Cuban communists headed for oblivion

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An old and disappointed Cuban communist told me, during a recent brief encounter in Madrid: “This Sixth Party Congress reminds me of the atmosphere of sadness and nostalgia one breathes in those theaters that present their last show before being demolished.”

That’s a good metaphor.

Fidel Castro’s generation is now octogenarian. It’s giving its farewell performance. Fidel, 84, had his intestines removed in 2006, and Raúl, almost 80, will leave the stage before long. He gave himself a three-to-five-year period to transfer his authority in full and facilitate a sort of generational relay “so the heirs may continue the revolutionary task.”

What does all that mean? Nothing, except to stay in power. Although Cubans continue to repeat slogans, almost no one believes in Marxism-Leninism, while the government tries to escape from the system’s chronic failures by creating a few spaces that might allow private initiative to alleviate the disaster of collectivism. While they applaud revolutionary mottos, young people call Marx “the little old man who invented hunger.”

The adults, in confidence, acknowledge this outlook. After 52 years of dictatorship, without a hostile parliament or an opposition that could hinder the government’s work, the six basic elements that determine the quality of life of any modern society have decayed into nightmares: food, potable water, housing, electricity, communications and transport.

Raúl Castro, a realist who cannot understand why Cuban children can’t drink milk after the age of 7, is not unaware that his brother has been the worst leader in the history of the republic, founded in 1902. In 56 years of capitalism, despite bad administrations, corruption, frequent uprisings and periods of military dictatorship, the island became one of the most prosperous countries in Latin America, and Havana one of the most beautiful cities in the world. The public sector was mediocre or bad, but civil society functioned reasonably well.

In contrast, in 52 years of communism, society became pauperized, and the urban landscape took on the appearance of a bombed territory. The communist-imposed public sector was terribly clumsy, infinitely worse than the one in the capitalist era, and civil society (which Raúl is trying to revive via artificial respiration) was cruelly crushed.

This is the melancholy diagnosis with which Cuban communists must celebrate their Sixth Congress. Raúl has summoned a docile ruling circle and asked it to support his timid reforms and legitimize the
handpicked functionaries. The idea is to appoint cadres under the age of 60, but the ones who existed — Carlos Lage, Felipe Pérez Roque, Roberto Robaina, Fernando Remírez de Estenoz — were destroyed by the rulers themselves.

Who will emerge as the heir presumptive? The name is whispered (though no one is certain) of Marino Murillo, a 50-year-old economist, former Army officer and former Minister of the Economy, despised by the apparatchiks ("he's a lowly auditor, not an economist," I was told by an especially shrewd observer), who today is in charge of disciplining the Party so that, during this Sixth Congress, it will accept, without a whimper, the changes proposed by Raúl. He is said to owe total allegiance to the general-president and to be committed to retaining the basic elements of the communist system, although eliminating paternalism.

Will he succeed? I doubt it. Raúl, with the aid of Murillo, his ideological stepson, wants to build a socialism without subsidies and a capitalism without markets. That's impossible.

That monstrosity has to be buried, the way it was done in Eastern Europe. However, it is not improbable that, after the departure of the Castros, the armed forces will hold on tightly to power for awhile, but only until a spark is lit and we see in Cuba a violent finale.

Those who insist on impeding the natural evolution of history end up provoking devastating catastrophes.

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