


Castro's resignation gets a shrug from some Cuban-Americans

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BY MICHAEL MARTZ AND JOE MACENKA Times-Dispatch Staff Writers

Today's news of Fidel Castro's resignation failed to inspire much in the way of hope for significant change from several Cuban-Americans who now call the Richmond area home, but it did spark optimism from an advocate for small farmers.

"I don't think it is going to make much difference," said Raul Alvarez, 50, of Ashland. Alvarez came to the U.S. with his family in 1960 when he was 12 years old and has not been back since.

The owner of Prowear Enterprises Inc., Alvarez said whatever changes are taking place in Cuba's leadership have been underway for some time.

"This does open the door to Fidel's brother, Raul, to make some decisions," said Alvarez. "He's been called 'Fidel Lite' over the years by some people. . . but in the next six months to a year, I don't think you will see much difference."

Alvarez said a lifting of the U.S. economic embargo of Cuba could have a bigger effect than Fidel Castro's departure from the Cuban government's top spot. He said the embargo already has so many holes that it doesn't have the intended effect.

"Hard-liners say no, we shouldn't end the embargo," he said. "I'm a little softer on that."

If U.S. travel restrictions are lifted, Alvarez said, he would love to visit the island country with his wife and two daughters.

"It would be great to see the homeplace, the town where I was a boy," he said. "After a week or two, I would be ready to come home. I'm happy in Ashland. My life is here now."

Ofelia Robaina, 68, who works as a counselor for Refugee and Immigration Services at the Catholic Diocese of Richmond, said she is not optimistic.

Robaina, who left Cuba in 1968, said her family and friends in Miami told her yesterday that they are skeptical that Castro's resignation will relieve political pressure in Cuba. Castro remains the head of Cuba's Communist Party, which controls the government and the military, she said.

"The power is not one man," she said. "The power is many people who are supporting him."

Many members of Miami's Cuban community believe Castro is dead, she said, and they don't trust his brother, Raul, who essentially has been running the government since Fidel became ill in 2006.

"The repression is every day bigger and bigger," she said.

Robaina said she would never return to Cuba to live, regardless of what happens to Fidel Castro. She and her late husband, Dr. Roberto Robaina, raised two daughters here.

"I am American," she said. "I owe a lot to this country. My daughters were born here and I will die here."

Manny Mendez, 45, a co-owner of Kuba Kuba restaurant in Richmond's Fan District, is another Cuban-American who said the formal switch from one Castro to another is unlikely to spawn significant change.

"I think even though his brother is five or six years younger, the country will stay socialist," he said. "You still have someone who was there from the original regime."

Mendez, who was a small child when his family came to the United States in 1968, said only small changes are likely in Cuba.

"Raul . . . is as conservative with his socialism as is his brother," he said.

The only significant change, Mendez said, will come when the nation addresses problems with its deteriorating infrastructure.

Maricel Quintana-Baker, associate director for academic affairs for Virginia's Council of Higher Education, said she finds it hard to share the hopes raised by some Cubans that economic conditions will improve under Raul Castro.

"I have read that he is in favor of the Chinese system of having more economic opportunities -- but still keeping a very close control politically and ideologically," she said. "But I suppose it might work.

Quintana-Baker left Cuba as a child in 1960 and has not returned. She has no relatives in the island nation, where her father is buried.

Jose M. Santiago, 65, teaches high school Spanish at Trinity Episcopal after a long career in the information-systems industry. His father owned Cuba's largest leaf-tobacco export business, he said, but it was taken from his family when Castro came to power. Santiago's family moved to U.S. in 1960.

He, too, said that Cuba may follow China's example and ease some of its restrictions.

"Will the U.S. open up more then," he asked, "or will it continue its failed 50-year policy? So far we have been much more willing to open up to China than to Cuba."

He pointed to U.S. interaction with eastern European countries and with Vietnam.

"It worked in those instances," he said. "Why couldn't it work with Cuba? In the free market of ideas, our ideas are better. Our ideas will prevail."

He said Cuba's offshore oil and gas resources and its ability to make low-cost ethanol with sugarcane could make it an important trading partner with the U.S.

Santiago said he still has many family members in Cuba and last visited there in 1997.

He said Castro's decision to step down opens the way not only for his brother, but also for a new generation of leaders.

"The resignation was not entirely unexpected," he said. "Castro has been so ill. . . . I think he wanted to see the change in leadership before he was out of the picture completely -- to exert as much influence as possible on those who will follow him."

Mirta Martin, executive vice president of the John Tyler Community College Foundation, still has a 75-year-old father living in Havana.

"I worry for my father every day," said Martin, who left Cuba in 1966 with her grandmother and sister.

Martin also sees no positive changes coming from the resignation of a dictator who has outlasted nine U.S. presidents.

"A communist regime under any name is a communist regime," she said. "As long as it's still a Castro, either Fidel or Raul, they will be communists and the people will continue to suffer."

If anything, Martin said, conditions may worsen under Raul Castro.

"He's always operated with intimidation," she said. "I don't know that he's not going to go back to those methods."

John W. Boyd Jr., a Mecklenburg County farmer, founded and is director of the National Black Farmers Association and met with Castro during three trips to Cuba on behalf of the NBFA. He said he sees a glimmer of hope in Fidel Castro's resignation and the larger role his brother, Raul, will play.

"His brother has said food rationing is not working," Boyd said. "I don't think Fidel ever said that.

"A window of opportunity for change is open right now. For U.S. farmers, opening up trade would be a good thing. It would help us in our bottom line. It's tough right now."

Boyd, said he is not certain how quickly change could come -- particularly during an election year -- but at least the subject can be broached.

He said the NBFA would certainly support the easing trade restrictions.

"It's a win-win situation," he said. "It's new ways, creative ways to get U.S. products into Cuba." Contact Michael Martz at mmartz@timesdispatch.com. Contact Joe Macenka at jmacenka@timesdispatch.com. Staff writer Zachary Reid and Deputy Web Editor Randy Hallman contributed to this report.