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## Winds of Change in Havana: Blog post

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## Winds of Change in Havana

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### Winds of Change in Havana

April 11, 2018

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In a matter of a few weeks a monumental change will occur in Cuba. For the past 10 years, Raul Castro has been Cuba's President and head of the Cuban Communist Party. In a highly anticipated and orchestrated manner, he will hand off the mantle of leadership to Miguel Diaz-Canel, a 57 year-old government insider, to become only the 3<sup>rd</sup> President of Cuba since the 1959 Revolution. While the Cuban National Assembly will officially elect Diaz-Canel to this position, he was essentially handpicked and groomed over the past five years to assume this role. Few if any Cuba followers know much about Diaz-Canel other than he has been Raul's trusted advisor, and

that he has never visited the United States in any official or unofficial capacity. For some, it raises concerns as to whether Diaz-Canel will continue the *reformist-lite* policy trajectory of President Raul Castro during his tenure, or will we see a return to the hardline position of Cuba's revolutionary vanguard. Given the revanchist policy of the Trump Administration toward the regime, the Cuban hardliners have been given a re-birth and a validation of their admonition, that in spite of Obama's overture and warming of relations, from their perspective, the U.S. policy continues to advocate for the demise of the Cuban Revolution. Any momentum gained has now lost all of its wind and has returned to the Cold War stasis in relations with the U.S. The accompanying new travel and trade restrictions serve as little more than irritants as opposed to obstacles for anyone interested but symbolically have stunted the movement forward of bilateral relations. In the end, we are no closer to end the embargo today that we were in December 2014 at the time of Obama's initiative, insofar as the *de facto* obstacles of the Cuban Democracy Act and the Libertad (Helms-Burton) Act, are no nearer to disappearing as they were on the day they were signed into law in the mid 1990's.

For anyone who has been paying attention, this will be the second peaceful transfer of leadership on the island in the since 2008, and it will mark       rst time in the past 60 years that neither of the

Castro Brothers will sit at the head of the Cuban state. It also marks the first time in the 500-year modern history of Cuba that it is not under the grip and control of a single foreign power. And in advance of the transfer of power, thoughtful *Cubanologos* have given much thought and analysis to what the ascension of Diaz-Canel signals for Cuba. Among them, Arturo Lopez-Levy has identified what he believes to be the four essential markers of change that will inform and define why the ascent of Diaz-Canel presents us with a clear break from the past, and perhaps the transformation of the “revolutionary process of social justice” underway in Cuba since 1959.<sup>[1]</sup>

First, he notes that this will indeed be a ***generational change in leadership***. For many Cubans on the island, this has been a long overdue development. But it signals that the reign of the “Heroes of the Revolution” is waning not because of their being deposed or removed from power, but more because the actuarial tables are actually playing themselves out, leaving space for a new generation of leaders to fill their roles. What questions arise focus on this is if this new and younger generation under Diaz-Canel will be content to stay the course of caution and internal control, or shift to something more progressive and transformative in the realm of state and economic policy. It is certainly something the emerging small business class in Cuba has been clamoring for, but we have few signs at this time in which direction these policies might head in the short term.

Second, Diaz-Canel will be ***Cuba's first civilian president***. After 60 years of a military-led dictatorship on the island, the military will no longer hold the symbolic head of government in Cuba, but it raises further concerns. In the short-term, will the military still control the levers of many of the island's commercial enterprises especially, those of the hotel and tourism industry, transportation and other important sectors. We have little if any indication that Diaz-Canel will be content to allow the military to continue to hold sway of these enterprises. But he may be unwilling to upset the *de facto* apple cart of the state's concession to what has been the central instrument of control in Cuban society if indeed it would undermine the ability of the military-led enterprises to continue operating in the fashion that it has since the *Special Period in a Time of Peace* in the 1990s. Would any attempt to transform or shift the priority of military control over what have been the most profitable sectors of the Cuban economy compel the military to respond in a manner that could undermine Diaz-Canel and the nascent civilian rule of the state, and would the military be content to sit on the sidelines? Furthermore, could such a development portend the uprising of civil strife requiring action by the military to quell such a development? This is important because the one thing that Cuba has been, as it relates to its domestic environment, is stable. Instability and civil strife on the island could potentially unleash a torrent of refugees fleeing from the island from across the Straits of Florida. Given the Obama decision to rescind the “wet foot-dry foot” migration policy and the special status of Cuban emigres, the potential for a refugee crisis in South Florida is a distinct possibility given the current state of relations.

Third, the ascension of Diaz-Canel to the Cuban presidency will mark a ***separation of power*** and a departure from the existing state of affairs on the island because he will not be the head of the Cuban Communist Party (PCC). In spite of his r            nent, Raul Castro will remain the head of the

PCC until the 8<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2021. This is a shift from the structure of leadership on the island since Fidel Castro assumed the party leadership in the early 1960's. As Lopez Levy states, "the separation between the presidency and the leadership of the PCC could create the victory over the final obstacle to a smooth generational change." Here it remains to be seen, but it is in his estimation, and that of other Cuba observers, this is a critical component and catalyst for transformation if the regime can successfully assume and implement urgent reforms. While not a transition to democracy, Cuba is now entering a new phase of government where many of the totalitarian/authoritarian structures are being relaxed, and the aforementioned reforms can be viewed as necessary steps in a process of transition to something less so. Conversely, it will also be interesting to observe whether, like in the case of Chile, the PCC and perhaps even the military will seek to create "reserve domains" of power in the successor and subsequent regimes. All evidence to this point indicates that the ruling gerontocracy has been unwilling to surrender few if any its seats on the Cuban Council of State, the supreme ruling junta on the island, but the Castro departure marks an abrupt shift and could mark the beginning of a permanent change in the structure of power in the Cuban state.

The fourth element the Lopez Levy highlights is the *re-circulación* (rotation) of elites in the Cuban state-party apparatus. It suffices to say that insofar as most high-level party officials of the past depended on the connection with and/or direct patronage of the Castro brothers in order to assume, or be placed into positions of leadership. Under those conditions, we could usually ascertain from which cadres these individuals were drawn – primarily those with direct linkages to the Revolutionary generation or from the ranks of the Cuban military. The question now becomes, which groups or social networks of political influence will curry the favor of Diaz-Canel when he assumes power? This is important because of the privileged monopolies of the state enterprises such as GAESA, CIMEX and Cubanacan, who control significant elements of the Cuban economy, could now come under scrutiny and demands for opening to competition on the island, as it were. Moreover, how with this jive with increasing demands upon the President from provincial party elites, the military and the rising and new corporate/small enterprise class in Cuba.

All of this merely provides a framework for understanding the key factors and driving forces of the transition in leadership in Cuba. It does not speak to the gnawing reality that the untested Diaz-Canel and the new leadership cadre will need to demonstrate an effective design and implementation of national policies that will promote and sustain economic development and well-being for a nation starving for meaningful change in these arenas. Raul Castro set into motion some very powerful forces by breaking some of the long-held ideological obstacles to wider participation in the global economy. The question now becomes, will travel, remittances, increased purchasing power and nascent business opportunities be enough to satisfy the younger generations? Ironically, Cuba faces the same dilemma that it did in the period before the Revolution, under-employment of its college-educated youth and few opportunities for the expression of personal and economic liberty. The telltale will be the extent to which the party leadership can create opportunities for this segment while ostensibly maintaining some elements

of the social welfare system for the future. If not, we should expect that the brain drain of talented Cubans from the island would continue. It won't be in a manner that is political in any way; it will be for purely economic reasons.

[1] Arturo Lopez Levy, *Cuarto claves del cambio presidencial en Cuba*. (March 18, 2018).

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