

Hoping for better times: The Second Term of Díaz-Canel (Analysis)



Cuba's President Miguel Díaz-Canel at the beginning of his second term in office before the National Assembly (Source: [ACN](#))

Cuba's President Miguel Díaz-Canel was [re-elected for a second](#) term Wednesday by deputies of Cuba's National Assembly. The inaugural session of the parliament, also newly elected at the end of March, took place amid the worst economic and energy crisis since the "special period" of the 1990s. In his re-election, the electronics engineer received 97.3 percent of the vote. All but 12 of the 470 members of Cuba's parliament are members of the Communist Party, which Díaz-Canel has headed as first secretary since April 2021.

Crises and blockades



In his speech, Díaz-Canel thanked the deputies for their support and announced faster implementation of reforms. Economic policy will become the focus of the next legislature. At the same time, he reaffirmed his loyalty to the revolutionary process in Cuba that began in 1959. Among those present was Raúl Castro, who congratulated his successor on his second term and expressed support from the "historic generation."

View of the Saratoga Hotel from the Capitol after the explosion last May 6 (Source: [Twitter](#))

"We must accept this gigantic challenge without discouragement," Díaz-Canel told delegates. He said his government's main focus in the coming period will be on food production. As other priorities in the economic field, Díaz-Canel cited "the use of idle capacity, the increase of foreign exchange earnings, the reform of state-owned enterprises, a more efficient investment process, the linking of all economic actors, and the participation of foreign investment." All of these serve to increase the supply of goods and services and bring triple-digit inflation under control, Díaz-Canel said.

Once adopted, measures should not be "undone by unjustified delays in implementation," the president called for an acceleration of the reform process. "We have to convince our young people, but above all prove that they can realize themselves in their homeland," Díaz-Canel expressed in reference to the ongoing wave of departures.

Díaz-Canel's first term in office was marked by numerous crises. Just a few weeks after he took office in May 2018, a plane crash claimed 112 lives. In the fall of 2019, the country was hit by its first energy crisis as a result of tightened U.S. sanctions, which seamlessly transitioned into the now three-year economic crisis related to the Corona pandemic and the collapse of tourism. In 2021, the largest anti-government protests since 1994 occurred, resulting in the sentencing of some 700 people to prison terms, some of them for many years, which was met with international criticism. Last year, a gas explosion at a hotel in Havana, the fire at a fuel depot in Matanzas, and a severe hurricane further depressed the island's economy. Fuel shortages and inadequate maintenance brought the energy system to the brink of collapse several times and led to recurring power cuts ("apagones"). On the plus side, the vaccination campaign against Covid-19 was successfully implemented with the country's self-developed vaccines and a vaccination rate of over 90 percent. In addition, despite the difficult economic situation, Cuba has managed to massively expand and cheapen Internet access in recent years, thus fulfilling one of Díaz-Canel's promises.

"Not a single day in these years has spared us the blows of this undeclared war against our economy and society, against the daily life and dreams of progress of an entire nation," the 63-year-old said in reference to the United States' economic blockade, which has been ongoing since the year of his birth and was tightened several times under Trump. Cuba remains ready for a dialogue of equals "without pressures and conditionalities," he said, addressing the United States government. At the same time, he called on deputies to fight against "bureaucracy, indifference, and corruption." "We must overcome the blockade without waiting for it to be lifted!" said Díaz-Canel.

Cabinet reshuffle: no successor in sight

In addition to the president, Wednesday's meeting also elected a new Council of State and Ministers. Prime Minister Manuel Marrero, 59, was appointed for a second term at Díaz-Canel's suggestion. Vice President Salvador Valdés Mesa (77) and Parliament President Esteban Lazo (79) also remain in office. Thus, there were no changes in the top offices. There is currently no successor in sight for Díaz-Canel, who, according to the constitution, may not run again after the end of his second term in 2028.

In his speech, Lazo highlighted the implementation of 138 laws and reform packages passed in the last legislature. Many are part of the implementation of Cuba's new constitution, which was put to a referendum in 2019. Same-sex marriage was likewise introduced last September as part of a new family law, giving the country some of the most progressive legislation in the region in this area. The current legislature is intended to professionalize the work of deputies in Cuba. This is to create more time for discussion and exchange with constituents. Díaz-Canel set a good example two days after the session by visiting his constituency in Santa Clara explicitly in his capacity as delegate. In the future, these visits will occur once a month. The role of the Council of State, which represents the National Assembly between legislative sessions, will be strengthened. Delegates will face intense discussions of "complex matters," with more space given in particular to the issue of fighting inflation, Lazo announced.



Waiting for fuel these days at a gas station in Havana (Source: [Cubadebate](#))

Almost half of the positions in the Council of State, which was reduced to 21 seats, were filled by new members. Revolutionary veterans Guillermo García (95) and Leopoldo Cintra Frías (81) left the body. New members include economist Iván Santos Prieta (47), Taymí Martínez Naranjo (36), director of the "Faustino Pérez" hospital in Matanzas, and 31-year-old Olympic athlete Omara Durand. The average age of the new Council of State is 47, and women make up 52 percent.

In the Council of Ministers, the new appointments were smaller. 20 of the 26 ministers were confirmed in office. Foreign Trade Minister Rodrigo Malmierca (66) had to vacate his post after 14 years. His ministry had recently come under increasing criticism for its slow progress in reducing bureaucracy. He was replaced by Ricardo Cabrisas (86), who is considered agile and pragmatic despite his advanced age. Finance Minister Meisi Bolaños (52) was replaced by her former deputy Vladimir Regueiro. The cabinet reshuffle also included the Ministries of Education and Higher Education and the Institute of Regional Planning.

Vietnam's Parliament President Dinh Hue was the only foreign guest to address the deputies. He highlighted the support Cuba has provided to his country in times of war and stressed that Vietnam is currently the "most important Asian investor" in Cuba. Hue [announced](#) a donation of 5000 tons of rice and 300 tablets for National Assembly deputies. Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov had also traveled to the island immediately before the meeting and met with Díaz-Canel and Castro for energy talks that [appeared to be successful](#). China's President Xi Jinping also [congratulated](#) Díaz-Canel on his re-election and called Friday for deepening the "Cuban-Chinese community with a shared future." Xi reiterated his will for "close exchanges" with Díaz-Canel to "strengthen political leadership over party and state relations."

Who is Díaz-Canel, anyway - and what is he up to with Cuba?

Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez, his full name, was born on April 20, 1960, in the small town of Placetas (Santa Clara province). His father worked for a brewery, while his mother worked as an elementary school teacher. In 1982, he graduated as an electronics engineer from the University of Santa Clara and served in the Armed Forces until 1985. In April of the same year, he began working as a lecturer at his former university, while serving as an official for the Communist Youth League (UJC). There, the self-confessed Beatles fan and mullet-wearer Díaz-Canel caused irritation: Long hair & rock'n'roll had just become socially acceptable in 1980s Cuba, but were not (yet) befitting for functionary candidates.

He worked his way up through the ranks of the Communist Party via several provincial leadership posts. In his hometown of Santa Clara in the 1990s, he protected "El Mejunje," Cuba's first decidedly gay nightclub, which still exists today. During this time, he also earned the reputation of a down-to-earth and humble official who, unlike many of his colleagues, eschewed the government car and instead rode his bicycle to work. After rising to become the youngest member of the Politburo in 2003, he served as minister of higher education between 2009 and 2012. During his time as vice president of the Council of State from 2013, he made his mark primarily on the issues of digitization and media renewal. On April 19, 2018, he was elected as Raúl Castro's successor.



Miguel Díaz-Canel and Fidel Castro in Birán, September 2003 (Source: [Cubadebate](#))

Many allegations of corruption have been made against Cuban politicians and their families in recent years, from Fidel Castro's grandson filming himself in a late-model Mercedes to Prime Minister Marrero's children allegedly traveling abroad on a government plane for a shopping trip, the list is long. Díaz-Canel, however, has always been able to maintain the aura of modesty, despite criticism of his policies and government record. Elsewhere, he demonstrated his ability to take ridicule: When he spoke of a "conjunctural situation" at the start of the energy crisis in the fall of 2019, the term earned him much derision and gloating. The internet on the island overflowed with a first wave of sarcastic Díaz Canel memes. In a speech at the time, he alluded to it with a wink, legitimizing it as an expression of the typically Cuban ability to "joke even about our most serious problems." Such relaxedness on the issue would probably not have been expected from Fidel Castro.

Even though the reform of the media (which Díaz-Canel took up again and again as vice president) will only really be implemented this year as part of a new communications law, a new style has taken hold with Díaz-Canel compared to the almost publicity-shy Raúl Castro, which he also cultivates on social media. In 2018, he compelled all ministers to take to Twitter and report regularly on their work, and he himself repeatedly appears in special broadcasts on certain topics without becoming a "permanent face" on television. But even in his five-year presidency, he has not yet been able to bridge the gap between official discourse and the feelings of large parts of the population.

About three weeks before the March parliamentary election, Díaz-Canel gave a [rare interview](#) to the Lebanese TV station Al Mayadeen that provided insights into his person and agenda. In the three-hour interview, originally scheduled to last 50 minutes, he took a stand on issues of international politics and Cuba's situation. For long stretches, he limited himself to reproducing the official party line. Even when his guest explicitly asked him to comment personally, Díaz-Canel stuck to prepared answers. The contrast with Fidel Castro, who "always bordered on heresy" in lively rhetorical figures, as one observer put it, could not have been greater. Possibly, however, it was precisely this careful balancing of words and keeping a low profile that enabled him to rise to the top of the Cuban state. In the end, journalist Ghassan bin Jiddo nevertheless managed to elicit some interesting statements from his interlocutor.

Díaz-Canel, unsurprisingly, clearly acknowledged the "continuation of the legacy of the Revolution," which he "would never allow itself to betray." The transition from the founding fathers of the Revolution to subsequent generations, he stressed, has been "without ruptures and trauma." At the same time, he said, there is "the challenge of reflecting on this work from a critical, nonconformist perspective without complacency." His first commitment, he said, is always to the Cuban people, because "without commitment to the people and their well-being, there is no continuity." The goal of the economic reforms underway, he said, is "to achieve in the shortest possible time, despite the blockade, the prosperity and satisfaction that the people deserve." To this end, he said, he is in close communication with the population and experts. On the state of implementation, he was self-critical: "I am dissatisfied with many things, including the fact that we have not managed to solve the problems of the country [...] with the way we are implementing some things that are more efficient, more effective solutions. And this dissatisfaction accompanies me every day." Therefore, in order to avoid future delays in the reform process, halfway to the next party congress, in October 2024, an extraordinary party conference is to be held to take stock of the implementation of measures to date.



Díaz-Canel playing baseball (Source: [Presidencia/Twitter](#)).

Asked about his government's priorities, he first mentioned the defense of the revolution and the country, which included "reducing economic and ideological vulnerabilities." In the political arena, he formulated the guiding question, "How do we achieve more democracy in our political process based on the real participation of the people in decision-making?" In addition to the changes mentioned at the beginning, programs planned for the new legislature include those "for the empowerment of women, against discrimination and racism, against cultural colonialism and platforms of capitalist restoration, and for the social transformation of neighborhoods with vulnerable groups." The goal, he said, is to reduce again the inequalities that have risen sharply in recent years.

In addition, he referred to the "innovation-based governance model" developed in collaboration with social scientists at the University of Havana, on which he received his doctorate in March 2021. He named the "Three Pillars of Governance" as 1. science and innovation, linking research, production, and corresponding framework policies "so that for every problem that arises, we have concrete actions on the screen on how to solve it through innovation." 2. digital transformation as part of a "necessary change in mentality, also with a view to the demographic development of our country." Government services and official procedures would have to become more agile throughout. 3. social communication: "How do we counter the immense media campaign of imperialism with emancipatory, humanistic content? How do we arrive at a society in which persons are not defined by the consumption of certain content or material possessions, but by their knowledge, their contribution to society, and their solidarity?" Above all, he said, is the goal of "achieving prosperity and well-being."

At the end of the interview, bin Jibbo turned the conversation to the person of Díaz-Canel. What does Cuba's president do in his spare time? "I think I'm a frustrated athlete, a frustrated musician and a frustrated artist," said Díaz-Canel, who added that he is "rather mediocre" as an athlete, although he walks four to five kilometers every day, lifts weights on weekends and occasionally swims. As a youth, he loved basketball and water polo, and as he got older, he switched to softball, he said. Regarding his musical talent, he said that he never managed to learn chords on the guitar, which is why he later switched to drums, although he has not had great success there either (as president, he has so far performed once [on the drum](#) and as a [karaoke singer in public](#)). The most important thing for him personally is his family, "without whose support the job would not be possible". Sundays belong to the family, where he spends time with his three children and his wife. The eldest son, with whom he also works professionally, is "the in house opposition, always criticizing, but he is not always right." With his wife, Liz Cuesta, he maintains an "intimate love relationship" (which also sometimes causes frowns on Twitter), saying she is a "true friend and comrade in arms" with whom he discusses political issues and develops ideas together. "From the rest of the family, I receive support, understanding... but also opposition," Díaz-Canel said.

Conclusion: Reforms on its own strength

The circumstances of Díaz-Canel's second term could hardly have been more difficult. The economic fallout from the pandemic, tightened U.S. sanctions, and a reform process that was getting off to a poor start ensured that Cuba's economy (still) has its back to the wall in its fourth year of crisis. Shortages of food, medicine and electricity characterize everyday life, and just a few weeks before the assembly's meeting, long lines have once again formed in front of gas stations while inflation is barely leveling off. After a slump of 10.2 percent of GDP in 2020 and a barely noticeable recovery in subsequent years, the government is planning moderate growth of three percent this year. Whether this target can be achieved remains an open question, but despite all the uncertainties, there is much to suggest that the crisis has now bottomed out: [new investments and trade agreements](#) with Algeria, China, Russia and Vietnam should provide a boost for the first time in the course of this year.

Meanwhile, frustration on the island remains high. Political apathy and sarcasm about the country's situation dominate street talk. Time and again, anger is discharged in the form of graffiti in which the president is also personally attacked. "Díaz-Canel has borne the brunt of the displeasure, anger or unpopularity of the economic situation", former Cuban diplomat and analyst Carlos Alzugaray [told](#) the AP news agency. Many who turned their backs on the revolution recently voted with their feet: Since 2021, more than 391,000 Cubans have left the country for the U.S., about three percent of the population. It is the largest wave of emigration in recent Cuban history.

Díaz-Canel's main task for the coming years remains to revive the economy - with or without changes to U.S. sanctions. Their easing could contribute significantly to the economy's recovery, but many experts are now skeptical that the Biden administration will be willing to take further easing steps after reauthorizing money shipments earlier this year. Even the early release of protesters arrested in the protests would have little chance of success, according to Alzugaray: "It is irrelevant what Cuba does, because there is enormous pressure within the U.S. government to maintain this crude policy," Alzugaray said pessimistically. The island is forced to "undertake the necessary reforms under its own

steam," he said. Their success depends not least on domestic political factors: Will it be possible to push back rampant corruption and bureaucracy, overcome ideological barriers in the economic sphere, ensure social balance and at the same time establish a successor? The answer to these questions will determine how Cuba will look back on Díaz-Canel's political legacy at the end of his presidency. ([Cubaheute](#))