

The Americas: Risks and Rewards of Decaying Authoritarianism

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Pushing regime change in Iraq and Afghanistan cost the United States trillions of dollars and involved the sacrifices of many nations. Regime change is starting to take place on its own in the Western Hemisphere without the loss of thousands of lives or draining the U.S. treasury. However, a good outcome is anything but certain, and the wreckage could prove just as damaging to America's short-term national security interests as events in the Middle East.

The countries in question are Cuba and Venezuela, and the presumption of risk in regime change seems counterintuitive. After all, both governments have been hostile to the United States and Western-style democracy as long as their current leaders have been in power. Many Americans remember when Cuban president Fidel Castro invited the Soviet Union to install nuclear-tipped, medium-range ballistic missiles on his island. In the last decade, Venezuela's Hugo Chávez converted his country into a welcome mat for nuclear wannabe Iran to make in-roads in the hemisphere.

The demise of these projects is no cause for sorrow. However, dangers exist in each case. Cuba lies just 90 miles off of Florida's shores. Former president Fidel Castro may be 85 and frail, but his hard-line political influence is enormous. As long as he lives, reforms must be gradual. The more moderate brother Raúl Castro, 80, shows signs of wanting to accelerate market and political reforms, but seems reluctant while his brother is *compos mentis*. As long as Raúl outlives Fidel, a transition of sorts is more or less assured. If Raúl departs first, a power grab might ensue.

The result could be an internal conflict at a time when the state is nearly bankrupt, trying to transition its captive labor force from dependency on government welfare—where, as the old joke goes, Cubans pretend to work and the state pretends to pay them—to self-employment and private-public enterprises. Discontent is not likely to arise in Cuba's bucolic countryside, but in Havana, where millions of younger Cubans feel little connection to the faded glory of the Castro regime.

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Two potential problems leap out of this scenario. The most immediate would be a mass migration when a floundering state would be powerless to stop it. In 1980, the Mariel Boatlift sent more than 125,000 Cubans to U.S. shores when Fidel decided to rid the island of malcontents and criminals. The Boatlift ended when the Carter administration pressed the Castros to end further departures. If the regime loses control, migration could be a larger and more dangerous event.

The other problem is losing Cuba's cooperation on counternarcotics if the situation becomes chaotic. Yes, believe it or not, the Cuban government and the U.S. Coast Guard cooperate in counternarcotics matters. For now, Cuba does not have a huge drug trafficking problem because the regime takes strong measures to stop it. A sudden breakdown could complicate transnational crime difficulties in the Caribbean at a time when trafficking is epidemic.

A transition in Venezuela could have a more widespread impact. As President Hugo Chávez reportedly convalesces from a second cancer surgery, doubts grow concerning whether he will be able to make it through his current term, much less another after elections this coming October. First, his recent elevation of generals with alleged criminal histories to senior government positions suggests a military takeover in his absence and perhaps a civil conflict should armed Chávez loyalists, aided by factions in the military, go after opponents. Venezuela's new defense minister, General Henry Rangel Silva—a U.S.-designated drug kingpin—has said that an opposition government, if elected, would be unacceptable.

Second, Venezuela is more lawless than ever, despite a so-called police reform in 2009 to put all police under Chávez's thumb. It now has the fourth-highest murder rate in the world and is South America's transit hub for cocaine

going to North America, Europe, and Africa. Hence, narcotics trafficking and other criminal enterprises could take advantage of even less effective policing during an internal conflict, affecting Colombia, Brazil, Guyana, and nearby Caribbean states.

Finally, Venezuela's official finances are already hard to track since Chávez's domestic political projects and foreign aid initiatives are mostly off the books in the form of oil shipments and suitcases stuffed with cash. Without him, Venezuela could be in tough economic straits until the money mess gets sorted out. In turn, aid-dependent allies such as Bolivia, Nicaragua, and some Caribbean countries could suffer mightily without current subsidies. Cuba, heavily dependent on Venezuelan petroleum—which it resells—would be hardest hit.

With resources stretched to the other side of the world, the United States does not need two new centers of conflict in its own hemisphere. That does not mean Washington should throw a lifeline to these authoritarian regimes. Rather, U.S. policymakers should anticipate the potential dangers presented by their decay. Foremost in minimizing such threats is encouraging greater adherence to democratic principles. This is not easy for the U.S. government to do in Latin America, so often remembered for its interventions.

Fortunately, the United States does not need to do all the heavy lifting. Our democratic neighbors can press Cuban president Raúl Castro to accelerate reforms while he has time. And they can signal Venezuela's military and political parties that any deviation from free and fair elections and respect for deeper democratic principles will mean certain isolation. But this won't happen by wishing it. Our State Department needs to start the quiet conversations now. ■