

Raul Castro ousts top Cubans loyal to Fidel Castro

By WILL WEISSERT, Associated Press Writer Will Weissert, Associated Press

HAVANA – President Raul Castro abruptly ousted some of Cuba's most powerful officials Monday, remaking the government in the biggest shakeup since he took over from his ailing brother Fidel Castro a year ago.

The changes replaced some key Fidel loyalists, including the longtime foreign minister, with men closer to Raul. They also reduced the enormous powers of a vice president credited with saving Cuba's economy after the fall of the Soviet Union.

But analysts saw no immediate indication that the changes are related to hopes for closer U.S.-Cuban ties now that both countries have new presidents.

Several ministries were consolidated in response to President Raul Castro's calls for a "more compact and functional structure" for the often unwieldy communist bureaucracy that oversees nearly all public activity on the island.

The most sweeping leadership shakeup in years was dropped on Cubans almost as an afterthought — at the end of the midday news, following the weather and sports.

The most prominent of those ousted, Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque, was the youngest of Cuba's top leaders and had been widely mentioned as a possible future president.

Perez Roque, 43, had been Fidel Castro's personal secretary before becoming foreign minister almost a decade ago, and he delighted in blustery, Fidel-like denunciations of U.S. policy.

"He was someone who was very close to Fidel Castro and built his career working directly for Fidel Castro," said Phil Peters, a Cuba specialist at the Lexington Institute near Washington.

Perez Roque was replaced by his own deputy, Bruno Rodriguez, who once served as Cuba's ambassador to the United Nations. Officials announced no new post for Perez Roque.

The surprise shake-up did not sit well with some Cubans, including Carmen Elizondo, 45, a housewife with three children who said she heard the announcement on the news.

"Ay! It left me feeling cold," Elizondo said. "I don't understand. Why make these changes, more than anything, Felipe? I had a lot of confidence in Felipe. I don't know any of those they put in place."

But retired worker Marta Jimenez, 65, was more optimistic.

"People here are not used to change," she said. "But I think this was necessary and will be for the better. It's a restructuring of the country and I see that as good."

Peters said it was too early to say whether the changes could affect relations with the new administration of President Barack Obama, whose proposals for easing U.S. restrictions on Cuba have created hopes for the resumption of negotiations between the two countries on ending decades of hostilities.

"There is nothing that indicates it's a reaction to anything in the United States," Peters said, noting that Raul Castro has long spoken of streamlining Cuba's government.

The changes also seemed to cast further doubt on who could one day succeed Raul Castro. Cuba's current No. 2, Jose Ramon Machado Ventura, is a year older than the current president — and no heir apparent was clear from Monday's list of new leaders.

Vice President Carlos Lage, 57, apparently kept his job as vice president of the Council of State — a ruling body more powerful than the Cabinet. But he was replaced as Cabinet Secretary by Gen. Jose Amado Ricardo Guerra, who had been a top official in the military that Raul Castro ran for decades.

Lage, a former Communist youth leader, was credited with helping save Cuba's economy by designing modest economic reforms after the Soviet Union collapsed. Peters said there was no sign Lage's economic role was being reduced.

Another former youth leader, Otto Rivero Torres, was removed as Cabinet vice president. Rivero Torres had already been dropped from the Council of State last year when Raul Castro became president.

His replacement is hardliner Ramiro Valdez Menendez, who fought alongside Fidel, Raul and Ernesto "Che" Guevara in the revolution that toppled the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista in 1959.

Longtime Economy Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez was replaced by Internal Commerce Minister Marino Murillo Jorge; Finance Minister Georgina Barreiro Fajardo was replaced by Lina Pedraza Rodriguez of the Communist Party's secretariat; and Labor Minister Alfredo Morales Cartaya was replaced by Vice Minister Margarita Marlene Gonzalez Fernandez.

Jose Miguel Miyar Barruecos, a close Fidel Castro confidant, was removed as secretary of the Council of State but was given the vacant post of science and environment minister.

Replacing him as secretary of the governing council is Homero Acosta Alvarez, who worked closely with Raul Castro during the younger Castro brother's decades as Cuba's defense minister.

Vicki Huddleston, America's top diplomat in Cuba from 1999-2001, said the changes raise questions about how much influence Fidel Castro retains. The 82-year-old former president remains head of the Communist Party and often writes newspaper articles on foreign affairs.

"This would seem to indicate this is a consolidation of Raul, which then makes you think, `What about Fidel?'" she said.

Associated Press Writer Anne-Marie Garcia contributed to this report.