

AFTER CASTRO EXITS

Afro-Cubans worry about their future

By Karen Juanita Carrillo

THE AMSTERDAM NEWS

NEW YORK — The latest rumor from Cuba is that the nation's leader, Fidel Castro, may have Parkinson's disease. It's only one of many tales about Castro's health,



Castro

his wealth, and his governing abilities.

It's a CIA assessment that Castro personally refuted by delivering one of his customary five hour long speeches to a group of Havana University students.

Castro has long been the subject of near-death rumors, despite the general health he enjoys at 79 years old. The reports usually originate in Florida's exiled Cuban-American community, where many have never forgiven the Cuban leader for taking power on the island during the 1959 revolution.

Cuba's president traditionally dismisses the various rumors of stroke, brain hemorrhage, hypertension and other illnesses as the vengeful wishes of enemies who would love to see him dead. Still, the inevitable reality of Fidel Castro's true passing is bound to lead to drastic changes on the island nation. And the most striking changes will affect the lives of Afro Cubans.

"Black Cubans continue to lag behind white Cubans," notes the journalist and activist, Willie Mack Thompson. "President Castro has spoken to this, but this is especially frightening in an anticipated leadership transition.

"My concern is that if black Cubans enter into this transition with less resources and income and less status than they will not be able to compete and will thus be relegated to their pre-revolutionary status. It will be a class struggle based on status."

Out of the shadows

Castro's 1959 revolution took Cuba out from under the control of monied interests strongly allied to the U.S. government. Between the large agri-businesses and Mafia-controlled casinos, hotels and prostitution rings throughout the island, black and white Cubans had bitterly complained of being treated as if they lived on a large offshore U.S. plantation. Castro's revolution nationalized island businesses, which led to the end of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States and a now 43-year-old U.S. economic embargo against the island.

Cuba's survival has been buttressed by the education, employment and social inclusion of its large black population. But the fact that blacks are not central to the political structure in Cuba may prohibit Afro-Cubans from playing a central role in controlling the island post-Castro.

"The black population there realizes that they have made gains since the Revolution," notes Harlem activist Elombe Brath. "They understand that it's to their advantage to maintain the Revolution."

Race-based discrimination was so fine-tuned in Cuba prior to Castro that even the nation's former president, General Fulgencio Batista, was denied admission to exclusive clubs because he was considered a mulatto, pointed out Brath, who hosts "Afrikaleidoscope" on WBAI-FM in New York.

"There has always been a relative silence among Cubans about race and racial inequality," said George Priestley, who directs the Latin American Area Studies department at CUNY's Queens College. "And given the fact that so much has been done to erase the racial problems the island had, and that so much was done to address the issues of structural inequality, racial identification was for a while not encouraged. And a Black identification was particularly not encouraged."

The popularity of reggaeton, hip-hop and floetry among Afro Cuban youth may spark a higher degree of ethnic awareness, Priestley added. And that ethnic awareness and Black pride should spur stronger political responsibility.

Tied to revolution

But in the meantime, the political awareness of Afro Cubans remains exclusively tied to the revolution. "And Fidel is the one sustaining the Revolution: the reason Cuba is so strong is because of Fidel," said a prominent U.S.-based Afro Latino journalist who preferred not to be named. "After Fidel, the Cubans in Miami will simply pounce on the island," this journalist contends. "They have connections in Cuba; they have their people in place in Cuba already. When they take over they're going to be opening up the political arena to the U.S. again.

"The problem is going to be with black Cubans who are not used to taking orders and won't stand for it. The white Cubans in Miami are still racists. They're making preparations for their return, but their plans don't include concerns about black people."

The majority of Miami-based Cubans are right wing and anti-Castro, called "gusanos" (worms or "vendepatria" (traitors) by Castro supporters. There are left-wing Castro-supporting Cubans also living abroad, but they are not as frequently heard from in the media, because they are generally labeled communists. Cuba has also been branded communist since the Castro-led revolution, but supporters see Castro's efforts as continuing the island's push for independence.

Cuba has ostensibly been "independent" since Dec. 10, 1898, following decades of fighting between the nation's independence army, the Cuba Libre, and Spain. By 1898, the war was between Spain and the United States, but Cubans had declared their independence as early as Oct. 10, 1868. At that time, they'd also called for the island to end its enslavement of black people, but emancipation from slavery was not made law until Oct. 7, 1886.

What next?

Afro Cubans took the lead in the fight to end Spain's dominance on the island, and for three decades they formed the majority of soldiers in Cuba Libre's ranks. After its independence from Spain, Cubans felt they had to continue their fight to gain independence from the United States. Castro has always termed his revolution a further battle in the struggle for Cuba's independence.

"Fidel is a mortal being and as a mortal being he will die one day," notes the Afro Cuban journalist, author, and broadcaster Pedro Perez-Sarduy. "But Cubans know that Cuba has been transformed into a revolutionary nation over these past decades. And Cuba will remain a revolutionary nation for many years to come — with or without Fidel.

"I think these kinds of worries, so often repeated in recent years and mostly by people of goodwill, who don't live in Cuba — is in many ways similar to the wishes of those who don't want the best for Cuba after Fidel dies," Perez-Sarduy adds. "Obviously, it would be shameful for most of Cuba if the Revolution does not survive the death of its principal creator. But he is not the only defender of the revolutionary ideals that began in 1868 and re-emerged on July 26, 1953 during the attack on the Moncada barracks in Santiago de Cuba. Cuba will survive with or without Fidel."

Caucus plans for N.C. lottery

Continued from page 1A

tery will be used: 50 percent will go towards class size reduction efforts, 40 percent towards school construction and 10 percent for scholarships.

Thompson said students will be able to apply for the scholarships if they commit to at least four years of teaching in the state after they graduate from college.

James Fuller said in Georgia, students who graduate with at least a B average are able to attend most state colleges free of charge because of the lottery. He wanted to know how the scholarship process would work in N.C., explaining that many black students do not finish high school with a B average.

NCBLC chair Carnell Robinson said new lottery director Tom Shaheen does not have to adhere to the state minority hiring regulations.

"The law needs to be amended (on hiring

practices)," he said.

Anita Smith asked if there was anything in the plan to help citizens who have a gambling problem. No one had an answer.

NCBLC members agreed to form a special committee to write a letter to the Lottery Commission, specifically requesting that African Americans receive fair and equitable treatment when it comes to opportunities.

Robinson said it is important that the letter ask for inclusiveness and fairness for blacks across the state, instead of just falling into a larger pool of minorities or low-income residents.

Erin Byrd agreed, noting that the purpose of the NCBLC is advocating for the equity of African Americans.

"That's what our mission statement says," she said.

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