

Fate of post-Castro Cuba can't be foretold

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NO ONE predicted the transformations that have swept Eastern Europe. Yet everyone now seems ready to predict what will happen in Cuba. The days of the Castro government, we are told, are numbered. And nowhere is there greater optimism about the advent of drastic changes in Cuba than in Miami's Cuban community.



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The when and how of the changes have apparently already been decided in Little Havana. When? Sooner rather than later. How? Somehow Castro will be out of the picture, and somehow that will lead to a new order that will restore Cuba to the world of free and democratic nations, friendly to the United States, and with a rapidly recuperating market economy.

The 'new Cuba' ideal

In other words, a new Cuba will be created in which the emigres of the past 30 years would fit and would be welcomed should they decide to return. It will be a society in which most of the features of Cuban life known to the exiles prior to the revolution would be restored.

Cuban history provides a good basis for that view of political change. As I noted in a previous column, Cuban dictators have a penchant for disappearing

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overnight (in 1933 and 1959), taking with them their despised regimes and leaving behind a total vacuum, a clean slate that allows those who assume power to shape the — presumably better — Cuba that they envision.

Maybe that will happen again this time and the model of change that the exiles have in mind will indeed occur. But in reality, we do not know. Just as no one anticipated the changes in Eastern Europe, no one can accurately predict the when and how of the changes in Cuba. One has only to see the wide range of outcomes of the revolutions in Eastern Europe to appreciate the diversity of paths that a post-Castro Cuba could take.

Without wanting to throw cold water on anyone's hopes, allow me nevertheless to suggest that it is conceivable that the exit of Castro may not lead to the changes that the exile community is anticipating.

This is *not* my prediction of the course of events. Predictions, to repeat myself, are not worth much in the Cuban case. What I am presenting here is just one of the many possible scenarios for change in Cuba.

Those who are in the position to effect

significant political changes in Cuba are not the marginalized dissidents within the island nor the exiles outside. They are the Ochoas, the insiders to the system.

Castro will be replaced when and if those insiders become sufficiently strong and confident to make a move. Their motivation for acting will probably not be that they disagree with the basic outlines of the system in Cuba. Those insiders are people with a long history of service to the revolution and who owe their careers to the order that the Revolution has wrought.

Rather, they may act out of a sense that Castro has long ceased to serve the interests of that revolution. In the Gorbachev era, Cuba has become isolated, with an anachronistic repressive regime and disastrous economic policies that are totally subordinated to political concerns. Those who may assume power after Castro will undoubtedly bring a greater political openness and economic rationality than what is evidently possible under the present regime.

But — to invoke the overused baby-and-bathwater expression — those reformers may not want to throw out the

revolution along with the Castros. Ideological linchpins of that Revolution have included hostility and suspicion toward the United States, sufficient government control to maintain economic redistribution and avoid glaring class disparities, and limits on foreign private investment.

Indeed, those ideological tenets of the revolution, among others, were deeply embedded in a Cuban-nationalist agenda that long preceded — and paved the way for — the drastic process of change that started in 1959.

A stake in the 'status quo'

Ideology aside, the members of the ruling elite are not the only ones in Cuba with a stake in the continuation of the basic outlines of the present system. Although the residents of the island are undoubtedly eager for an end to totalitarianism and economic austerity, they will hardly want to turn back the clock to 1960. The redistribution of wealth that occurred after that year benefited a substantial portion of the population, largely at the expense of many of those who left the country. There would be resistance to jeopardizing those gains, and leering about the return of those who left.

Post-Castro Cuba, then, when it arrives, may not quite be what the exiles envision. Then again, it may. Perhaps when the Castros are out of the picture, everything will suddenly "be all right again," as many exiles believe.

My point is that the tide of optimism and confidence that has enveloped Cuban Miami about the when and how of the liberated homeland is, at the very least, premature and possibly ill-founded. Some of the paths that a post-Castro Cuba may take will not make it possible nor attractive for anyone to sell his Miami home and go back.

There is, I guess, no harm in hoping. The problem with high expectations, however, is that they are easily dashed. Cuban history in this century is a long string of episodes in which politicians have raised, manipulated, and eventually frustrated the people's aspirations for a better tomorrow.

I hope that we are not witnessing yet another such episode.