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Cubans praise Raul Castro's 12 years in power

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Changes in Cuba over the past decade are manifested not only in the thriving private restaurants and luxurious hotels, but also in its people, who are optimistic about their future thanks to the economic reforms launched by President Raul Castro in 2011.

Cubans had been grappling to overcome the hardships during what they referred to as the "special period" following the demise of the Soviet Union nearly three decades ago.

After Castro handed over power to his younger brother Raul Castro in 2006, the latter initiated sweeping political, economic and social reforms not seen since the triumph of the Cuban revolution in 1959, resulting in an improved living standard for the people.

As the younger Castro is set to step down from his second term as Cuban president, Cubans across the island and from all walks of life have been speaking highly of his 12 years in office.

"In recent years the standard of living of Cubans has risen in one way or another and this has been influenced by his determination to start updating the economic

model," a young worker called Jorge Alvarez told Xinhua, praising the president as being very positive.

Alvarez said Castro, on the verge of turning 87 in June, was intrepid in taking that step and cautious when putting decisions into practice due to their complexity.

"He did just as he said, step by step without haste but without pause. He made important and far-reaching changes for the development of the country, such as promoting private property and allowing more foreign investment," Alvarez said.

Juan Triana, a professor in economics at the University of Havana, said one of Castro's greatest achievements was that he eliminated the suspicions of Cubans toward foreign direct investment (FDI).

Triana said FDI was perceived as "an enemy of our development process" in Cuba in the 1970s. As time went by, it was considered "something necessary but done in very timid manner."

"In the 1990s it was accepted as a necessary evil, later as a complement to the economy, and currently as a strategic need for the development of the country," he said.

Triana said extensive transformations are being carried out at all levels, politically, economically and socially.

However, a lot remains to be done as only 25 percent of the over 300 reform guidelines approved by the ruling Communist Party in 2011 have been implemented as of now.

The most important thing, Triana said, is the will to continue on this path, which has created an ideological foundation and a political platform that will allow the country to advance much further in the short term.

Although the target level of income of ordinary citizens hasn't been reached -- and neither have the planned growth rates -- there is a vision charting out specific steps to materialize the reforms.

In 2017 the Cuban economy grew 2 percent, only half of what was projected at the beginning of the year. There were multiple reasons for the slow growth, including domestic financial limitations, the continued crisis in its regional ally and main economic partner Venezuela, as well as damages by Hurricane Irma worth 13 billion U.S. dollars.

"Much progress was made in the idea that all sectors of the economy can and should contribute to growth, and that it is the government's task to pursue an appropriate legal framework so that everyone can contribute in one way or

another," said Triana.

In that context, the academic also referred to non-state forms of management, specifically private or self-employed workers as they are known on the island and non-agricultural cooperatives.

As regards reforms in the private sector, the scholar said the process is pending since privatization is "something new for Cuba," adding, however, that the government will approve small and medium-sized private companies "in the near future."

Silvio Reyes, one of the nearly 600,000 private workers in the country, also highlighted the importance of deepening the reforms in an interview with Xinhua.

Reyes said the changes made by Castro have been significant because they've opened the possibility for citizens to embrace a new dynamism in their lives.

"I started working on my own several years ago and I believe that not only did my family income grow, but also my contribution to society through the service I offer and the taxes I pay," he said.

He also praised other measures, such as the new migration policy approved in 2013 which eliminated obtaining government permits to travel abroad, as well as the authorization of home and car purchases for ordinary citizens.

Lourdes Gomez, who works in the state-owned sector, thinks Castro says little but is more concerned about practical actions.

"He knew how to combine what had been achieved by Fidel Castro, whose legacy will last forever, and at the same time undertake the changes that were necessary," said Gomez.

She said sometimes the pace of implementation of the reforms was slower than what people desired, but it was understandable given the lack of resources and other short-term problems.

"There is also the negative impact of the economic blockade imposed by the United States, which is the main obstacle to the development of the country," she added.

U.S. President Donald Trump has decided to roll back the detente achieved during Barack Obama's presidency that saw the two bitter foes resume a diplomatic relationship with each other. Despite the setback, the reality is that Cubans have never expected benefits from Washington.

"The results of Raul's government are evident and without relying on the United

States," said Juan Valera, an elderly man.

He said Castro was consistent with the policies outlined by his late brother Fidel and never gave up "the revolutionary ideals or the socialist process."

The younger Castro, Valera said, faced the challenges in the best possible way "with intelligence and solid principles," instead of sticking to the old development path.

A two-day parliamentary session starting on Wednesday will decide the composition of Cuba's ninth legislature, where 605 lawmakers will elect a new president and other senior government officials.

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