

(IPS) - Lacking the charisma of his brother but possessing a personality that is perhaps easier for the average Cuban to identify with, Raúl Castro, slated to replace Fidel as Cuba's new president, will have to push through major economic and political transformations if he hopes to guarantee the survival of the country's socialist system.

"Change" seems to be the byword in this Caribbean island nation since acting president Raúl Castro, in a famous Jul. 26, 2007 speech, called on Cubans to hold meetings to discuss the country's most pressing problems.

His main message at the time was that everything is subject to change, and that what worked yesterday does not necessarily make sense today.

The new National Assembly (parliament) will face "a complex stage" and "major decisions, little by little," Fidel's younger brother said just a month ago, after casting his vote for the country's single-chamber parliament and provincial officials.

Of course, changes promoted at the highest levels of government have their limits, and for now they are set in the context of the construction of a Cuban-style socialist model that would incorporate structural, economic, legal and even political reforms.

"Raúl has a sense of the need for change," a 52-year-old retired educational system worker commented to IPS. "There are many things that cannot remain as they are."

Others, less optimistic, say the acting president played a role in some of the most hard-line policies of the past, although they also recognise that he has pushed for economic reforms.

While the tendency in Cuba is to wait calmly "for whatever lies ahead," people in the Cuban exile community in the United States question what kind of changes could be ushered in by a government led by Raúl Castro.

Jaime Suchlicki, a historian at the University of Miami, told the press that real, structural changes cannot be expected.

General Raúl Castro, who was defence minister, first vice president and second secretary of the ruling Communist Party, would appear to be the only possible candidate in the elections for the president of the Council of State to be held Sunday in the new parliament's first session.

Close to him is Vice President Carlos Lage, a 56-year-old doctor and former leader of the Young Communist League, who was heavily involved in the economic reforms adopted in the 1990s and has stood in for Fidel Castro in international meetings on several occasions.

After temporarily yielding power to his brother on Jul. 31, 2006 due to emergency intestinal surgery, the ailing Fidel announced Tuesday that he would not accept reelection as president of the Council of State and was also retiring as commander-in-chief of the army.

Without mentioning his position as first secretary of the Communist Party, Fidel said in a statement that his "only wish is to fight as a soldier on the battlefield of ideas," and that to do so he would continue writing his column in the Cuban press as "just another weapon in the arsenal that you can count on. Perhaps my voice will be heard."

After his resignation was announced, speculation expanded to include the possibility of changes in a system that up to now has concentrated the positions of head of state, government and the Communist Party in the hands of a single person.

The separation of powers, which would require a constitutional reform, would be a major transformation for Cuba and a sign of comprehension on the part of the country's current leaders of the need for a more collective leadership -- something that Raúl has tended towards since his brother fell ill.

Analysts say the question now is to achieve a model of government that would seek balance and consensus, both within the current political class -- which encompasses several generations and diverse political visions

regarding Cuban reality -- and with respect to the demands and hopes of Cubans.

More than 1.3 million specific proposals were collected during the open assemblies and public meetings held in Cuba since Raúl Castro invited people in his Jul. 26 speech to debate the country's problems.

The broad range of concerns include, according to different sources, issues like the fact that many goods are sold in convertible currency, which puts them out of the reach of ordinary Cubans, the real value of wages, housing problems and the limitations involved in the system governing the "trading", selling or building of housing units, the public transportation crisis and the quality of education and health services.

Other concerns expressed refer to the limits on private enterprise and self-employment, the fact that Cubans can no longer stay in the country's beach resort hotels, which are now only open to foreign tourists, and the restrictions on travelling abroad.

The list also includes the need for a restructuring of the agricultural system -- reforms that the government is already pushing forward -- calls for a revival of some of the economic opening measures of the 1990s, which were rolled back, and protests against the return to an excessively centralised state, after the decentralisation adopted as a solution to the severe economic crisis of the 1990s.

The majority of the proposals set forth by Cubans in the public debates call for "certain changes" that would, however, "help sustain the current social policies," Mariela Castro, head of the Cuban National Centre for Sex Education, told IPS.

Castro, who is Raúl's daughter, added that she would like to see these open public debates become "a permanent mechanism."

The meetings convoked by Raúl Castro were complementary to debates conducted by means of e-mail, blogs and Internet sites over the past year, through which many Cubans expressed their views in favour of significant

changes within the current political system.

Baptist minister Raimundo García, executive director of the Christian Centre for Reflection and Dialogue, said another important challenge is creating "spaces for dialogue" and for more effective participation by different sectors of civil society in the search for local solutions.

In addition, the sixth congress of the Communist Party, postponed since 2002, will have to be held as soon as possible, to approve the main political and economic guidelines that the country will follow in today's post-Fidel Cuba.

And all of this during an election year in the United States -- a circumstance that inevitably marks politics and even daily life in this country that has been caught up in a bilateral conflict with Washington for nearly half a century.

"There are sectors within the government that realise that Cuba must modernise," said dissident leader Manuel Cuesta Morúa.

In his conversation with IPS, he also mentioned the need for what he called "common sense changes" in areas like "housing, food and wages, all of which have to do with social wellbeing."

With respect to Tuesday's announcement, the spokesman for the moderate dissident Arco Progresista coalition said Fidel Castro "took the right decision at the right time."

He referred to the decision as "courageous" and said it paved for the way for "the changes that the country needs and is demanding."