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Can Americans Still Travel to Cuba Under Its New Leader Miguel Díaz-Canel?

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For the first time since revolutionaries swept to power, the surname of Cuba's leader will be different—but there is much speculation over whether such a change will be anything more than cosmetic.

Raul Castro, 86, who succeeded his brother Fidel in 2008, will stand down as president on Wednesday and the country's National Assembly is expected to choose his handpicked successor Miguel Díaz-Canel.

But Juan Carlos Hidalgo, a Latin America policy analyst at the Washington, D.C.-based CATO Institute, said Díaz-Canel is just warming the seat for Castro's son, Alejandro, a colonel in the interior ministry, who is expected to take over in 2021.

"The new Cuban leader has been adamant that the political system is not going to change. Even though [Díaz-Canel] will be the new president, he is not going to have much power," Hidalgo told *Newsweek*. "Raul Castro is grooming his son Alejandro to be the one to take the reins of the leadership. So Cuba will remain a firm Stalinist dictatorship in the foreseeable future."

Raúl Castro has ushered in market reforms when he took over from his brother in 2008, including giving Cubans the right to buy and sell properties, own computers and cellphones.

But more than two-thirds of Cubans are state employees earning only around \$30 a month. Furthermore, the government has only implemented a fraction of its intended market reforms with its economy still one-third smaller than it was in 1985 when it received subsidies from the Soviet Union, Reuters reported.

A significant moment in Raúl Castro's tenure was when he presided over a warming of ties with Washington, and in 2016 a historic meeting with former President Barack Obama paved the way for the reopening of embassies and an easing of restrictions on tourism and business links.

However, President Donald Trump has rowed back on some of these and the U.S. State Department issued a travel warning after American embassy staff in Havana complained of dizziness and headaches after what was described as "sonic attacks."

Despite all this, the changes which benefited U.S. tourists and businesses, are expected to continue. William LeoGrande, a professor of government at the American University School of Public Affairs in Washington, D.C., said he doubted that Trump's return to a policy of hostility would do lasting damage.

"There is a broad consensus in the United States and Latin America that normalization with Cuba was a good thing. The only thing not part of that consensus, are conservative Cuban Americans in the South of Florida and even they are a minority in their own community," LeoGrande told *Newsweek*. "The president of the United States thinks he owes them a political debt for delivering Florida to them [in the 2016 election] but he has essentially outsourced his Latin America policy to Senator Marco Rubio."

The U.S. State Department prohibits doing business with a number of Cuban enterprises that have links to the island's armed forces, but American firms can still work with companies that are part of that list.

For tourists, these Obama-era regulations only mean that certain hotels and restaurants are off limits. This month, the Department of Transportation awarded five airlines the right to fly to Havana from cities such as Fort Lauderdale and Miami.

American visitors still have to meet 12 categories of approved travel. LeoGrande said the main change to regulations under Trump affecting travelers was the ending of educational travel that allowed individual journeys.

"Under Obama, you could go on your own and design your own educational trip, but they eliminated that, now you have to go with an organized trip," he said.

However, Hidalgo said the Trump administration is highly unpredictable and so relations between Washington and Havana could change quickly.

"It could be that given the reaffirmation of the Communist government's core principles, that the Trump administration uses this as an excuse to impose harder sanctions on Cuba."