with Raul.

The need to begin solidifying the second round of succession is probably on Raul's mind often. The longer he delays implementing it, however, the greater the likelihood that rivals for his benediction will begin to conspire and feud among themselves. Most dangerously of all for the regime, if Raul were to die or become incapacitated before the line of succession after him has been legitimized, destabilizing infighting would likely break out in the leadership. There are no procedures or likely pacts within the next tier of civilian and military leaders that could ease such a transition. Even within the top ranks of the officer corps, only Rosales del Toro might have the authority and legitimacy among his peers to maintain command and control in the ranks. Popular un-

rest would be likely to follow any such leadership crisis. Together, the Castro brothers have been the essential glue that has held the regime together since its inception.

The Venezuela Factor

In the foreseeable future, Chavez will remain a critical external variable affecting the outlook for Cuba's successor regime. His government provides subsidies that were valued at more than \$2 billion in 2006.¹¹ Approximately 100,000 barrels per day of crude and refined petroleum is provided virtually free of charge, along with diesel and aviation fuel, some investment, and agricultural commodities. Although Venezuelan support is less than the \$5–6 billion in annual subsidies provided by the Soviet bloc during the 1970s and 1980s, it is critical to the viability of Cuba's economy. If the subsidies were to end, the Cuban economy would within weeks plunge into deep recession, accompanied by shortages of consumer products, energy blackouts, and transportation breakdowns. When those kinds of hardships occurred in 1993 and 1994, large regime-threatening protests occurred in Havana and nearby towns.

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Little is known about Raul's relationship with the Venezuelan president. Some observers believe the two have established a close bond, as Raul controls the Cuban intelligence and security services that maintain an enormous presence in Venezuela, organizing and training their Venezuelan counterparts. These observers argue that Raul must have been included in most of Fidel's frequent meetings in Cuba with Chavez in the past and that they have a natural concomitance of interests. Yet, except for Venezuelan and Cuban media coverage of Raul and Chavez together at Fidel's bedside, no other evidence of meetings between the two seems to exist. Raul has not been reported to have traveled to Venezuela since Chavez won power, and Chavez, who fawns on Fidel, rarely ever mentions Raul.

The bulk of evidence suggests that the two men have little in common and are more rivals than allies. Their personal and leadership styles are starkly different. As Chavez heads down the path of centralizing political and economic power in Venezuela, Raul is probably contemplating the opposite, how to open segments of Cuba's economy to market forces. Chavez, like his idol and mentor Fidel, seeks a glorious role on the world stage, especially in Latin America, where he has been devoting enormous energies and resources to building an entente supposedly reflecting the ideals of South American independence

leader Simon Bolivar. Raul, in contrast, is preoccupied with Cuba's internal problems and as yet has shown no inclination to become personally involved in international posturing. Notably, he has eschewed his role as provisional president of the Non-Aligned Movement following its triennial conference in Havana in September 2006.

Furthermore, it may be reasonable to speculate that Raul's generals, all of whom are experienced professionals, mainly feel contempt for the mercurial and boorish Chavez, a former lieutenant colonel who mounted a coup in 1992 against the democratically elected government in Caracas and against his own superior officers. Yet, Chavez's leverage over the Cubans is considerable. He could stoke instability on the island with the stroke of a pen or more likely just a nod of his head.

Looking Ahead

Generational and other tensions and uncertainties in Cuban society seem certain to increase no matter what course Raul pursues. Expectations for liberalizing change already are high and are likely to reach considerable intensity following Fidel's death. His depleted presence and participation in decision-making has created a disturbing conundrum for his successors. They are most likely in broad agreement that they must soon begin to dismantle his rigid, centrally planned economic system and encourage an independent private sector. Until now, they have been unwilling to go that far, instead tinkering on the margins. The longer that stasis persists, the greater the chances that Cuba's new leaders will begin to compete and conflict.

Instability during or following an interregnum dominated by Raul could take many forms, depending on how those conditions were first ignited. At the lowest end of the threat spectrum, isolated popular disturbances in one or a few urban areas, sparked either by economic or political triggers, might prove to be relatively easily and bloodlessly contained by the police and security forces. Cuban leaders would probably seek to ameliorate the underlying tensions by enacting targeted reforms, for example by loosening restrictions on religious observance, instruction, and possibly organization, as well as through other measures.

Yet, leaders will be intent on preventing all forms of civil disobedience and disturbances, fearing that once underway they could easily spiral out of control. Under conditions of sustained popular unrest, the regime could be faced for the first time since the mid-1960s with a violent opposition that might begin to coalesce into organized cells. Post-Fidel leaders would be uncertain and probably divided about how to respond to such challenges. Without the implacable Fidel to order merciless crackdowns and military campaigns to eradicate all opposi-

tion, his successors would probably experiment with different means of reducing or co-opting new opposition elements. Moderates in Raul's circle would advocate negotiations and concessions to pacify a rising opposition. Hard-liners would demand to do what Fidel would, brutally extinguishing all organized opposition to the old order. Their different strategies and priorities would in all likelihood generate discord and possibly open conflict.

The uniformed services will be the key. The generals commanding the armed forces and interior ministry could force change at the top almost at will, even to the extent of backing a rival to Raul or his eventual successor. Although both possibilities now appear unlikely, the generals will remain more powerful than any conceivable combination of civilian leaders, that is, as long as command and control in their ranks remains steadfast. As yet, therefore, it cannot be said with any confidence how Cuba's new leaders will manage the revolution that for nearly a half century had been the singular creation of one man.

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Notes

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