The death of Fidel Castro, Cuba’s former dictator, comes at a time of uncertainty for the Communist country. Will it be a turning point for U.S.-Cuba relations? By Rebecca Zissou

**When Fidel Castro** died this past November at the age of 90, many Cubans were shocked and saddened. Huge crowds gathered in the capital of Havana to pay their respects to the country’s former leader. He had ruled the island nation with an iron hand for nearly 50 years.

Just a few hundred miles away in Miami, Florida, the reaction was very different. Thousands of Cuban-Americans took to the streets in celebration. They waved Cuban flags and beat drums. Many of them had fled Cuba to escape Castro’s rule. To them, Castro was a brutal dictator. He had stolen their families’ land, jailed political opponents, and wrecked Cuba’s economy.

Castro’s death “represents the end of something awful that happened to us,” says Isabel De Lara. She was 12 years old in 1961 when her parents sent her to the United States. They were afraid of what was to come after Castro took control of Cuba. “It’s because of him that we lost our opportunity to have a life in our country.”

Castro was no longer Cuba’s leader when he died. He officially transferred power to his younger brother Raúl in 2008. But he remained influential behind the scenes. Now, many people hope that his influence will fade and that a new era will begin in Cuba.

Indeed, Fidel Castro’s death comes during a time of historic change for the island nation. In 2015, the...
Cuba After Fidel

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U.S. and Cuba formally re-established diplomatic relations after more than 50 years of hostility. (The U.S. cut off all ties with Cuba in the 1960s because of Castro’s undemocratic policies. It also began an economic embargo. That meant trade and most travel between the two countries were forbidden.)

In the past two years, however, Presidents Barack Obama and Raúl Castro have taken steps to improve relations. They have reopened embassies in each other’s capitals. They also relaxed trade and travel restrictions.

But whether the thaw between the U.S. and Cuba will continue is uncertain. Donald Trump will become U.S. president on January 20. He has promised to undo many of Obama’s policy changes. Trump says Cuba’s government doesn’t deserve to have closer ties with the U.S. until Cubans are given more rights.

It is also unclear whether Raúl will steer Cuba in a different direction. Raúl spent much of his life in his brother’s shadow. Fidel’s death may give him the independence to pursue further economic and political reforms.

But many Cuban-Americans, including Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, do not expect the form of government Fidel built to change anytime soon. “Sadly, Fidel Castro’s death does not mean freedom for the Cuban people or justice for the democratic activists, religious leaders, and political opponents he and his brother have jailed and persecuted,” says Rubio, the son of Cuban immigrants. “The dictator has died, but the dictatorship has not.”

Still, the next few years are sure to be a time of change.

Raúl is now 85. He has said that he will step down from the presidency in 2018. His vice president is expected to take over. But how, or if, a new leader will improve conditions for the Cuban people, and improve relations with the U.S., remains to be seen.

Decades of Hostility
The complicated relationship between the U.S. and Cuba goes back more than a century. In 1898, the U.S. gained control over the island after defeating Spain in the Spanish-American War. Four years later, Washington helped Cuba form its first government. But for decades after that, the U.S. continued to intervene in Cuba’s affairs. That fueled resentment among many Cubans.

In 1959, the relationship between the two countries began to break down after Fidel Castro led a revolution that overthrew Cuba’s dictatorship. (See “Timeline: The U.S. & Cuba,” above.) At the time, many Cubans hailed Castro as a liberator and a champion of the working class.

But shortly after seizing power, Castro formed an alliance with the Soviet Union, America’s Cold War rival. He set up a Communist government in Cuba. (Under Communism, the government owns all land and businesses, and individual freedom is severely limited.)

Soon, Castro began to crack down on free speech. He jailed or executed political opponents. He also seized thousands of acres of privately owned property and U.S. businesses worth millions of dollars.
In response, the U.S. cut off diplomatic ties with Cuba and imposed the embargo. It remains partly in effect today. Massive aid from the Soviet Union and other Communist countries helped keep Cuba afloat for decades after that. But when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, so did Cuba’s economy.

Cuba Under the Castros
Today, shortages of food and other necessities are common in Cuba. Education and health care are free, but most Cubans struggle to get by on government salaries that average about $20 a month. They often depend on money sent by relatives living overseas, most in the U.S. Many things that Americans take for granted are luxuries in Cuba, including internet access, microwaves, and air-conditioning. Many Cubans can’t afford new cars, so they drive old American models from the 1950s. Anyone who speaks out against the government can be beaten or arrested.

Fed up with the lack of freedom and economic opportunities, thousands of Cubans risk their lives to escape to the U.S. every year. Many cross the Straits of Florida in rickety boats made from old car parts, inner tubes, or Styrofoam. (See map, p. 18.) Hundreds of Cubans have died trying to make the dangerous 94-mile journey.

But in the past few years, there have been small glimmers of hope. Since taking power in 2008, Raúl Castro has loosened restrictions on the economy. He also tried to reduce tensions with the U.S. Cubans can now own businesses and buy cell phones and computers—if they are among the few who can afford such things.

More Travel and Trade
Obama’s policy shifts have started to provide additional relief for some Cubans. In the past few years, he has chipped away at the embargo. It is now easier for people to send money and goods to relatives on the island. (The president can re-establish relations with Cuba, but only Congress can completely end the embargo.)

In 2015, more than 160,000 Americans took advantage of relaxed travel rules to visit Cuba. That is up 77 percent from 2014. Cuban officials estimate that as many as 1.5 million Americans would visit the island every year if all restrictions were lifted. That would inject $2 billion into the island’s struggling economy.

Obama has also eased some business restrictions, and U.S. companies have started to operate in Cuba. Carnival’s cruise ships began sailing from Miami to Havana last spring. JetBlue and other airlines began offering regular flights to the island last year. And Netflix launched streaming services there in 2015.

A New Phase?
Fidel Castro’s death and Donald Trump’s victory, both in November, brought in a new era of uncertainty for Cuba. Last fall, Trump promised to reverse Obama’s policies “unless the Castro regime meets our demands.” That includes releasing political prisoners and restoring religious and political freedoms.

Robert L. Muse is a lawyer in Washington, D.C., who specializes in U.S.-Cuba trade law. He says Trump can undo Obama’s efforts. But some changes may be hard to roll back. U.S. companies have spent billions of
dollars to set up shop in Cuba. They would likely oppose Trump if he were to stop them from doing business there.

In taking a stronger stance against Cuba, Trump is siding with the influential Cuban-American community in South Florida. They helped him win the state, and the presidency, in November. Many Cuban-Americans oppose lifting the U.S. embargo. They believe that any money that goes into the island from American tourists or businesses benefits Cuba’s government more than ordinary Cubans. Some U.S. lawmakers also oppose ending the embargo, and the Republican-controlled Congress is unlikely to end it anytime soon.

It remains to be seen how leaders in the U.S. and Cuba will proceed. But many people in both countries say they are excited for what lies ahead. Enrique López Oliva, a retired historian in Cuba, sees Castro’s death as a turning point for the nation.

“It’s the end of one era and the beginning of another,” he said. “The death itself, we were waiting for that to happen at any moment. But now it feels like a new phase is about to begin.”

With reporting by The New York Times

**CORE QUESTION** What are some pros and cons of improving U.S. relations with Cuba?

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**-charting-cuba**

The island nation of Cuba is just 94 miles from the U.S. What will the future hold for those two countries?

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**Map Skills**

1. What is the capital of Cuba?
2. That city is about how many miles from Miami?
3. In which direction would you travel to get from Cuba to Haiti?
4. What is the westernmost city on this map?
5. Which waterway separates Florida and Cuba?
6. Which body of water is located off Cuba’s southern shore?
7. About how many miles separate Key West and the U.S. naval base at Guantánamo Bay?
8. The Cayman Islands are located in which body of water?
9. Turks and Caicos is governed by which country?
10. Which major body of water is north of Haiti and east of Miami?