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Charismatic Authority and Leadership Change: Lessons from Cuba's Post-Fidel Succession

BERT HOFFMANN

ABSTRACT. When Max Weber introduced the concept of “charismatic authority” into the social sciences, acknowledging its great transformative potential, he stressed its inherent problem of succession. This proposition has been tested in the case of one of the most emblematic charismatic leaders in modern politics, Cuba’s longtime revolutionary leader Fidel Castro. When he fell ill in 2006, conventional wisdom assumed a major crisis of succession to be inevitable. So how was it possible that the Cuban regime was able to stage a gradual and orderly succession? In addressing this question, the article identifies four key ways in which the empirical experience of the post-Fidel succession challenges our theoretical understanding of the link between charismatic authority and political leadership change.

Keywords: • Political succession • Charismatic authority • Leadership change • Max Weber • Cuba

Introduction

The question of succession in the highest political office is one of the key problems any polity has to resolve. In this, the type of authority and leadership is a critical factor. While in modern political democracies constitutional provisions, time limits on mandates, and competitive elections are in place to resolve the succession in a state’s highest political office, things are different in nonpluralist political orders. The less these are defined by traditional or bureaucratic-rational norms and institutions, the thornier the issue of succession tends to be. So when Max Weber introduced the concept of “charismatic authority” into the social sciences,¹ he underscored the great revolutionary power it can have; but at the same time he pointed to the inevitable problem of succession inherent in charismatic leadership (Weber, 1968: 55f.).

Few would question that the almost half-a-century-long tenure of the leader of the Cuban Revolution, Fidel Castro, was one of the most emblematic cases

of charismatic leadership in modern politics. It certainly proved the potential for revolutionary transformation that Weber ascribed to charismatic leaders, as “Castro led as complete a revolution as ever took place in Europe” (Horowitz, 1968: 60). However, this article is about the second element: the question of succession, which became imminent when, in July of 2006, Fidel Castro’s health faltered and he had to cede his leadership position.

According to the Weberian insights on charismatic authority, a major succession crisis was to be expected. Indeed, with the demise of Cuba’s socialist allies overseas at the beginning of the 1990s many scholars had linked the country’s regime survival to the physical presence of its leader, as, for instance, Domínguez (1997: 10), who wrote: “The current political regime depends to such an extent on the person of Fidel Castro that its future is now perhaps more than ever identified with his biological survival.” However, the Cuban regime has been able to stage a prolonged, gradual, and, by all comparative standards, smooth succession so far. It has avoided social unrest as well as visceral confrontations within the ruling elite. We have come to witness what after almost half a century of uninterrupted leadership had seemed an improbable scenario: a peaceful succession still within the lifetime of the charismatic leader.

When Max Weber (1968: 55f.) pointed to the problem of succession inherent in charismatic leadership, he sketched a spectrum of possible types of solutions at the moment of the leader’s demise. While some are essentially limited to religious movements (for example, revelation by oracles), for contemporary politics four of these options come into play: the designation of his own successor by the original charismatic leader; the conception that charisma is a quality transmitted by heredity, particularly to the leader’s closest relatives; the transmission by ritual means; and the designation of a successor by the charismatically qualified administrative staff – a process, as Weber stresses, not to be interpreted as a modern “election” (Weber, 1968: 55) but one with blurred lines in relation to institutionalized forms of transfer of power. How did these propositions play out in the case of Cuba’s post-Fidel succession? What solutions did the regime choose to ensure its survival in the face of the demise of its historic leader? What role was given to the institutions of state-socialism – the tangible materialization of what Weber had called the indispensable “routinization of charisma”?

Theory on leadership succession holds yet another proposition that the case under scrutiny challenges: the “succession dilemma” as formulated by Burling (1974), according to which a clear designation of the successor results in weak leadership, and a lack of clarity results in destructive power struggles. How, then, can we explain the Cuban case, where Raúl Castro has been the leader’s “second-in-command” and designated successor for decades?

Finally, theories of political succession tend to be marked by a “methodological nationalism” which says little about the incongruence between, on the one hand, the international charismatic appeal of a leader such as Fidel Castro who has been a major actor on the world stage and, on the other hand, the political regime he led, which is confined to the limits of the Cuban nation-state. What are the implications of such a two-level leadership role at the moment of succession?

When studying third world countries, scholars of comparative politics have traditionally paid more attention to the issues of regime change than to the topic of leadership succession within a given system (Goeva and Holm, 1998: 131). Regarding Latin America, in the 1980s and 1990s the analysis of “transitions from authoritarian rule” (O’Donnell et al., 1986) and the prospects for democratization

became a dominant strand in political science research. Within this literature, the Cuban regime was largely neglected until 1989, as it did not fall into the typical patterns of the “bureaucratic-authoritarian state” elsewhere on the continent and there was no major expectation of regime change as long as the island’s ties with the Soviet Union remained in place. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and Cuba’s subsequent economic crisis, the issue of regime change and democratization became the object of a great deal of scholarly literature. This literature, however, remained largely prospective or prescriptive, while on the island political continuity prevailed against considerable odds (Hoffmann, 2001).

It is not the interest of this article to add to the speculative “Cuba after Fidel” scenarios that have been an evergreen in the scholarly literature on Cuba in the past.² Instead, it sets out to empirically examine, Weber’s conceptual toolbox in hand, how the demise and succession of Cuba’s charismatic leader were played out in Cuban politics, and how this feeds back on our theoretical and conceptual understanding. Hence, rather than “transition to democracy,” the object of this study is the “transition from charismatic authority.” In this sense, the aim of this article is to contribute to what the author considers to be very much a still-pending task: to insert the empirical case of the post-Fidel succession into the broader theoretical and comparative debate about charismatic authority and leadership change.

The article unfolds as follows. The section following this introduction will review some of the key concepts of the debate on charisma and political succession; against this background, it will reflect on the nature of Cuba’s political regime under Fidel Castro’s leadership. The article will then turn to an empirical analysis of the post-Fidel succession, which, while not designed as a comparative study, will draw on other succession experiences to explore commonalities and differences. In doing so, it will highlight four important ways in which the case of Cuba’s post-Fidel succession challenges conventional wisdom about the link between charismatic authority and political leadership change: the role and character of the regime’s “second-in-command” (third section); the interplay between charisma and institutionalization (fourth section); the implications of the gradualist model of succession, which includes a complex power-sharing arrangement as the outgoing leader maintains an important role as the legitimator of the successor government (fifth section); and finally, the twofold nature of the post-Fidel leadership succession: the handover of power to a bureaucratic-institutionalized successor in the realm of the Cuban nation-state, and a theatrically staged transfer of charisma by ritual means to an heir beyond the nation’s borders. The conclusion then reflects on the lessons that the empirical analysis of the post-Fidel succession contributes to the general research on charismatic authority and leadership succession in contemporary politics.

Before we continue, a brief note on data collection is due. The author has visited Cuba for field trips about a dozen times, both before and after Fidel fell ill. During these visits he spoke at length with Cubans working in the state apparatus as well as with political opponents, intellectuals, and “ordinary citizens.” However, it is a deliberate choice not to empirically base this article on individual interviews. As the political process at the upper echelons of power is solidly shielded from public view, any interview partner, no matter how “high up” he or she may be, can only present more or less plausible interpretations of a political reality played out behind the scenes, with no possibility of independent verification or falsification. As a result, speculation becomes inevitable.

Instead, the present article's empirical analysis is essentially based on speeches and documents published in Cuba's official media. In the absence of pluralist political competition and its corollary institutions, the state media are more than just channels through which the Cuban authorities communicate their views to the population; rather, they constitute the principal way Cuban politics as such are made public. Their political bias and shortcomings are all too obvious. Yet, as the politics behind the scenes are kept as state secrets, it is these official manifestations in the media which represent the visible face of Cuban politics and hence become the key points of reference for political actors as much as for academic observers.

The owl of Minerva takes flight at dusk, Hegel once postulated. But the analysis of recent political events, such as Cuba's post-Fidel succession, cannot be put off until some day when we perhaps have access to empirical data on what went on behind the closed doors, to recordings of talks between Fidel and Raúl, or to transcripts of the Politburo discussions. Albeit with manifold limitations, we have a significant body of publicly available evidence to analyze, without falling victim to speculative "Kremlin astrology." Moreover, this article has no ambition to be conclusive on the issue; Minerva's owl will have many more turns to take in Cuban skies.

The Nature of the Beast: A Case of "Charismatic State Socialism"

Charisma is a concept which, as Turner (2003: 5) writes, "arose from theological obscurity through social science, from which it passed into popular culture." As "charisma" has now become a buzzword used ubiquitously in media, marketing, and politics, we need to rewind to Max Weber's seminal work, in which he developed the categories and typologies of charismatic authority that have become standard items in the theorization of leadership and succession in politics. For Weber, charismatic authority is one of three types of legitimate authority, alongside bureaucratic-rational and traditional authority. He defines it as "resting on devotion to the specific and exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of normative patterns revealed or ordained by him" (Weber, 1968: 46). The charismatic leader "is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities" (Weber, 1968: 48).

As noted earlier, Max Weber foresaw a crisis of succession at the moment of the charismatic leader's demise and sketched a spectrum of possible types of solutions. Before we contrast these Weberian succession scenarios with the empirical reality of the Cuban case, we need to answer whether – and if so, to what extent – the case under scrutiny is adequately approached with the concept of charismatic leadership.

Ever since Weber, an important strand of scholarly literature has understood charisma essentially as the personality traits or personal attributes of the leader. This was underscored when, in the 1970s, organizational research and management studies on leadership began to take a lead role in the academic use and definition of charisma³ – which placed crucial emphasis on the personality, behavior, and psychology of the leader. As this influenced the interpretation of charisma in other social sciences, it frequently led to "a bias towards heroic conceptions of leadership" (Yukl, 1999) and even as far as futile genius debates (e.g. Simonton, 1984).

However, unlike physical characteristics, a leader's charisma can never be a mere personal quality, for it only comes into existence in interaction with his audience. Weber himself makes it sufficiently clear that charisma must, by definition, be understood not as a personal but rather as a relational category: "It is recognition on the part of those subject to authority which is decisive for the validity of charisma" (Weber, 1968: 49).

Countering the leader-centric perspective, Madsen and Snow (1996), in their analysis of the Peronist experience in Argentina, shift the focus of attention to "the charismatic bond," that is, the relational property of charisma. They and others have underscored that charisma depends on the material conditions, interests, and expectations of those the leader appeals to. In this sense, Jones, for instance, stressed that follower response depends upon the leader's providing an answer to a situational need (Jones, 2001: 763). Similarly, Beyer (1999) argues that, in the study of charismatic leadership, the contextual factors need to move from the periphery to the center of the research agenda. She goes as far as defining "charisma" as a "social structure" (Beyer, 1999: 309).

Eisenstadt (1968: xxviii), whose reading of Weber was critical in inserting the latter's concepts in modernization theory, had already pointed to the importance of "communicative situations" which facilitate charismatic relations. The "communicative situation" par excellence is a moment of crisis that precipitates the emergence of a leader with a radical vision of systemic change. When the existing order is shattered, societies are more ready to respond to people who are – as Fidel Castro was in postrevolutionary Cuba – able to endow them with new meanings, new symbols, and new orientations regarding the new rules, all of which make it possible "to relate the individual to collective identification, and to reassure him of his status and his place in a given collectivity" (Eisenstadt, 1968: xxviii).

In the research on the Cuban Revolution and its leader, these competing understandings of "charisma" find ample reflection. Numerous scholars from different backgrounds have emphasized the charismatic character of Fidel Castro's personality: the heroic example and extraordinary qualities displayed in the guerrilla war and as the military "commander-in-chief" of the revolution; his profound sense of mission and his leadership by example; his oratorical skills and emotional appeal in his communication to the people; his personalist style of leadership, and so forth. The list of such traits attributed to Fidel Castro is long, as would be the list of authors who have based the claim of Fidel's charisma on these traits.⁴

However, there is also an important strand of authors in Cuban studies (e.g. Domínguez, 1978; Eckstein, 1994; Fagen, 1965; Valdés, 2001) who have indeed understood Fidel's charismatic authority as a relational category, and who have consequently paid more attention to the opportunity structures in which he acted. Fidel's charismatic appeal was due not only to his flamboyant rhetoric on the Plaza but also to the redistributive measures his government enacted, which to many Cubans proved the credibility of his commitment to radically break with a past associated with corruption and social exclusion. Similarly, the primacy of personal loyalty over ideological definition (as embodied in the slogan of the early 1960s that read "Si Fidel es comunista, que me pongan en la lista!" – "If Fidel is a communist, then sign me up, too!") reflects less the personality of the leader than the popular response to his calls.

Such an understanding connects with Max Weber's highlighting of charisma as "the greatest revolutionary force" (Weber, 1968: 53): the leader's charisma stems precisely from his embodiment of a radical, revolutionary break with the past, in such a form that popular hopes view it as a remedy to their problems. Seen from this perspective, the leader, despite his extraordinary status, appears as much a product of circumstances as the motor of their change.

As charismatic leadership is not based on bureaucratic norms or traditions, the leader's claim to leadership is inherently at odds with the notion of a time-limited mandate. "The charismatic leader," Robert Michels wrote, "does not abdicate, not even when the water reaches to his throat. Precisely in his readiness to die lies one element of his force and his triumph."⁵ Turner (2003: 7) exemplifies this trait of leadership with quotations from Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. While this is illustrative, Chávez's rhetoric seems only to echo the slogan of "Socialismo o Muerte" coined earlier by Fidel Castro. In fact, the Numantian attitude of preferring death to surrender has been a hallmark of Fidel's tenure. It is all the more noteworthy that his long rule eventually came to an end that, while sparked by illness, did not follow any of the dramatic prescriptions of Michels.

Finally, as the Greek term "charisma" translates as "gift of grace" or "divine grace," Weber's concept has been endowed with strong religious overtones. When applied to the study of modern political leaders, this leads to a "blind alley" (Madsen and Snow, 1996: 1) if charisma is not understood in a secularized manner. In the case of Fidel's recourse to legitimacy through a higher authority, "history" took the place of the Divine, as emblematically spelled out in his 1953 trial defense, which terminated with his famous statement: "History will absolve me!" But even in Cuba's revolutionary and nominally atheist state, popular religiosity remained an important element in the social construction of the leader's charisma, as Valdés (2001) has argued.⁶

While this article so far has emphasized the charismatic aspects of Fidel Castro's rule, it is important to remember that Weberian ideal types are not to be mistaken for empirical cases. The German sociologist noted that over time the routinization of charisma is inevitable if charismatic authority is not to be a purely transitory phenomenon: "Indeed, in its pure form charismatic authority may be said to exist only in the process of originating. It cannot remain stable, but becomes either traditionalized or rationalized, or a combination of both" (Weber, 1968: 54). Cuba under Fidel is a case that illustrates well how the charismatic dimension so all-dominant in the beginning becomes over time one element that coexists and combines with others to legitimize political rule.

Hence, if the conceptual framework of charismatic leadership is helpful in explaining Cuban politics, it is so only to the degree that scholars are aware of its limitations and of the combination of charisma with other sources of power and legitimacy. For instance, Jorge Domínguez's magnum opus on Cuba's political order lists charisma as one of four elements in the legitimization of revolutionary rule, the others being political deliverance, distributional performance, and nationalism (Domínguez, 1978: 201). Susan Eckstein (1994) is particularly explicit in making the point that Fidel Castro, while being "in many respects a textbook case of a Weberian ideal-typical charismatic leader" (Eckstein, 1994: 20), "turned to traditional and especially to rational-legal bureaucratic forms of legitimation and authority as well" (Eckstein, 1994: 20).⁷ The central form of rational-legal authority has been the core set of Soviet-style institutions, adopted in the 1970s. However, Cuba never came to be just one more member of the family; the persistence of strong elements of charismatic leadership always set the Cuban

case apart from the bureaucratic state-socialist experiences of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

To accommodate the coexistence of both the rational-legal order of socialism and its charismatic underpinnings, the regime led by Fidel Castro may be adequately understood as one of “charismatic state socialism.” For this type of regime, the moment of leadership succession should indeed mark a profound political challenge. The article will now turn to this question.

Escaping the Succession Dilemma: Cuba’s “Second-Man” Exceptionalism

In his outline of a theory of succession, Burling (1974: 260) formulated the general “succession dilemma” as follows: “When the successor is too clearly designated, weak leadership is often the result. When he is not designated clearly enough, the result may be a destructive succession struggle.” Burling (1974: 256) sees the underlying reason for this in the “second-in-command problem”; a man or an office with an unambiguous second position is as rare as an unambiguous first position is usual, he argues. This is so because anyone holding an undisputed second position for a sustained period of time poses a potential threat to the man on top: “If a man occupies a clear second place, every opponent of the top man will tend to rally around him, and he will then become a serious rival to the man on top” (Burling, 1974: 256).

The other reason political leaders tend to refrain from designating a successor is that this may alienate important constituencies, as Brown (2005) has argued in his analysis of succession in Arab republics and monarchies. Keeping the question of succession open can be a vital instrument for integrating diverging political forces, as different groups or factions can hope that “their turn” is about to come as long as they remain in good standing with the incumbent.

The historical experience of state socialism shows that leaders typically shied away from having an individual in an undisputed second position over prolonged periods of time, both for fear of this individual evolving into a rival and owing to the integrational effect of keeping the question of succession open. A consequence was that succession often remained a highly conflictive issue, as the power struggles on such occasions in the USSR and other state-socialist countries attest (Taras, 1989). A textbook illustration of Burling’s thesis is the case of Mao Zedong, the other great charismatic leader of a third world revolution in the twentieth century at the helm of a Communist Party-based system. Mao never had an undisputed second-in-command for any long period of time, and his death was indeed followed by the fierce infighting of rival factions during the Cultural Revolution (e.g. Sandschneider, 1987).

The case of Fidel’s tenure has been crucially different in regard to this “second-in-command problem.” Accounts vary as to when precisely Fidel declared his younger brother Raúl as his designated successor: Valdés (2004: 243) speaks of May 1 1960, in the face of assassination attempts on Fidel. Others, such as Thomas (1971: 1087), place the declaration even earlier, in the very first days after the revolutionary takeover. Fidel’s “mando único” (unified command) became replicated in Raúl, who became his deputy in all formal offices.

The “Sovietization thesis” so prominent in the analysis of Cuba’s 1970s institutionalization process⁸ simply failed to acknowledge that in such a key aspect Cuba fundamentally departed from the Soviet mold, in which the top offices of party,

state, and military affairs, and certainly their deputy positions, typically were not united in one hand.⁹ The towering figure of Fidel led observers to overlook the importance of the role played by Raúl Castro: as the eternal and unquestionably loyal number two, he was a crucial part of Cuban exceptionalism; he immunized Fidel's rule against the typical instabilities stemming from power struggles around the second-in-command position.

One option available to charismatic leaders in order to resolve the succession problem is, following Weber, the hereditary transmission of charisma. Such dynastic succession is usually from one generation to the other, but it can also be enacted among siblings. The most prominent case of dynastic succession in the communist experience of the twentieth century is the North Korean case, where, beginning in 1973, Kim Il Song systematically built up his son Kim Jong Il as his successor (Scobell, 2005). In public the Cuban leadership has been unambiguous in its rejection of any such dynastic line of succession, which in Central America and the Caribbean – take the case of “Papa Doc” and “Baby Doc” Duvalier in Haiti or the Somoza clan in Nicaragua – is identified with the most reactionary dictatorships. According to official discourse, Raúl was appointed to the second-man position solely based on the merits he earned in the insurgency movement before the triumph of the revolution and in his army, state, and party functions after 1959, and not because of his brotherly ties to Fidel.

However, things do not seem to be quite that easy. In experiences of insurgency, clandestine activity, and cadre politics that are shielded from public transparency, loyalty, trust, and confidence are paramount preconditions of merit; they are the *sine qua non* for any individual to be given or to remain in a position of leadership (as the innumerable cases against defections and “traitors” attest). As this trust is vitally based on shared experiences, in which common identities evolve and loyalties are proven, it cannot surprise that this type of political endeavor is particularly prone to draw on the resources of kinship networks with their often strong codes of loyalty.¹⁰

Before undergoing emergency surgery in July 2006, Fidel handwrote a proclamation (proclama) in which he delegated “in provisional form,” as was stressed, his functions at the head of the Cuban state, the armed forces, and the Communist Party to his deputy in these functions, Raúl Castro. However, regarding the family ties between Fidel and Raúl, the Cuban leaders seem aware of the thin line they are walking. A year and a half later, and only two months before Raúl was to be formalized as Fidel's definite successor, the ailing leader addressed the delegates of Cuba's National Assembly, stating: “In the Proclamation I signed on 31 July 2006, none of you ever saw any act of nepotism” (F. Castro, 2007b). In the form of denial, this statement reflects the worries on precisely that point. The leadership takes the voice of the delegates by speaking in their name (“none of you ever”), thus essentially banning the issue from permissible discourse.

In the post-Fidel succession, Raúl Castro's long-standing role as “second man” has been crucially important. There is some irony in the fact that even Fidel seems to ignore the full dimension of this aspect. In the book-length interview with Ignacio Ramonet carried out shortly before he had to undergo surgery and delegate his powers, he was asked: “If you disappeared, for whatever circumstance – would Raúl be your undisputed substitute?” Fidel replied: “If something happens to me tomorrow, I am absolutely certain that the National Assembly will gather and elect him, without the slightest doubt. The Politburo will meet and elect him” (Ramonet, 2006: 563, author's translation). None of this occurred. In the

summer of 2006 neither the National Assembly nor the Politburo came together. Nor did they have to. Article 94 of the Cuban Constitution stipulates: "In case of the absence, illness or death of the President of the Council of State, his duties will be assumed by the First Vice President" (República de Cuba, 1992, author's translation). Hence, Raúl Castro was fully designated to take Fidel's place as head of state; on rational-legal grounds there was no need for any proclama by Fidel or for any electoral act before the end of the term for which Fidel, and Raúl as his deputy, had been elected by the National Assembly in 2003.

It is the Weberian analysis of succession to charismatic authority which makes evident why the handwritten proclama was needed: it was the symbolic gesture that succession to leadership was not determined through the legal-institutional process (the deputy takes over) or through designation by the corresponding administrative staff (the National Assembly or Politburo) alone, but was rather enacted as "the designation on the part of the original charismatic leader of his own successor" (Weber, 1968: 54).

Raúl Castro is only four years younger than his brother and can, for age reasons alone, be seen as a transitional figure. When he formally assumed office in 2008, he named 77-year-old party veteran Machado Ventura first vice president. This choice marks the end of Cuba's "second-man exceptionalism," as Machado Ventura is regarded neither as unambiguous second man nor as designated successor. However successfully the regime has managed the post-Fidel succession, the experience in no way establishes a role model for future leadership changes. "There is no 'equivalent Raúl' for Raúl," as Valdés (2004: 251) has put it.

Charisma, Succession, and Institutionalization: "Fidel is the Party, Raúl is the Party"

It seems all too plausible that for personalistic rule the question of leadership succession represents a greater challenge than for regimes with institutional one-party rule, as Burnell (2006: 552) argues. But what if Cuba's "charismatic state socialism" has been a combination of both types? Charismatic leadership at first seems sharply antithetical to bureaucratic authority, as it thrives on its role of being above the everyday administrative routine. At the same time, Weber noted that a "routinization of charisma" is indispensable, giving birth to new traditions and new institutions endowed with "charisma of office," if it is to prevail over time (Weber, 1968: 61). According to Eisenstadt, while charisma has a great transformative capacity and can be highly creative in the provision of new order and meaning, it is the routinization of charisma that transforms these innovations into a more continuous social organization and institutional framework (Eisenstadt, 1968: xxi).

The relationship between the charismatic leader and the institutions he creates is typically laden with tensions. Fidel was no exception. The Partido Comunista de Cuba (PCC), contrary to the Leninist postulate of the Communist Party's vanguard role, was founded in its present form only years after the triumph of the revolution. It was meant to spread Fidel's charisma more by embodying moral principles and exemplary behavior than by functional efficiency or vanguard knowledge in the interpretation of the writings of Marx and Lenin (Domínguez, 1978: 337).¹¹

With the "process of institutionalization" in the 1970s, the new Soviet-inspired constitution enshrined the Communist Party as the "leading force in state and

society” (República de Cuba, 1992). It was at this time that the Communist Party also became, for the first time, an official answer of sorts to the question of leadership succession, as the slogan “Men die, but the Party is immortal!” was launched (Leogrande, 2002: 17).

Despite the adoption of Soviet-style institutions, the dualism of charismatic and legal-rational elements was still reflected in Fidel Castro’s very titles. He acquired the titles of the state-socialist nomenclature, and official declarations named him as First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party and President of the Council of Ministers and of the Council of State; yet his foremost title never ceased to be that of the Comandante en Jefe – a title found neither in the country’s constitution nor in the party’s statutes.

The last decade of Fidel’s tenure was particularly notable for a deinstitutionalization which affected both party and state (Domínguez, 1997: 12). Although the Communist Party’s statutes require it to hold a congress every five years, after the 1997 congress Fidel never publicly mentioned the idea of calling the next one. More blatantly, deinstitutionalization was accompanied by a return to campaign-style politics under the slogan of the “battle of ideas” (*batalla de ideas*). This approach combined mass mobilizations with the creation of new parallel structures which sidelined the formally established competencies of party and state organs. At its commanding heights were young cadres – “talibans,” as Cuban street jargon was quick to term them – whose authority was derived directly from Fidel.

A landmark decision in the re-personalization of Cuban politics was the designation of Felipe Pérez Roque as foreign minister in 1999. Aged 34 at the time, Pérez Roque had been the chief of staff of the Grupo de Apoyo al Comandante, Fidel’s personal support group. The official announcement of Pérez Roque’s nomination explicitly underscored that his legitimacy for the post derived from his unmediated ties to Fidel, and stressed that he was “familiarized with the ideas and the thoughts of Fidel Castro as few others are” (Consejo de Estado, 1999).

It was Pérez Roque who – well before Fidel’s health problems became acute – in a programmatic address to the National Assembly in December 2005 underscored the charismatic character of Cuban socialism in order then to sketch a model of an explicitly charismatic rather than institutional succession (in which he was widely seen to be profiling himself as the leader’s chosen crown prince). Pérez Roque defined the people’s blind faith in its leader as the revolution’s “greatest treasure”: “The way in which we understand this authority is as follows: ‘I don’t understand very well, but if Fidel said so, I am sure that this is how it is’” (Pérez Roque, 2005, author’s translation). And as if to paraphrase Weber’s definition of charismatic authority as resting on the exemplary character of the leader, Pérez Roque time and again invoked “the authority that comes from the example” (*ibid.*), going so far as to define this as the essence of the regime’s ideology: “Socialism is the science of the example” (*ibid.*). The conclusion for the post-Fidel era was as uninstitutional as could be: “As long as this country has a leadership based on example ... it is invincible” (*ibid.*).

While the Cuban leadership publicly denies any internal differences, since Fidel fell ill Raúl Castro has led a model of succession that is diametrically opposed to the one suggested by Pérez Roque. While Weber had suggested the transmission of charisma by heredity, the brotherly bond between Fidel and Raúl was not used for a transfer of charisma. Ironically, whereas Pérez Roque, a young “apparatchik” of the regime, spoke out for a charismatic succession model, Raúl Castro emphatically

rejected this. Instead, he has missed no opportunity to discursively reposition the Communist Party as the center of Cuban politics.

While two contrasting approaches to the post-Fidel succession competed within the same single-party regime framework, elite cohesion has been sufficiently strong not to let these differences escalate. Raúl Castro's thesis that the answer to succession is institutionalization has carried the day. A provincial party paper, *Guerrero*, from the PCC's Pinar del Río branch, summed up the official take on the post-Fidel succession as follows: "Fidel is the Party, Raúl is the Party" (*Guerrillero*, August 3 2006).

A closer analysis of the political process, however, raises doubts about whether the Communist Party is really being given the lead role in Cuban politics, as official rhetoric stresses. Under Raúl's guidance the presence of army officers in the top state bodies has visibly increased; the long overdue party congress has been scheduled to take place in the second half of 2009; and, perhaps most tellingly, in April 2008 Raúl established a new supreme body within the party's Politburo, a seven-person commission whose membership exactly mirrors the seven-member presidency of the Council of State named two months earlier. Thus, rather than being the "guiding force in state and society," as Article 5 of the socialist constitution prescribes, the Communist Party follows the structures of the state apparatus. Institutionalization is undertaken in the name of the party, but in political practice its base is an amalgam of state, military, and party structures.

From Leader to Legitimator: "Cohabitation," Cuban-style

If a charismatic leader dies or is ousted by force, succession will typically be an abrupt process, as the need to fill the vacuum at the top is imminent. The situation is different, however, when the reason for the disruption is illness or old age, as these often mark not a total but a relative incapacity to perform the leadership role. It is in these cases that succession can be a prolonged and gradual affair.

Cuba's post-Fidel succession made a gala out of this gradualism. When the leader had to undergo emergency surgery in July 2006, he delegated his functions only "temporarily," as was stressed. For more than a year and a half a climate of uncertainty was deliberately maintained regarding whether Fidel would eventually return to his former functions, until he finally ceded formal office as head of state in February of 2008 when his brother Raúl was elected by the National Assembly to succeed him as President of the Council of State and of the Council of Ministers.¹²

A simplified perception of succession focuses merely on who fills the highest office left by the outgoing leader. However, the character and function of the highest office itself can be subject to change in the process. This does not necessarily mean formal changes in its constitutional definition, but can also apply to the de facto nature of the top leadership position. As Calvert points out, drawing on truly dissimilar cases, the office of the prime minister in Great Britain had no legal standing until 1904; Libya's Gaddafi does not hold any constitutionally formalized position; and in socialist states such as the Soviet Union or China the question of what constitutes the highest office itself has been repeatedly disputed (Calvert, 1987: 3–4).

While Raúl Castro held the deputy position to Fidel Castro in all offices, this statement needs one important qualification: it refers to all formal offices in the

party, state, and military, but not to that title which most clearly embodies the charismatic side of Fidel's tenure, that of Comandante en Jefe (commander-in-chief) of the Cuban Revolution. There was never any such position as "Deputy Comandante en Jefe." In the succession, Raúl emblematically bid farewell to the Fidelista leadership model when he declared that neither he nor any other successor was to take on the title of "Comandante en Jefe."¹³

Raúl Castro's own leadership style is as uncharismatic as can be – a point he himself has publicly underscored.¹⁴ This goes hand in hand with a turn to more collective leadership, in which Raúl Castro is a primus inter pares rather than a towering leader. Factions have been officially banned from Cuban politics since the 1960s (Domínguez, 1989), but intra-party competition and rivalries have persisted to some degree. While the quest for elite cohesion, collective leadership, and factional power-sharing within a state-socialist party apparatus is a pattern known from the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, or China (Breslauer, 1989; Taras, 1989), the Cuban experience of gradual succession within the lifetime of the leader was unique in that it also implied complex power-sharing arrangements between the outgoing and the incoming leader.

The role played by Fidel Castro since July 2006 has not only been a dependent variable of his state of health but also reflects a political arrangement within the political leadership. As early as three months after Fidel's surgery, the party newspaper cautiously hinted that Fidel – rather than preparing to come back to the supreme political role previously held – would be pursuing "special tasks" (Bonasso, 2006). The visible forms these special tasks have taken are the so-called "Reflexiones," opinion pieces written by Fidel Castro in the party newspaper *Granma*.¹⁵ In the streets of Havana, commentators have quipped about this change of function that Fidel has now become "Comentarista en Jefe" (commentator-in-chief).

An analysis of Fidel's "Reflexiones" shows that they are concerned with, essentially, a) international politics, most prominently US politics, the EU, and the Bolivarian Revolution led by Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, but also the perspectives of other left-wing Latin American leaders; b) issues of global concern facing humanity, such as climate change and food shortages; and c) historical accounts of the Cuban Revolution's epic struggles. It is crucial to note what Fidel's commentaries do not address: we hardly find any mention of domestic policy issues beyond very general statements. While the degree of voluntariness and coercion involved in this "cohabitation" arrangement is open to speculation, Fidel Castro publicly ratified his new role when he stated his need to

"reflect at length [on] how immensely the world has changed in the past 60 years ... I devote time to this ... Now that I am dedicated to this task ... I feel I have more energy, more strength and more time to devote to study. I have once again become a student" asking "for tranquility for me to be able to fulfill my new tasks" (F. Castro, 2007c).

Fidel's "new tasks" bring to mind the "second-front" concept once put forward by Mao Zedong, as the aging Chinese leader tried to prepare his succession:

"I was in the second front while other comrades were in the first front ... Since I was in the second front, I did not take charge of daily work. Many things were done by others and their prestige was thus cultivated, so that when I met with God, the State would not be thrown into great convulsions."¹⁶

With hindsight we know that this was insufficient to prevent the Chinese state from "great convulsions" after Mao's death. The problem was not a lack of

“prestige” or capacity on the part of others, but rather the fierce rivalry among them about who was to succeed the Great Chairman and what policy course was to be taken.¹⁷

In Cuba, however, a “second-front” strategy has been played out in a different context, as the successor has been named and taken office during the lifetime of the historical leader. Gradual succession has taken place through a power-sharing arrangement, which for a significant amount of time conceals how much or how little power rests with either of the actors involved. Even three years after Fidel’s proclamation, while there is little doubt that Raúl has consolidated his power in the apparatus (Oxford Analytica, 2008), he has put brakes on his own initial reform proposals that included policy changes long disdained by his brother.

The Raúl government, while it shies away from striving for a charismatic approach of its own, remains critically dependent on recourse to the charismatic leader for legitimacy. This may be surprising, as Raúl Castro is fully legitimated by the regime’s bureaucratic-legal order, and he was unmistakably designated by the charismatic leader, first in Fidel’s proclama of 2006 and again in a written endorsement to the National Assembly when it elected Raúl as formal head of state in 2008. Yet the Cuban case shows that the transfer of legitimacy from charismatic authority is not a one-time affair as the Weberian notion of “designation by the charismatic leader” suggests. Such designation may be a necessary, but not necessarily a sufficient, condition. As the charismatic leader becomes the legitimator, the successor government needs to continually validate its actions through recourse to his legacy.

Even where the successors depart from previous policies, they seek legitimacy for this through recourse to the former leader: “Revolution means changing everything that needs to be changed” is the Fidel quotation that was ordered to be painted on billboards all across the country. While in the case of defunct leaders such a strategy of discursive appropriation depends solely on the power to interpret the leader’s legacy, in a succession during the leader’s lifetime it includes either the leader’s acquiescence or his inability to disown the interpreters. It has been precisely the ability to work out and enforce this power-sharing arrangement between the outgoing leader and his successor that has so far enabled the smoothness of the post-Fidel succession, but which also accounts for a lack of coherence and dynamism in government policies.

Charisma beyond the Nation-State: Fidel’s Transnational Heir

The issue of political succession of heads of state is normally analyzed within the framework of the nation-state. However, as a strong sense of mission is typical of charismatic leadership, the latter’s appeal can go well beyond its domestic constituency, if the mission’s goals and values are not defined in terms that are too nationalistic. In this sense, charismatic leadership is a broader category than rulership of a specific polity. A leader can have a following beyond the nation-state’s borders which is not bound by formal aspects such as citizenship or eligibility to vote.

The case of Fidel Castro highlights how relevant such transnational charismatic appeal can be for the question of succession. Fidel was, for one, the leader of the Cuban state. Beyond this, however, his “mission” of anti-imperialist revolution and third world emancipation had global appeal. Particularly for Latin America’s left, this secured Fidel a transnational following across the continent. In the succession these two levels of leadership were divided into a domestic side, in which

the highest office in the Cuban state was passed on to Raúl, and a less tangible transnational side, in which Fidel's charisma was transferred to the Venezuelan president and leader of the so-called "Bolivarian Revolution," Hugo Chávez.

Cuban–Venezuelan relations have a strong economic underpinning. While Venezuela is providing Cuba with oil on highly preferential terms, the Chávez government has been paid through Cuba's exports of professionals and services in health, education, sports, and other sectors. Politically, while certainly Chávez has charismatic qualities of his own,¹⁸ his connection to Cuba has also allowed him to tap into Fidel's charisma. He has been able to acquire considerable symbolic capital as the two revolutionary leaders have displayed a bond not merely of friendship or of political alliance, but of an intimate father–son relationship.¹⁹

The designation of Chávez as the extra-territorial heir of Fidel's continental leadership role culminated in Chávez's absolutely central role at the side of Fidel's hospital bed after his operation of July 2006, as it was staged by Cuba's state-controlled media. All of the first official hospital footage showed the Venezuelan leader, not Raúl Castro or any other Cuban functionary, next to Fidel. Displaying a mastery of political theatrics, in Weberian terminology these hospital-bed scenes can be seen as the transmission of charisma "by ritual means," in which Fidel Castro symbolically passed the torch of Latin American revolution to Hugo Chávez. As in the case of Raúl in domestic politics, here too the "designation on the part of the original charismatic leader of his own successor" (Weber, 1968: 55) is evident. The father–son imagery adds an element of elective familial lineage which contrasts with the negation of any relevance of Raúl's real familial ties in the domestic succession.

If Chávez wants to convey to his followers that they are part of an epic historical project of liberation, no one may testify to the validity of this claim better than Fidel Castro. On the other hand, if the Raúl-led government feels the need to reinstitutionalize Cuba's political system and to foster pragmatism and bureaucratic rationality in the country's economy and planning, it seems a gift from heaven to have someone else taking it on his shoulders to continue Fidel's grand "internationalist" mission.

The transfer of the leader's charisma to an heir beyond the borders of his own polity is an aspect foreseen neither by Weber nor in the more recent literature. Yet it proves to be an important element which fosters the viability of a domestic political succession that opts to discontinue the charismatic leadership approach and to underscore institutionalization and bureaucratic-rational legitimacy instead.

Conclusions

The scenario we have witnessed in Cuba since July 2006 is something few observers, both on and off the island, had thought likely to occur after almost half a century of Fidel Castro's highly personalist leadership: the political succession within the lifetime of the charismatic leader. As of now, this succession has proven much less disruptive or cataclysmic than many expected. Indeed, the present article has shown how the regime managed to stage the transfer of power from Fidel to Raúl, and from a political model of "charismatic state socialism" to a much more institutions-based model of "bureaucratic state socialism."

However, a caveat is necessary. This analysis is about a process still in the making. A successfully completed formal succession neither predicts that the role given to the outgoing leader will stand the test of time nor does it guarantee the sustained rule of the successor. In the short run, the successor government can

claim legitimacy based on the formal succession; in the medium term, however, it will have to seek new sources of support and legitimacy of its own. Economic performance will be crucial, and Raúl's calls for economic reforms – however limited their implementation has been so far – seem to signal that the new leadership is very much aware of this.

Cuba's post-Fidel succession challenges conventional wisdom on the succession dilemma deemed inherent in charismatic leadership on a number of counts. First, the Cuban case highlights potential antidotes to the "second-man" problem that Burling (1974) failed to identify when he formulated his general "succession dilemma." The historical trajectory of the relationship between Fidel and Raúl Castro certainly is exceptional, and as such hardly represents a replicable model. However, it provides strong evidence that the loyalty networks included in family relations can be a vital resource for political leaders to draw upon, both during their tenure and in resolving the issue of succession. This does not have to take the form of a transfer of charisma by heredity, as envisaged by Weber, but also can hold in the case of a turn to institutionalization and rational-legal authority.

Second, as Weber had noted, over time charismatic authority must combine with traditionalized or rationalized forms of authority in order to persist (Weber, 1968: 54). The case studied in this article shows how the precise nature of this combination is a crucial variable – and one that is often insufficiently explored in leader-centric studies on charismatic authority – in understanding the dynamics of succession. The empirical study underscores the hybrid nature of the political regime under Fidel Castro, which can be adequately captured by its characterization as "charismatic state socialism." It was precisely the combination of charismatic leadership with bureaucratic-rational authority, in the form of one-party state socialism with strong army participation, which gave the successor government sufficiently strong alternative power structures to turn to as it discontinued the charismatic leadership style.

Third, the analysis of the post-Fidel succession has shown how the outgoing leader has maintained limited but continuous participation in the political arena; this challenges the notion implicit in the Weberian categories which sees succession as a one-time affair. As the outgoing leader has become detached from day-to-day political decision-making power, he has remained important as a legitimator to whom the successor government continuously needs to pay attention. By underscoring these aspects, the empirical case emphasizes the need to focus on a longer time frame, on the possibilities and implications of gradualist models of succession, and on the power-sharing arrangements between outgoing and incoming leadership, aspects which so far have been marginal in the study of charismatic authority.

Fourth and finally, this study highlights the potential deficits of "methodological nationalism" inherent in common approaches to succession, in the case of charismatic leaders whose sense of mission is typically not bound to specific nation-state interests. The emergence of radical projects of transformation in Latin America, particularly the leadership of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, has led to the renewal of a "communicative situation" (Eisenstadt) for Fidel's charismatic appeal beyond Cuba's borders. This has facilitated a two-level succession: the succession to political rulership at the helm of the Cuban government and, detached from this, the transfer of charisma in regard to Fidel's "internationalist" leadership role in the mission of anti-imperialist revolution and Latin American emancipation. As the latter has been symbolically delegated to an heir outside the Cuban

nation-state, it has contributed to the viability of a domestic succession that has emphasized rational-bureaucratic authority and bid farewell to the model of charismatic leadership.

While transnationalism has become a forceful paradigm in other research areas, there is still much work to be done with regard to cross-border political leadership roles. Cuba's unique contribution to the study of "transitions from charismatic authority" may be to show how succession to a charismatic leader can be played out in transnational terms in a way that greatly reduces the tensions between the transformative power of charismatic authority and the stabilizing function of institutionalized rule.

Notes

1. See Max Weber's essay on "The Pure Types of Legitimate Authority," originally published in his *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* in 1922 (published in English as *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*); all citations in the following are taken from Weber (1968), particularly pp. 46–65. For a discussion of the Weberian term "Herrschaft" and its English translation as authority, see Adair-Toteff (2005: 191–2).
2. An illustration is the case of Edward González (1976), who more than three decades ago argued that "the fact that Castro is now entering middle age (he will be fifty later this year) reminds us that Cuba may someday confront a succession problem" and then went on to sketch different scenarios of succession.
3. For example in the so-called "Neo-charismatic Leadership Paradigm" advanced in organizational research since the 1970s by House (1977), Burns (1978), and Conger (1993).
4. A classic exponent is González (1976).
5. Cited in Turner (2003: 7).
6. According to Valdés (2001), in Cuba's popular syncretistic *Santería* religion Fidel came to be seen as "the chosen one" when, during a speech on January 8 1959, a white dove landed on his shoulders. This was interpreted as a sign from Obatalá, one of the important *Santos* of the *Santería* religion, that Castro had the blessing of the gods.
7. We may add that to some degree he also did so before the triumph of the revolution. With respect to legal authority, one of the political banners of his 26th of July Movement was the reinstatement of the 1940 constitution that Batista had dispensed with. Another important recourse was to traditional authority: the identification of the revolution as the culmination of Cuba's century-old struggles for independence.
8. For example González (1976); for a critique see Bengelsdorf (1988).
9. As Breslauer points out, in the post-Stalin USSR "norms have developed against excessive power concentration by the general secretary, as reflected in a written but secret rule against the same person occupying the post of CPSU general secretary and chairman of the Council of Ministers" (Breslauer, 1989: 35).
10. There are parallels with the case of the Ortega brothers' role in the 1979 Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua. However, their case does not replicate the immobile hierarchy between Fidel and Raúl Castro. Whereas Daniel Ortega is the older brother, it was Humberto who assumed what, after the triumph of 1979, was seen as the key position of power, command over the armed forces; Daniel Ortega's participation in the five-person government junta seemed of lesser weight. It was only with political evolution and, in particular, with the presidential elections of 1984 that Daniel Ortega's role began to outweigh that of his brother (Rediske, 1984).
11. In a memorable essay, Hans Magnus Enzensberger summed up in 1969 the tension between Fidel and Cuba's Communist Party: "With great tenacity Fidel escapes the avant-garde that he conjured up. It will never catch up with him. He wants it and he does not want it. Fidel's dilemma is also that of the PCC, an institution that has now been in the process of being built and destroyed for many years" (Enzensberger, 1969: 215, author's translation).

12. The formal succession of Raúl as head of the Communist Party will presumably be left to the party congress planned for the second half of 2009.
13. "The Commander-in-Chief of the Cuban Revolution is one and only one" – meaning: Fidel – "and only the Communist Party ... can be the dignified heir of the trust deposited by the people in its leader," said Raúl Castro in his address to the 5th Plenary Meeting of the Cuban Communist Party's Central Committee (in *Granma*, July 1 2006).
14. Raúl Castro, in his first and programmatic *Granma* interview after assuming office, included the following: "As a point of fact, I am not used to making frequent appearances in public, except at times when it is required ... Moreover, I have always been discreet, that is my way, and in passing I will clarify that I am thinking of continuing in that way. But that has not been the fundamental reason why I don't appear very often in the mass media; simply, it has not been necessary" (R. Castro, 2006b).
15. All of these are accessible at the party newspaper's website: <http://www.granma.cubaweb.cu/secciones/ref-fidel/index.html>. Since the formal takeover of Raúl Castro as head of state, the title of Fidel's pieces has been changed from "Reflexiones del Comandante en Jefe" to "Reflexiones del Compañero Fidel" (Reflections of Comrade Fidel).
16. Cited in Sandschneider (1987: 116).
17. In the North Korean case, Kim Il Song delegated the military high command to his son Kim Jong Il well before his death in 1994. Scholars have seen this move as a key factor in securing the designated succession from father to son, as from this position Kim Jong Il was able to counter challenges from within the armed forces and instead to craft an alliance with the military around his person (e.g. Scobell, 2005).
18. For example Turner (2003: 7). When Chávez called in early 2007 to unite all parties that supported him in the elections into a single party, the leader of one of the smaller parties, Lina Ron of the UPV, reportedly agreed to disband her party with the following words, so archetypal of the Weberian category: "My comandante gives the order – we obey. Who am I to question the second Liberator of the Republic, the messiah God sent to save the people?" (quoted in *The Economist*, March 8 2007).
19. This image has been explicitly confirmed by Chávez on numerous occasions, for instance when he used his radio show *Aló Presidente* in February 2007 to tell Fidel: "You know that I don't have any complex about it: I call you 'father' in front of the entire world."

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