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Raúl ditches his brother Fidel's fatigues [pglewis](#)

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Reviving old images is an exquisite branding strategy. Adidas, Coca-Cola, and other corporations rebrand to stay fresh in customers' minds. Firms use Twitter, Facebook, and blogs to gain consumer confidence in a globalized world cluttered by products and symbols.

With only four years at the helm, Raúl Castro is displaying this business acumen. He recently declared the guayabera shirt as Cuba's "official" protocol garment.

The symbolic and practical shirt —replete with four pockets and many buttons—is a symbol of Cuban identity. Gradually, it is replacing the drab olive greens that brother Fidel immortalized.

This charismatic shirt was created in the city of Sancti Spiritus, Cuba in 1709, a town located in the center of the island and founded in 1514 by the conquistador, Diego Velázquez.

Today, the guayabera is an international symbol of success. Its glamour is touted by business people, and in many countries, it is often worn for official business and government ceremonies. It is found in rich and poor, urban and rural areas. Men and women can select from short sleeves and long, and cotton or polyester blends.

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The guayabera shirt, traditionally white or pastel-colored but now made in many colors and black, is distinguished by either two or four patch pockets and two vertical rows of alforzas (fine, tiny pleats, usually 10, sewn closely together) running along the front and back of the shirt (the pockets are separately detailed with identical, properly aligned alforzas). Tradition has it, that the guayabera shirt was first made by a poor rural Cuban seamstress who sewed large pockets into her husband's shirts for carrying guava (*guayabas*) from the field.

The once unassuming guayabera has become an iconic brand, and Raúl Castro aims to market it with foreign policy and ideological accoutrements, but how should we interpret this shift?

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Renovation of the Cuban economic model stems from the collapse of a failed system. Reworking economic and political structures requires a rebranding campaign. The symbolic guayabera, hugely more user-friendly than battle fatigues in the post-Cold War era, implies economic restructuring. Is this old wine in a new bottle, or a tepid nod toward a freer market?

If Fidel's olive-green proposals stood for inflexibility, dogmatism and centralization, Raúl's white-guayabera approach tilts the other way.

The visible face of this change appeared when the close collaborators of Fidel were axed from office. In their stead appeared a cadre of former military technocrats and confidants, most of them generals trained and promoted through the ranks of Cuba's Revolutionary Armed Forces.

Last October, new labor reforms increased the list of private jobs to 178 different trades. Ties between the government and the Roman Catholic Church's Cardinal Jaime Ortega in Havana have improved. Also notable is a dialogue between church and state that led to the release of dozens of political prisoners.

More palpable changes during the past few years include relaxing rules about purchasing computers and DVD players. Cell phone contracts were liberalized and broadly promoted, as was the ability of Cubans to lodge in hotels (long a sort of tourist-apartheid sore spot for many islanders).

Other changes portend the elimination of the decades' old ration book (*libreta*), combining soft (peso) and hard (convertible currency units) currencies into a single monetary system, achieving greater efficiency across all state companies, and a surge in small and medium enterprises.

The new guayabera model aims to stimulate foreign investment while providing credit to new private businesses. All of this is without precedent in Cuba's 52-year old revolution.

Two years ago the Obama administration allowed Cuban-Americans to make unrestricted visits to kin, and they can now send up to \$5,000 USD daily, versus the \$300 maximum every three months that George W. Bush stipulated.

These policies will not only strengthen private enterprise (e.g., money from abroad used as start-up capital for mom-and-pop operations) but will stimulate hard currency retailing.

Just this year nearly 400,000 Cuban Americans have visited the island--a significant number given that just over 2 million foreigners go there annually. The Cuban-American figure could reach 650,000 by 2011. These visits should be thought of as business-to-business ventures because capital, cash, and entrepreneurial know-how infuse a budding private sector.

Eighty-five percent of Cubans on the island were born after the revolution. Even though mass communication and advertising channels do not exist, our research shows that 42% of Cubans purchase their products and services based on brand reputation; pretty savvy for communists.

We believe that Cubans are hungry for cell phones, fast food, and a spate of brands. They are fascinated by the Internet, however limited access may be. And thousands of Cubans on the island actually belong to social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, and operate blogs.

In a little over two years since making cell phone contracts available to citizens who can pay hard currency fees, there are now 1.1 million cell phones in use.

These new reforms mark positive changes. Political and economic rebranding is under way, both superficially and substantively.

...Seems like Raúl's white guayabera rebranding is more pragmatic than Fidel's military fatigues.

small>Commentary by Emilio Morales and Joseph L. Scarpaci, partners at The Havana Consulting Group. Morales is the former Marketing Director of CIMEX, the island's largest retailing

organization; Scarpaci is Emeritus Professor of Geography at Virginia Tech. Their book, *Marketing without Advertising: Brand Preference and Consumer Choice*, will be published by Routledge. They are members of the American Geographical Society's Writers Circle.

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