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Mariela Castro: Fidel must have been involved in U.S.-Cuba deal

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Fidel Castro's niece told CNN's Christiane Amanpour on Thursday that the former president and revolutionary must have had a role in the decision-making process that led to the historic breakthrough in U.S.-Cuba relations.

Mariela Castro Espin, daughter of President Raul Castro, said she doesn't know "what is his view about this process but imagine that at any moment he's going to write his reflections as usual. But I'm certain that he's really happy about it, he must have participated in all this decision-making."

In the first television interview from a leading member of the Castro family since the move to renew U.S.-Cuba relations was announced by both countries' presidents on Wednesday, Castro said she feels "thrilled and excited and feel that a dream has come true, something that we wanted for so many years."

"Normalizing the relations is something we've always wanted since the beginning, at the start of the Revolution as declared by our leader Fidel Castro."

The Cuban President's daughter, who is an elected member of Cuba's parliament and a civic leader, said she "didn't have the slightest idea" the negotiations, which had been ongoing for 18 months and kept in secret, were ongoing.

"Yesterday I was as surprised as you have been, as all Cubans have been all over the world."

And I think that in Cuba when things like this are done, they are done in silence and so this is the result that we had."

The Cuban leadership has been especially elated about the release of the last three of the "Cuban Five", who were convicted and jailed in the U.S. for espionage, but are largely regarded as national heroes back home.

Castro said the shift in relations between the two countries and the prisoners' release are both "extremely important to our people and the fact that they have started together - this has been a surprise and also extremely gratifying."

"I have said myself on interviews that if I had to choose, I better choose first to have the five freed and then the negotiations, this step taken which is so important in our history and to do it together really I would like to say congratulations to both parties."

Castro, who was born not long after America placed an embargo on Cuba in 1960, congratulated President Obama "for his courage."

"Really what I wanted the most was for Obama to go down in history as the U.S. President who ended the blockade and also who freed the '[Cuban] Five'."

"I didn't want to lose hope and I am glad to have faith, and to have the trust and confidence that this possibility was going to be possible. So I would like to thank President Obama and all the teams and people who have supported this cause, not only for the '[Cuban] Five' but also to start normalizing relations between Cuba and the U.S."

Amanpour asked her if the U.S.-Cuba thaw could provide an opportunity for Cuba to improve its human rights record and move towards party pluralism.

"I can say that the Cuban Revolution is a project, a historical experiment, just to try and find equality and social justice and to cover all human rights. We have been working in this direction, have free education and so on, but we've had yet many challenges identified by the people.

"And we have a lot of deadlines we are going to continue working towards. The fact there is opening in the relations, it will help, but us Cuba, we do not identify pluripartidismo [a multiparty system] as democracy."

Castro argued that "many countries have many parties and yet have not achieved democracy," adding that "this is an issue we can continue and talk about further ahead. It's very interesting and it is fantastic that it is part of the dialogue."

She also hit back at claims that Cuba lacks freedom of expression.

"We haven't got an issue with freedom of expression, we can say whatever we want, nobody can shut us up. This is just a media cliché."