

Cuba replaces top Cabinet ministers

Cuba unexpectedly replaced some of its most powerful and visible officials on Monday March 2, 2009, including Vice President Carlos Lage and Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque.

The surprise change, involving about 10 top officials, was announced at the end of the midday newscast by Cuba's supreme governing body, the Council of State.

Lage, 57, was one of five vice presidents below Raúl Castro and had served as a de-facto prime minister. He was credited with helping save Cuba's economy by designing modest economic reforms after the Soviet Union collapsed. Lage was replaced by Brig. Gen. Jose Amado Ricardo Guerra, long Raul Castro's secretary at the defense ministry.

Perez Roque, 43, was previously personal secretary to Fidel Castro and a former leader of the Communist Party youth organization. He had been foreign minister for almost a decade. The new Foreign Minister becomes Bruno Rodriguez Parrilla, No. 2 in the ministry.

Replacements took place also at following positions: Vice President of the Council of Ministers; Secretary of Council of State; Science, Technology and Environment Minister; Economy Minister; Internal Commerce Minister; External Commerce Minister; Food and Fishing Minister; Finance Minister; Heavy Industries Minister and Labor Minister.

Fidel Castro wrote in a column published Tuesday March 3, 2009, a day after two of his trusted allies lost their posts in the Cabinet that he was consulted before his brother made these changes to the halls of power.

"The new ministers who were just named were consulted with me, even though there was no rule requiring those who named them to do that," Castro wrote. Lage and Pérez both made controversial comments about Venezuela during their tenure.

Speculation over what the moves mean range from Raúl Castro aiming to finally take firm control of the government to simply trying to streamline the country's bureaucracy. Many analysts remain confused by the moves, though opinions abound.

"Some of the hard-liners known as the 'Talibans' that were put there by Fidel are out, which suggests Fidel is losing power -- if he has not lost all power," said Cuba expert Carmelo Mesa-Lago. "By taking out Fidel's men, Raúl has a more free hand."

Power shakeup casts more doubt on post-Castro Cuba The ouster of Cuba's two most prominent younger leaders leaves more doubt than ever about who will guide the country once the Castro brothers and their gray-haired revolutionary contemporaries are gone.

With the replacement there are no obvious next-generation successors in the ranks of mostly obscure communist party officials, military officers and bureaucrats who were suddenly promoted this week in Cuba's largest leadership shake-up in decades.

"This is the old guard, most of them are very traditional hard-liners," said Uva de Aragon, associate director of the Cuban Research Institute at Florida International University in Miami. "It's disappointing in a sense that it doesn't give a lot of room to think about a generational transition."

A Communist Party Congress this year could shed some light on future successors — perhaps from Cuba's military — but Lage's demotion leaves Cuba without a clear third-in-line to the presidency for now, said Oscar Espinosa Chepe, a state-trained economist who became an anti-communist dissident.

"I can't give you a name, but it's the military, the generals who in practice are now even more powerful perhaps than Machado Ventura," added Espinosa Chepe, who was freed for health reasons after being jailed for his political beliefs. "If Mr. Raul Castro were to fall ill, the military would take a larger role."

Jaime Suchlicki, director of the Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies at the University of Miami, agreed that the country's military has emerged stronger after the shake-up.

"I don't think there's any question that it gained the most from this," said Suchlicki, who has written about the longtime defense minister's "militarization" of Cuba since inheriting the presidency a year ago.

More soldiers at the top could make a key player of 67-year-old Gen. Ulises Rosales del Toro, the former sugar minister who in November took over the long-vacant post of agricultural minister. Also, while his name and face are well-known to the Cuban public, his personality seems low-wattage enough to avoid drawing the Castros' ire for being too ambitious.

Suchlicki believes another personality to watch is Ramiro Valdez, 76, a hard-liner who could be seen as an eventual compromise between Cuba's military and its revolutionary leaders.

Valdez fought alongside the Castros and Guevara in the 1959 revolution and holds the honorary title of "commander". But Valdez Mendez is a civilian and was tapped to replace Rivero Torres as Cabinet vice president on Monday. He also recently accompanied Raul Castro on a lengthy visit to Russia.

According to Ann Louise Bardach another eventual presidential possibility could be Raul Castro's son Alejandro, an adviser to his father and official at the Interior Ministry.

"If I had to bet, it would be on Raul's family," Bardach said, adding, "at least today, I'd go with more dynasty, surrounded and protected by historicos," a reference to those who fought in the 1959 revolution.

But more than individuals, Cuba's government depends on strong institutions.

"It's very, very difficult to look at personalities. I like to look at Cuba from an institutional point of view, the strength of the military, the strength of the Communist Party," Suchlicki said. "As long as we don't see any cracks in the military, or the party ... there is going to be, or at least very likely to be, a continuation of the current regime."

Sources: AP, Miami Herald

Cuba travel bill in U.S. House of Representatives

U.S. restrictions on trade with Cuba and family travel to the island would be eased under legislation passed by the House of Representatives on Wednesday (February 25, 2009) but the changes could encounter trouble in the Senate.

Supporters hope congressional action will be the first step toward reviewing and possibly reversing the decades-old U.S. policy of shunning Cuba. Tucked into a larger spending bill, most of the changes would expire on September 30 unless there is a move to extend them by Congress or President Barack Obama.

Obama has made clear he favors relaxing limits on family travel and cash remittances by Cuban Americans to Cuba, although he has said the U.S. trade embargo against that country should stay in place to press for democratic reforms.

The legislation approved by the House does not lift the overall embargo. But it would prohibit the Treasury Department from enforcing Bush administration rules requiring payment of cash in advance for agricultural sales to Cuba.

Analysts believe that U.S. rice sales to Cuba will soar if the provision becomes law. Rice sales declined every year after the cash-in-advance rules were imposed in 2005, because Cuba could turn to Vietnam -- a country with which it has close ties -- for rice on easier terms.

The House-passed legislation also would provide for general travel licenses for travel to and from Cuba for marketing and selling agricultural products. And it would allow Americans with relatives in Cuba to travel there more frequently and for longer periods of time.

Sources: Sun Setinel, Reuters