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Brother's in charge, but Castro still holds sway over Cuba

Any major changes will probably come after death

BYLINE: ALFREDO CORCHADO, Staff Writer

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WASHINGTON - Even with Fidel Castro seriously ill and power transferred to his brother, the ailing leader's presence is widely felt and is keeping the country from taking any new economic or political direction, says the U.S. government's top diplomat for Latin America.

"We see that this regime has made this successful transfer of power and is trying to consolidate itself, but it can't define itself or separate itself from Fidel," Thomas Shannon, assistant secretary of state for the Western Hemisphere, said in an interview. "My guess is that we're not going to see that until Fidel Castro is dead and buried."

As Cuba prepares to celebrate the 48th anniversary of Mr. Castro's rise to power on New Year's Day, the country is in a sort of limbo, Mr. Shannon said. "Fidel Castro is in this odd moment where he is neither alive nor dead politically. He is alive physically, but he's not in charge day to day, and he's obviously not present day to day, but it appears that he still has the ability to sit up in bed and give orders occasionally," Mr. Shannon said.

Since taking power on Jan. 1, 1959, Mr. Castro has persevered as one of the longest-tenured and most formidable adversaries the United States has faced. Washington broke off diplomatic relations with Havana in 1961 and imposed an economic blockade of the island after Mr. Castro turned Cuba into a Soviet ally.

Mr. Castro's medical condition has been a state secret since he underwent surgery for intestinal bleeding in late July and temporarily ceded power to his younger brother Raul Castro. He has not been seen publicly since July 26, fueling intense speculation about his future.

Bush administration officials say there will be no dialogue with Cuba until the government frees political prisoners and holds free elections. But some members of Congress and critics of U.S. policy say the transfer of power presents an opportunity for the U.S. to become re-engaged with Cuba.

"Fidel Castro is a personality cult," said U.S. Rep. Jeff Flake, R-Ariz., who led a 10-member bipartisan congressional delegation to Cuba in December. "As soon as he's gone, the chaos that many predicted isn't going to happen. It will be a far smoother transition than the U.S. government would like to see. Meantime ... we are on the sidelines, watching the transition evolve with very little influence from us, and that is very sad to see."

The Cuban people have accepted that Mr. Castro "is gone," Mr. Flake said. He said he will push for a lifting of the ban on travel to Cuba during the next Congress.

Asked whether the Cuban government was using the U.S. congressional delegation to advance its interests, Mr. Flake chuckled and said, "The Cuban government has played our policy like a fiddle for more than 40 years."

Whenever it occurs, the death of Mr. Castro will have widespread ramifications for several U.S. states, including Texas. Farmers, technology leaders and airline executives will probably push to expand their markets on the island of 11 million people, the majority of them highly educated.

"Cuba, as an export market, holds enormous potential to Texas employers and farmers, and is a potential petroleum source for meeting our energy needs," said Cynthia Thomas, president of TriDimension Strategies in Dallas, a consulting firm that represents a number of Texas agricultural exports to Cuba. "Texas companies have already exported more than \$70 million in agricultural goods to Cuba over the past three years.

"Additionally," she said, "Cuba has developed unique medicines that are needed by U.S. residents."

Meanwhile, the Bush administration has intensified the embargo to promote what it calls a transition to democracy. The blockade costs the Cuban government an estimated \$500 million a year, said a senior administration official, speaking on condition of anonymity. Mr. Shannon said that Raul Castro has shown no sign that he will be any different from Fidel, despite Raul Castro's call on Dec. 2 for the U.S. government to meet with the Cuban government to work through their differences.

Mr. Shannon said four goals must be met before the U.S. government considers a change in policy: all political prisoners must be freed, human rights guaranteed, trade unions allowed to form and concrete moves made toward free elections.

"We're not going to engage with Cuba just to engage," Mr. Shannon said. "Any engagement we have with Cuba has to be part of some kind of change process that leads toward this transition to democracy, and therefore we depend on what the Cuban people think and will want us to do."

Mr. Shannon said Cubans will set the course for their country.

"Ultimately, Cuba's transition is going to be driven by Cubans, not by the United States, not by the international community or the Organization of American States, nobody except Cubans in Cuba," he said.

Mr. Shannon acknowledged that the U.S. government has no clear idea what ails Mr. Castro.

Last month the U.S. director of national intelligence, John Negroponte, told The Washington Post that Mr. Castro had "months, not years" to live.

But Mr. Shannon said the U.S. government has no hard information on his condition. "We know he's really sick, that he's not really getting any better," Mr. Shannon said. "But it's not clear to us what his problem is and what his timeline is, if I can speak of it crudely. Negroponte said that the information available to us portrays his demise in a question of months as opposed to years, but the reality is that we don't know because the Cubans don't share that information."

The Spanish surgeon who has been treating Mr. Castro, Dr. José Lu s Garc a Sabrido, indicated last week that his patient was "absolutely" not dying from cancer, but was recovering from complications after surgery to treat a "benign illness."

"Within the rules of confidentiality, what I can say is that President Castro doesn't suffer from a malignant illness," Mr. Garc a Sabrido said at a news conference in Madrid. On the island, meanwhile, Cubans prepared for the biggest New Year's Eve celebration in years.

While Mr. Castro's health remains a big concern for many Cubans, the fact that the Cuban revolution continues is a sign of its "strength and success," Marta Rojas, an author and journalist, said in a phone interview. "Sixty percent of the population was born after the revolution. That tells you about our belief and confidence in the revolution."

Staff writer Tim Connolly contributed to this report.