Chapter 8

Political Repression in Castro’s Cuba: Policies, Institutions and Victims

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The Role of Fidel Castro

Among the Communist systems of the past century, and those that still survive, Cuba has been one of the most repressive and depriving as is indicated by the huge numbers of refugees escaping the island often under extremely difficult and life-threatening conditions. It has also been a system that allowed less freedom of expression than most other Communist states. Especially significant is that, unlike in Eastern Europe, the liberalization and later collapse of the Soviet Union did not lead to the relaxation of repressive policies or to a weakened will to power on the part of its leaders.

The personality and political role of Fidel Castro is critical for understanding the nature and durability of political repression in Cuba. By the time he was a law student, writes biographer Brian Latell, he had realized he had exceptional talents and was ready to use them to acquire power and fame.1 It has also been observed that he was “vain, spoiled, and narcissistic” and manifested the character traits of a sociopath, “unable to distinguish between right and wrong.”2 By age twenty, he had shot a classmate without warning and considered “murder and mayhem acceptable means to advance his personal interest.”3 In the subsequent half century, his reign on power has provided ample opportunity for expressing these traits.

Castro led the armed struggle against the Batista dictatorship by heading a widespread opposition movement. On January 1, 1959, he rode into power on broad popular support for the restoration of democracy. But, even as he was forcing Cuba on the path to Communism, for nearly three years he emphatically denied his Marxist-Leninist ideology. He only conceded his true intentions when totalitarian controls were well in place and were on the way to eliminating the “vestiges of the bourgeois state”4 while a clear alignment with the Soviet Union had been cemented.5

Castro has confirmed that his Marxist ideology had evolved during his six years as a university student6 and that he had already developed a plan for the future, his
thinking well formed before embarking on his revolutionary activities. While in jail for a year and a half under Batista, he read voraciously and took advantage of the lenient prison conditions for political prisoners. His manifesto from prison, “History will Absolve Me,” had been “well prepared to hide his true intentions and not harm the wider appeal of the anti-Batista movement.” The vision he had developed, he later explained, was one of “utopian socialism, rather than scientific socialism.” It is not difficult to conclude that adherence to dogmatic Marxism would have implied too rigid a script and would have been impractical given the actual circumstances in Cuba. He called his ideals “humanist”—their goal being to “bring freedom to the people, but also provide them the means to live and obtain their food.” He was “concerned with the chaotic nature of capitalism,” and came to the conclusion that only a system that allowed him to run everything could serve his ambitions. His tenure in power proves the point; he has been known to micromanage everything—including the most technical or trivial aspects of the economy. His unique conception of equality provided entitlement for maintaining the lifestyle of a very prosperous capitalist while imposing spartan living conditions on the vast majority of the population.

Castro had learned from Lenin and Gramsci that deception is not only justifiable, but also necessary in the service of the great goals. By the time he took power, he had refined his version of totalitarian control and plans for third-world revolutions to be unleashed when the moment was ripe. A Soviet-supported Communist system offered the best possibilities for achieving unchecked personal power and glory. Because, in Castro’s own words, the Cuban Communist Party “was isolated by the United States and the reactionaries within Cuba” and would never achieve power, he decided to carry out his own revolution. When the time was right, he would coopt the Cuban Communist Party, which he eventually did, quickly and successfully. In Chile, during a month-long visit in 1971 at the time of Allende’s presidency, he explained his reasoning: “A road to revolution means taking advantage of every opportunity and possibility of advancing.”

A close examination of Castro’s account of his road to power and the evolution of his rule makes it doubtful that he was a genuine Communist. Rather, he was first and foremost a “Fidelista”—an opportunist. His belief in his historical mission was difficult to separate from an apparently insatiable hunger for power and self-aggrandizement. His profound hatred of the United States and the realization that the U.S. government would oppose him and the political system he wished to establish made the Soviet connection and support convenient and attractive. His vision of socio-political transformation was not limited to Cuba. Exporting the revolution was part of his messianic agenda. Subversion abroad, beginning with Latin America, was initiated promptly after he came to power. Later on, large scale military interventions in Africa would extend his reach. Shaping radical forces worldwide and crowning himself as leader of the Third World “anti-imperialist” movement complemented his aspirations.

Castro stayed in power longer than Hitler, Stalin, and Mao. Until he delegated power temporarily to his brother on July 30, 2006, he was the longest-serving head of state. Despite his ill health, he still appears to influence policy making and the exercise of power. At least until July of 2006, he was chief of state with the titles of president, head of government, first secretary of the Communist Party, and commander in chief of the armed forces. His overriding need to seize and cling to power and glory, his supreme ruthlessness and skill for attaining this goal, as well as the impact of childhood experiences on his personality are reminiscent of the lives of Hitler and Stalin.