

Raul's reforms may strengthen communism

By WILL WEISSERT, Associated Press Writer Wed Apr 2, 3:23 PM ET

It's not the stuff of Lenin or Marx, or even of Fidel Castro, but it's hardly free-market capitalism, either. In fact, steps to encourage a Cuban spending spree may help the communist system and its new president survive.

In rapid-fire decrees over the past week, Raul Castro's government has done away with some despised restrictions, lifting bans on electric appliances, microwaves and computers, inviting average citizens to enter long-forbidden resorts and declaring they can even legally have their own cell phones.

More could be on the way. Rumors are rampant the government could ease travel restrictions and tolerate free enterprise that would let more people start their own small businesses. And hopes that it will tweak the dual-currency system that puts foreign products out of reach for most Cubans have sparked a run on the peso.

"We're going to get out and buy more and more," said retiree Roberto Avila. "That's the future in Cuba, and it is a strong future."

Cuba is still far from a buyers' paradise. Nearly everyone holds government jobs, earning an average of \$19.50 a month, though many get dollars from tourism jobs or relatives abroad. It would take the average Cuban five months to earn enough to buy a low-end DVD player that an American could buy with five hours of minimum-wage work.

By doing away with rules ordinary Cubans hate, Raul Castro may defuse clamor for deeper economic and political change in the single-party communist system.

On the other hand, the small changes could just whet Cubans' appetites for more.

"These measures to allow Cubans to buy DVDs and everything else are just to entertain the people," said Maite Moll, a 45-year-old state engineer. "It's not really important because it resolves nothing."

Some Cubans worry that even the small measures already taken will create class tensions and increase resentment between those earning state salaries and those with access to dollars, given the new opportunities for conspicuous consumption. Raul Castro is clearly hoping that greater buying power will distract from any friction.

Certainly, the 76-year-old president has bolstered his popularity, addressing for now the doubts that Cuba's government can survive without his charismatic brother Fidel.

"If low-income groups have access to essential goods like food, clothing and construction materials, and can sell and buy homes and use them as collateral, it doesn't matter if you have a significant income gap. People are better," said Carmelo Mesa-Lago, a Cuba economics expert at the University of Pittsburgh. "That's what happened in China and Vietnam."

The new president is said to be an admirer of free-market reforms that allowed those countries to revolutionize their economies while maintaining single-party communist political control, though top officials have said Cuba isn't about to follow a Chinese or Vietnamese path.

The food part of the equation could be profoundly affected by another initiative promoted this week. The government is lending uncultivated state-controlled land to private farmers and cooperatives to plant cash crops such as coffee and tobacco, while paying producers more for basics such as milk, meat and potatoes.

Over time, this could reduce chronic food shortages and change the face of Cuban farming.

It's not new for the government to let private farmers take a crack at putting state land to good use. But this time the government is letting farmers more easily buy equipment and supplies at government stores, removing a key impediment to their success.

The changes implemented barely a month into Raul's presidency are all measures Fidel bitterly opposed for decades, publicly declaring that even the smallest initiatives to increase economic and social freedoms could create a Cuban "new rich" and destroy the island's hard-fought social and economic equality.

Raul has pledged to consult his brother on all major decisions, but if the elder Castro doesn't like what's going on, he has kept his views to himself. Recuperating from an undisclosed illness in a secret location, the 81-year-old Fidel has written essays every few days focusing on international issues, making no mention of daily life in Cuba.

The latest changes are a far cry from perestroika or glasnost — the political opening and economic restructuring of the Gorbachev era in the Soviet Union. But there are movements for greater freedoms among Cuban intellectuals as well.

Raul Castro presided this week over the Congress of the Union of Cuban Writers and Artists, hearing their call for more open debate about "mechanisms of control and institutional censorship."

"It seems clear that there is a disconnect between the cultural project of the revolution and the references that broad sectors of the people establish for themselves," said the group, an arm of the Communist Party which in the past has been used to enforce ideological discipline.

And that disconnect could lead to unrest if more changes don't quickly benefit the vast majority of Cubans. While people are excited to walk around stores and hotel lobbies, they will soon become frustrated that they can't afford to do more than look, said Juan Antonio Blanco, a Cuban academic based in Ontario, Canada.

"This government is totally myopic and shortsighted if it doesn't understand that it's sitting on dynamite," he said. "They have to do more than the things that will play in the international media."