

The Miami Herald

Posted on Mon, Apr. 18, 2011

Cuban Communist Party Congress trapped in time loop

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Ismael Francisco / AP

Cuba's President Raul Castro casts his vote to elect the new Cuba's Communist Party Central Committee during a 6th Congress of the Cuban Communist Party session in Havana, Cuba, Monday, April 18, 2011

“Dramatic changes are sweeping Cuba as party convenes” read a Miami Herald report, which lauded the “fresh breezes ... blowing across the revolutionary island for over a year.” While courting the Catholic Church leaders, the congress would tackle frustrated workers, high imports and crushing inefficiency. Sound familiar?

It's 25 years later, and the Cuban Communist Party is meeting again, for the sixth time in its history. The litany of vexing concerns is virtually identical — but the approach to solving them could not be more different. This time, experts agree, there may actually be something fresh in the air.

“This is the most important party congress since the party was founded,” said American University dean William LeoGrande, an expert on Cuba's single political party. “It's making fundamental changes in the direction of the Cuban economy.”

Some 1,000 delegates convened Saturday in Havana to debate nearly 200 economic proposals aimed at boosting Cuba's freefalling economy. The measures allow micro-businesses and debate things as profound as laying off a half-million workers and allowing home ownership in a socialist state. The party also plans to elect a leadership team.

On Monday, leaders began voting on shifting the economy toward private enterprise and its new leadership. There's been no word on the names of the candidates for the Central Committee, a leadership group of about 100 members or the more elite Political Bureau with 19 current members, including Fidel and Raúl Castro.

The votes appeared to signal that the party Congress was moving along with no snags despite the gravity of the issues before it. Results are expected to be announced at the conclusion of the conclave, expected to start at 10 a.m. Tuesday.

Fidel Castro, who claimed last month that he had surrendered his duties as first secretary when

he suffered an intestinal infection that nearly killed him in 2006, has not attended the Congress sessions but wrote in a column Monday that he watched some, apparently on television.

He was impressed by the “high cultural level” of the young delegates, Castro wrote. “I cared less about what they said than the form in which they said it. They were so well educated and their vocabulary so rich that I almost could not understand them.”

Fidel made no mention of Raúl’s reforms but there is great hope that the economic moves will finally be the shock therapy Cuba has long awaited. Cuba-watchers say the nation’s Communist Party has a long history of tepid party congresses. The five prior congresses enacted short-lived measures that failed to revive a stagnant economy and often simply ratified whatever had come from up top.

The result: 35 years of flip-flopping economic proposals that went nowhere.

The Cuban Communist Party was founded in 1965 but did not have its first congress until 1975. The first two congresses, in 1975 and 1980, served to reiterate whatever Fidel Castro said at the moment, even if it was the opposite of what he had said at the last party assembly.

“It was sort of, ‘This has all been a good idea, right?’ ” LeoGrande said.

At the ’86 congress, the party retreated from prior market experiments and distanced Cuba from the perestroika in the Soviet Union. The “economic reforms” included eliminating farmers markets.

In 1992, Cuba was in the throes of a debilitating recession and decided to allow small businesses, foreign tourism and a dual-currency. By 1997, Cuba was recovering from its so-called “Special Period” and scaled back the small business opportunities announced just five years earlier.

“In the past it was more of the same: elegies to Fidel, whatever Fidel said, and it’s over,” said dissident economist Oscar Espinosa Chepe. “If this congress becomes ‘just another meeting,’ it will be a big blow.”

The conference is the first since 1997. It’s also the first without Fidel, the country’s iconic leader. That means real debate between delegates, some of whom are opposed to some of the radical ideas Raúl Castro put forth.

“Now you have a struggle between the historic conservative element and the faces represented by Raúl Castro,” Espinosa said. “In this congress, they are going to consolidate a new force of people in the party, who are educated and better-trained. If there is one thing that has changed in Cuba, it’s the mentality of the people, who are now more willing to speak openly.”

In his speech Saturday, Raúl Castro said nearly 1 million people at 163,000 different meetings have already reviewed the measures the party delegates are debating this weekend.

“This process has exposed the capacity of the Party to conduct a serious and transparent dialogue with the people on any issue, regardless of how sensitive it might be,” he said, calling it a “truly extensive democratic exercise.”

The party congress doesn’t ever come up with bold new initiatives that come from the delegates, but experts say it’s a mistake to consider the four-day meeting a mere formality.

“I wouldn’t call it a rubber-stamp,” said Philip Peters, a Cuba analyst at the Lexington Institute, a Virginia think tank. “One thing that’s very different now is that in past ‘status quo’ congresses, the fundamentals of their economic management were not under question. They have to fix the economy in a big way. There’s a lot of rhetoric, and also a lot of specific recommendations.”

The municipal and state delegates are the ones charged with implementing broad changes, and they have to be brought on board, said Philip Brenner, an international relations professor at American University who follows Cuba closely.

El Nuevo Herald staff writer Juan Tamayo contributed to this report.

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