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Fidel Castro: Charismatic Revolutionary Leader Who Defied the Odds

By Peter Mayo
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Fidel Alejandro Castro Ruz (90), who passed away on last week, was the son of a Spanish immigrant from Galicia, Spain. A significant world personality in the second half of the 20th century, Castro was regarded, love him or hate him, as a superb fighter, athlete, strategist and orator (some of his speeches lasted for hours). He is widely regarded as having been endowed with extraordinary intelligence. He also lived a charmed life, having dodged the bullet on numerous occasions. There have been reports of countless attempts on his life through CIA engineered plots.

After having been educated at the De Lasalle college at Santiago de Cuba, later by jesuits at the Colegio de Dolores in the same city and the Colegio de Belen, Castro graduated from the University of Havana as a lawyer and went on to become the charismatic architect of a revolution that overthrew the dictatorial regime of Fulgencio Batista and established a socialist state. He held on to power until recently when the presidential reins were handed to his brother Raul Castro, now 85, who has promised to step down in 2018. While a student at school and university, Fidel Castro excelled at sports but was also involved in political activism often in support of the Orthodox party led by Eduardo Chibás. The situation was volatile. Murders occurred and student gangs played a prominent part.

In 1947, he participated in a failed expedition to overthrow the Dominican Republic dictator, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina. While attending a student congress the following year, he was involved in an uprising in Bogota, Colombia known as the 'bogatazo.' In a country which was very much a US playground and well known for Mafia interests, Castro soon endeavoured to change the status quo represented by the Batista regime. Together with others, including his brother Raul, he staged an abortive attack on the Moncada Barracks with a view to paving the way for a revolution. The date was 26th July 1953 which was to become a momentous one; Castro would later insist on its being identified as the start of the Cuban revolution. The attack floundered and Castro, together with many others, was rounded up and arrested. While some of his comrades were executed, Castro was jailed for fifteen years. He was very lucky in that the Lieutenant who took him prisoner, Pedro Sarria, simply refused to have him shot or handed over to the barracks commander who would otherwise have had him killed after having him subjected to the most gruesome torture, the kind of torture mentioned in Castro's letters from prison.

While in prison, Castro was to write a formidable tract 'History will absolve me,' his self-defence at the trial which, later, was to have wide circulation throughout Cuba. He read voraciously and helped set up a prison school. He was released in 1955 as a result of an amnesty and eventually went to Mexico where he met the Argentinean doctor turned revolutionary, Ernesto 'Che' Guevara. A number of potential Cuban and other revolutionaries joined his clandestine movement – the 26th July Movement. Travelling to Cuba on board a rickety old yacht, *The Granma*, this band of revolutionaries landed on the island on 2nd December, 1956. They were organised into different columns. They were dispersed by enemy action and many lost their lives. From the original group of 82, only eleven remained and retreated to the Sierra Maestre from where they launched their attacks. Gradually their numbers swelled as more locals joined their ranks. Following captures of different localities, Castro and his companeros finally marched on Havana on January 8, 1959. By then Batista had fled the country. Fidel was first appointed Commander of the armed forces and later Prime Minister. An agrarian reform was soon put into effect which broke up large landholdings for redistribution among peasants, some of whom were organised into cooperatives.

After having visited the USA, Castro signed a trade agreement with the Soviet Union. There followed a series of sanctions by the USA, especially following the liquidation of many of its Cuban assets and nationalisation of several of its oil refineries. When in NYC to address the UN, Castro and the Cuban delegation stayed at Harlem where links were forged between the Cuban struggle and that of the oppressed in other parts of the world, especially Afroamericans. The USA broke diplomatic relations with Cuba and also planned, through the CIA, in concert with

Cuban exiles and Mafia bosses, an invasion, with a landing at the 'Bahia de los cochinos' (bay of pigs) which turned out to be an unmitigated disaster. Numerous attempts on Castro's life were carried out.

With Cuba veering more strongly towards the Soviet orbit, matters with the USA came to a head especially when Khrushchev was allowed to deploy missiles on the island facing Florida, in retaliation to US missiles in Turkey and other places facing the Soviet Union. This tense situation was solved by the two superpowers behind Castro's back. Earlier US President John Fitzgerald Kennedy had ordered an economic blockade of Cuba which has been maintained until very recently and was even consolidated following the collapse of the USSR in 1991. Castro had also broken relations with the Catholic Church because of its alleged connections with the Batista regime but the situation with the Vatican thawed significantly towards the end of the 90s marked by the visit of Pope John Paul II to the country. By then the Church had been allowed back. Despite all the economic difficulties, the country, under Castro, made tremendous strides forward in education, medicine, science, sport, international exchange relations and sustainable development.

The Cuban revolution served as a promising source of hope not only to the impoverished people of Latin America but also to the rest of the Tricontinental World. The term was used in 1960 during Castro's visit to the UN and subsequently Harlem in NYC. Castro's notion of 'tricontinental' applied to the exploited and colonized populations of Latin America, Asia and Africa. A Tricontinental Conference was later held in Havana in 1966. It offered a militant version of the 'Third World' alliance against continued western imperialist designs, an alliance that owes its origins to the Bandung Conference, which had taken place eleven years earlier. The term 'tricontinental' captured a significant feature of the Cuban revolution—its "South-to- South" international ethos of cooperation and solidarity. Cuba played a significant role in the dismantling of Apartheid in South Africa, a point Nelson Mandela underlined. Cuba's radical vision of "tricontinental" was, however, not merely determined by geographical boundaries. The link with the plight of Afro-Americans suggests that Castro and his collaborators were fully conscious of the existence of the 'third world' in the 'first world.' In 2004, Castro offered help to the 'wretched and oppressed' of the US. The oppressed Americans, on this occasion, were the impoverished of New Orleans.

This occurred in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Castro offered to provide access to Cuba's never ending supply of high quality doctors and health workers to assist those whose home and communities had been devastated by the storm. Some interpreted the humanitarian gesture as Castro's ultimate insult to his mighty neighbour; and indeed US leaders must have regarded it so, promptly refusing the offer. This gesture was interpreted as signalling Cuba's commitment to the global south, defined widely. Under Castro's leadership, Cuba placed its educational and medical facilities at the service of not only its own people and celebrities but also the common people of Africa, Asia and many other parts of the world. There emerged a series of bilateral, trilateral or multilateral agreements in the context of South-to-South cooperation, which contrasted with the more global and dominant models of hierarchical North-South relations, often denounced for maintaining former colonies in a colonial bind. As an example of this 'delinking' process, Venezuelan oil at low prices and interest rates were exchanged, during the Chavez and Maduro years, for Cuban teachers, doctors and health

workers. Cuba had Venezuelan literacy tutors trained in the ‘Yo si Puedo’ pedagogical method created by Cuban educator Leonela Realy. As a result, Cuba helped the Venezuela government enable one and a half million people learn to read and write. There are those who have expressed civil rights concerns regarding whether qualified personnel chosen for these exchanges had the option to decline work assignments abroad.

Like Nicaragua later, Cuba was forced to contend with overwhelming obstacles in its efforts to serve as a revolutionary model to other countries within the US intercontinental sphere of influence in the Americas. Despite all this, Cuba registered notable achievements, especially in preventive health and education. The *Universidad de la Habana* (University of Havana), although not recognized in the top flight of the now widely referred to world university rankings, has a medical school that is considered among the best in the world. Many ambitious students from the formerly Anglo-colonized Caribbean are said to strive hard to learn Spanish in order to gain admission to this school.

The same applies to Cuba’s science centres, one of them lauded, in the late 80s, as a remarkable research institution of its kind. In 2000, Argentina’s former soccer superstar Diego Armando Maradona, like others, chose to go to Cuba for rehabilitation from a life threatening, drug-related illness.

According to a 2006 WWF (World Wildlife Federation) report, Cuba is the only country in the world with sustainable development. It combined high human development standards (high literacy and health indexes) with a low ecological footprint; this includes the rate of electricity consumed and carbon dioxide emitted per capita. In making use of old cars and other products, which are made to function thanks to some superb mechanics and technicians, Castro’s Cuba has militated against the prevalent ‘consumer culture ideology’ of obsolescence with its devastating planetary effects.

Some organizations counter these achievements and the statistics involved by pointing to Cuba’s poor standing in the human rights index. This gives rise to several arguments regarding the extent of allowing civil liberties in a state of siege involving a sworn giant enemy lying next door. Cuba is not to be romanticized. Great poverty exists. Prostitution, for example, was initially tackled head on by the revolutionary government, through educational and rehabilitation measures such as schools for prostitutes. It resurfaced, especially in tourist areas (similar to other countries), despite its illegality.

Cuba operated a strict policy of control over departures and arrivals of citizens from abroad. This was recently subject to revision, given that the situation has dramatically changed since the early days of the revolution when Cuba lost a huge percentage of its brainpower – doctors and other professionals – to the US. If anything, the small nation now proactively exports such power.

There is also an overproduction of qualified people without reciprocal economic investments to integrate them. It has been argued that one should not blame this solely on the infamous blockade. In the view of many, the blockade had no justification in recent times, once the Soviet ‘threat’ to the USA was non-existent. Recently lifted, the blockade was condemned by several world figures. One of them, the late Pope John Paul II, was himself a staunch opponent of

Soviet communism and widely perceived to have been a catalyst for its overthrow. The lifting of the blockade, for which even Pope Francis lobbied strongly, came to pass recently following the normalization of relations between the two countries. It remains to be seen whether the Donald Trump administration will respect Obama's legacy with regard to US-Cuba relations.