

Miguel Díaz-Canel is Cuba's new President as Raúl Castro leaves office

By Tom Whitney

Fidel Castro served as Cuba's President from 1978 until 2008. Raul Castro did so from that year until April 19, 2018. On that day, Miguel Díaz-Canel, 57 years old, became Cuba's president. His presidency thus marks the dawning of an era in which revolutionaries who toppled the Batista regime in 1959 no longer have a direct hand in governmental affairs.

Cuba's National Assembly named Díaz -Canel as president of Cuba's Council of State. That position constitutionally establishes him as Cuba's president. Voters on March 11 had elected deputies to the current session of the Assembly. The Assembly is "[the supreme body](#) of state power and represents and expresses the sovereign will of all the people."

Díaz -Canel's rise to the presidency resulted from that National Assembly having elected 31 Assembly members to serve on the Council of State and choosing a few of them to be officers for the Council. The new Council includes 15 women and 11 new members. The members' average age is 54 years; [77.8 percent of them](#) were born after the Triumph of the Cuban Revolution.

The National Candidature Commission, led by leaders of Cuba's labor movement, is crucial to Cuba's electoral process generally and to the procedure used by the Assembly to form the Council of State. The Commission had previously conferred with individual deputies to learn their preferences as to members and officers of the Council of State. It used its findings to create a single slate of proposed members and officers.

The Assembly deputies voted secretly on the entire proposal. Two of the 604 voting deputies chose Council of State members other than the ones offered them. The others approved the recommended slate of members and officers.

Esteban Lazo, newly reinstated as president of the Assembly, presided over the session at which the new Council of State was announced. Revolutionary veterans Ana María Mari Machado, Ramiro Valdés, and Gladys Bejerano were returned to the Council of State. Veteran leaders of the Revolution departing the Council with Raúl Castro included José Ramón Machado Ventura and General Álvaro López Miera. The new first vice-president is former labor leader Salvador Valdés Mesa. Five vice-presidents were named.

Since 2013, the Cuban president's term has been limited to five years. After leaving office Raúl Castro will continue as head of Cuba's Army and as first secretary of the Cuban Communist Party.

In addressing the National Assembly the new Cuban president [dedicated his remarks](#) to “the historical generation that with its sanction and humility accompanies us in this time of challenges.” He pointed out that, “The mandate given by the people to this legislature is continuity of the Revolution.” He stated that, “for us it’s totally clear that only the Communist Party of Cuba guarantees the unity of the nation and its people.”

Díaz-Canel, age 57, grew up in Villa Clara Province. In 1982 he graduated as an electrical engineer from the university there. He was a student leader and later served in the Army and on a solidarity mission in Nicaragua. He taught at the university for three years beginning in 1985. Díaz-Canel, formerly a Communist Party youth leader, became the Party’s first secretary in Villa Clara in 1993. He joined the Political Bureau of the Communist Party in 2003 and in 2009 was appointed Minister of Higher Education. He relinquished that position in 2013 when he became first vice-president of the Councils of State and of Ministers.

Raúl Castro [pronounced the closing words](#) at the April 19 session of the National Assembly. He promised to join President Díaz-Canel at the head of Workers Day celebrations on May 1 and praised the work over decades of departing Council of State members. He welcomed Salvador Valdés Mesa to his new position as first vice-president and lauded Cuba’s gains in gender and racial equality. Valdés Mesa, in line to be Cuba’s president, is of African descent.

Castro noted that the election of Díaz-Canel is “no accident.” [According to Cubadebate.cu,](#) Díaz-Canel’s “promotion to higher offices was gradual and intentionally so.” And “we didn’t commit the error of advancing him too fast as we did in other cases.” Castro is quoted as saying that, “We live in a place and a time in which we cannot commit errors.” He indicated Díaz-Canel would become first secretary of the Communist Party in 2021, when the next Party Congress takes place.

Ángel Guerra Cabrera, a Cuban academician writing for Mexico’s La Jornada news service, [describes Cuba’s new president](#) as well “liked by people in the provinces,” someone frequently seen “on a bicycle or [waiting] in a line,” and a reader. He faces “big challenges since the economic model now in effect has advanced but has not been consolidated; it requires movement soon toward unification of [Cuba’s] monetary system, increased productivity and self-sufficiency, and food sovereignty.”

Guerra Cabrera suggests that, “The commercial, economic, and financial blockade of the United States, which has strengthened, is dangerous to the national economy.” He calls for both “constitutional reforms that fit with the great changes taking place in Cuban society” and “improved methods for carrying the island’s exceptional democracy of its own making to higher levels of participation and perfection.”

Richard Grassl assisted with this article.