

Winds of change in Cuba?



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The recent announcement of the release of 52 political detainees in Cuba, following a dialogue between the authorities and the Catholic Church, with a discreet role being played by Spain, is to be welcomed. But it is too early to reach a conclusion about whether the green shoots will be able to grow, especially given the influence of external actors, such as the US and the EU.

The Cuban Communist Party, which has been in power for several decades, has slowly been adjusting to the *de facto* retirement of the charismatic leader Fidel Castro, 83, from the post of the country's CEO. His place has been taken by his brother, Raul Castro, 79, a fellow insurgent of the ill-fated Moncada revolt of July 1953 and the subsequent successful struggle to overthrow the US-backed dictator Fulgencio Batista in 1956-59.

The Cuban revolution brought to an end the decisive role of the US in running Cuba by remote control for over 50 years, through devices such as the infamous Platt Amendment of

1903, imposed on a country debilitated by a war with Spain. The recent dialogue with the Catholic Church and its experienced leader Cardinal Ortega has been promoted discreetly by Spain, which has considerable influence in Cuba. A large part (65 per cent) of Cuba's population has its roots in Spain. The Left-wing Zapatero government, which came into office in 2004, has consistently played a constructive role, trying to moderate the hardliners in the EU as well as countering the Bush administration, which tightened sanctions against Cuba.

It is hoped that the Catholic Church and Spain will be able to continue this constructive engagement, but they will have to deal with resistance from hard-line Cuban exiles in the US and their supporters in the EU.

RAUL'S LEADERSHIP

Much also depends on the leadership of Raul Castro and how he handles this opening. Though lacking in oratory and charisma, Raul has the reputation of being a good organiser and disciplinarian, and was a hard-line communist long before Fidel. He has visited China often and regularly, and Cuba can count on strong support from China and Venezuela. Raul Castro's efforts at economic reforms have been significant, and he seems to be taking lessons from the experience of China. He is also

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known to be a strong disciplinarian, and has wielded the hatchet without mercy against corrupt or anti-party elements. The recent purge of senior leaders such as former Prime Minister Carlos Lage and former Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque illustrates this point.

The Communist Party in Cuba is bound to remain in control in the foreseeable future, though its internal management and direction shows signs of weakness. For example, no Party Congress has been held since 1997, whereas it should normally take place every five years to renew the mandate and leadership of the Party. However, elections to local bodies, specialised sectoral organisations, and the parliament have been held regularly, under Cuba's one-party system.

Fidel has recovered from his health problems and is playing the role of a respected elder statesman, writing profusely in the daily *Granma*, which is read by all of Cuba, and between the lines by Cuba-watchers for trends in Cuba. Fidel has, of late, focused his attention on internation-

al issues, refraining from commenting on sensitive internal affairs. The transition in Cuba's leadership has been relatively smooth so far, despite Raul's age.

US RELATIONS

The US plays an important role in the affairs of Cuba, being its nearest neighbour. A large number of Cubans have relatives living in the US, including Cubans who fled after the revolution. The Cuban exile lobby has been driving US policy against the Cuban regime for the past 50 years, but is slowly losing influence.

The Obama administration, after some initial announcements, has moved more cautiously, perhaps keeping in view electoral considerations. The US Congress is discussing once again measures to lift the ban on travel by US residents to Cuba, a step that is long overdue.

Such a move could have a positive effect on developments within Cuba and lessen the influence of those in Cuba opposed to reforms. Resumption of diplomatic relations between these two estranged neighbours without preconditions is also an obvious step forward. It is incongruous that the huge US Interests Section in Havana, bigger than any other Embassy there, continues to function under the aegis of the Swiss embassy. Elements of US policy on Cuba such as the travel ban, the trade and economic sanctions, are extremely

unpopular outside Cuban exile circles, and in the rest of Latin America and the world, including the EU, judging by the votes each year in the UN against the US embargo. US businesses are excluded from Cuba, while their competitors elsewhere are able to exploit opportunities.

The whole package is seen as a clumsy effort to bully Cuba into submission, while the Cuban regime uses this to burnish its nationalist credentials, justify the present political and economic system, and encourage other governments in the region to stand up to the US. It is time to jettison a policy that has failed to work for 40 years.

The future of Cuba's reforms is critically dependent on the attitude of the US and the EU. Positive signals from these quarters and the international community would encourage further reforms in Cuba and support the Catholic Church-Spanish efforts.

No fundamental changes in the Cuban regime's policies should be expected at this stage, when the regime is coping with economic problems. However, significant incremental steps can certainly be taken. The release of political prisoners and better conditions for the detainees is to be welcomed.

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