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Hard-Line Cuba Policy Helps Castro Retain Power, Says IWU Historian

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. - The surest way for the United States to get rid of Cuban dictator Fidel Castro would be to embrace him, says an Illinois Wesleyan University historian who contends that the revolution in Cuba is nearing an end.

Michael Weis, professor of history at Illinois Wesleyan and a specialist in Latin American history, says that Castro's control is, in large measure, based on his ability to deflect criticism of his own regime by pointing to the United States' hostility toward Cuba.

"Because Castro personifies Cuban nationalism, he gets a lot of latitude that I don't think he would get if we embraced him or at least accommodated him. To attack Castro is to attack Cuba, and our hard-line policy has helped him a lot over the years," said Weis who led Illinois Wesleyan students on a three-week study tour to Cuba last month.

Weis said that his latest trip made it apparent to him "that we are now witnessing the end of the revolution as we have known it." Further, he thinks that, after a very short transition, Cuba will go to a hybrid system like China in the early 1980s.

"In many respects, the revolution has been more about maintaining a sense of independence and pride vis-a-vis the Americans than about communism."

In light of Castro's recent crackdown on dissidents, which led to imprisonment of more than 70 and the execution of three men who hijacked a ferry, Weis was surprised that so many Cubans were willing to speak so openly, both criticizing Castro and speculating on the future without him.

"The overwhelming majority of Cubans support Castro and the Revolution despite their willingness to criticize the regime, speculate, and even dream of a more prosperous future. They criticize the lack of freedom. They criticize the lack of opportunities," said Weis.

"I also heard a lot more talk about what's going to happen next in Cuba," Weis said. "That's the big question: 'What will we do when Fidel finally goes?' That doesn't mean that they think he's going to be overthrown, but it is the clear sense that he's getting older and that he's going to die a natural death and then what?"

Aside from the increased speculation about the future, Weis said that he was surprised by how dramatically the Cuban economy seems to have changed in the year since he last visited the island in 2002.

"The fact that the economy now seems to be centered on the U.S. dollar has made a huge difference," said Weis. "Last year when I visited, there were stores that took dollars and stores that took pesos. This year every store took dollars."

That has led to a major shift, said Weis, in which average Cubans now hustle to find dollars. He cited a major increase in beggars and street vendors in Havana, all aiming to get dollars from tourists. "I was shocked by the changes that had occurred in only a year primarily, I think, because of the 'dollarization' of the economy," he said. "The pace just seemed faster because so many people are hustling so hard to get dollars."

Weis's class was the first Illinois Wesleyan group to visit Cuba. The students toured the island to examine the cause and course of the Cuban Revolution. To interview Weis on Cuba and Castro, contact Jeffery G. Hanna or Ann Aubry at 309/556-3181.