
Church talks help make Cuba 'perfect place for negotiations'

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The heads of the Roman Catholic and Russian Orthodox churches will hold a historic meeting today in Cuba's international airport.



- [INTERACTIVE: Pope Francis](#)

Pope Francis' and Patriarch Kirill's attempt to reconcile their churches after centuries of estrangement will set the tone for a year of peacemaking in Cuba, a nation trying to shed its historic role as international socialist

provocateur.

In addition to the meeting of the church leaders, Cuban President Raul Castro is expected to welcome President Barack Obama to Havana as early as this spring to celebrate the detente the two men declared at the end of 2014, ending a half-century of hostility. And four years of talks in Cuba between Colombia's government and its main rebel group appear set to produce an accord ending the Western Hemisphere's longest-running conflict, perhaps as early as mid-year.

If all goes as planned, 2016 could cement Castro's construction of a foreign policy legacy markedly different from that of his brother Fidel, who oversaw five decades of tension with the United States, dispatching Cuban troops and advisers to Africa, Asia and Central and South America, and offering safe haven to anti-Western fighters from conflicts around the world.

"Cuba has been transformed from a revolutionary actor, isolated from other states in the Western Hemisphere with the exception of Mexico and Canada," said Arturo Lopez-Levy, a Cuba-trained professor at the University of Texas-Rio Grande Valley. "The country has come to be seen as a country in transformation, part of the modern-day international system."

Kirill is traveling through Latin America, visiting national leaders and the region's small Russian Orthodox communities. Francis is stopping briefly in Cuba for the second time in less than a year on his way to a tour of Mexico.

The meeting of the men in Havana's Jose Marti International Airport is expected to focus almost entirely on the issue of religious reconciliation. The two churches split during the Great Schism of 1054 and have remained estranged over a host of issues, including the primacy of the pope and Russian Orthodox accusations the Catholic Church is poaching converts in former Soviet lands.

Friday's meeting will be the first between the leaders of the churches. It will put Raul Castro in a positive international light at a critical point in his normalization of relations with the United States. With less than a year left in Obama's presidency, advocates of detente are pushing hard for Cuba and the U.S. to make their reconciliation irreversible.

The Obama administration has cited Cuba's role in Colombia's peace talks as a reason for the U.S. to engage with the island rather than isolating it. Images of Raul Castro presiding over another historic attempt at reconciliation can't help but build his credentials as a man the U.S. should be doing business with.

"Fidel was widely perceived as volatile and partisan, Raul as steadier, more predictable and reliable, more reflective, hence a better negotiating partner or host," said Richard Feinberg, a former Clinton Administration official and a professor of international politics at the University of California, San Diego.

While Raul Castro is departing from his brother's foreign policy, Fidel Castro's international focus left his successor with some advantages, including a larger and better-trained diplomatic corps than those of many other countries its size.

In the hands of Raul Castro, Cuba is carving out a new role in which its peculiar, once polemic role in history allows it to function as neutral ground.

"These days," Feinberg said. "Cuba is the perfect place for negotiations."