



Castro's Legacy

Fidel Castro's death is unlikely to bring major changes to Cuba.

Juan Carlos Hidalgo

November 26, 2016

Fidel Castro was surely the most influential figure in Latin American politics in the second half of the 20th century. He was also the most ominous one. His legacy goes beyond subjugating and impoverishing Cuba for over 50 years to also inspiring and sponsoring armed insurgencies throughout the region that cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of Latin Americans.

From early on, Castro was obsessed with the United States. When he was 14 years old, he wrote an awkward fan letter to President Franklin Roosevelt congratulating him on his re-election and asking him for a \$10 bill. However, his youthful admiration turned into antagonism in adulthood. Some people believe that his introduction to Marxist ideas was responsible for this change in attitude; others claim that Castro was simply a narcissist troublemaker that found in communism an ideal political system to exert total control of Cuba, maintain power and purge political rivals.

Whether a Marxist by conviction or opportunism, Castro seized power in 1959 and successfully imposed the Stalinist regime in Cuba that remains to this day. During the Cold War, the massive subsidies he received from the Soviet Union contributed to the survival of his regime while Cuba rapidly turned into a basket case. In return, Castro devoted his attention to exporting his revolution by financing left-wing guerrillas in other Latin American countries. Nearly all of these insurgencies failed to topple their respective governments – with the exception of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua – but still thousands were killed in the process.

Cuban leader Fidel Castro praises the new immigration accord with Washington – and insists his own future is not negotiable.

The collapse of the Soviet Union didn't mean the end of the Castro dictatorship as many hoped. But it did bring the Cuban economy to its knees. When I visited Havana in 2007, locals told me how widespread hunger was during the so-called "Special Period" of the early 1990s. Castro dealt with the dire economic situation by reticently loosening the grip of the government on the economy. But these timid measures were quickly reversed a few years later when Castro found a new patron – and unconditional ally – in Hugo Chavez. At its height a few years ago, it is estimated that the subsidy that Venezuela's subsidy to Cuba represented 20 percent of the island's economy – higher than the assistance it once received from Moscow.

Washington's clumsy handling of Fidel Castro turned the despot into a hero in the eyes of many Latin Americans. The Bay of Pigs invasion, the CIA plots to assassinate him and the 56-year-old trade embargo are perceived as heavy-handed efforts of the American Goliath to subdue the Cuban David. In the last decade, with the ascendancy of left-wing governments in Latin America, and with U.S. influence dwindling in the region, Cuba has seen its star power rise. The island even hosted all of Latin America's heads of state in a summit in 2013 – whose declaration cynically called to strengthen democracy and human rights in the region.

Despite ceding power to his septuagenarian little brother Raul in 2006 after a still-undisclosed illness, Fidel remained a strong force within the regime. Some claim that his mere physical presence dissuaded Raul from pushing meaningful liberalizing reforms aimed at resurrecting the dilapidated economy. Instead, the limited measures implemented so far by the government seem more focused on keeping the economy – and thus the regime – afloat while preventing Cubans from becoming prosperous.

Cuba's ailing leader gives up government posts, though he remains head of the Communist Party.

However, Castro's death doesn't imply a green light for liberalization in Cuba, either economic or political. If anything, we should expect an increase in repression against dissidents in the short term as the regime tries to control the repercussions of the death announcement.

Washington's ability to influence these events is limited. The Obama administration did right by shifting an approach toward Cuba that failed to bring democracy to the island and instead provided Havana with an excuse to portray itself as the victim of U.S. aggression. But there is no reason to believe that U.S. engagement will significantly impact the regime's attitudes on human rights and democracy. Fidel's totalitarian dream will outlive him at least in the short term.

In 2010, asked by The Atlantic's Jeffrey Goldberg whether his economic model was still worth exporting to other nations, a frail and suddenly candid Fidel Castro said that "The Cuban model doesn't even work for us anymore." That reality had been painfully evident for several decades. And yet, the revolution was never about bringing prosperity to Cubans. It was always about Fidel himself.

Juan Carlos Hidalgo is a policy analyst on Latin America at the Cato Institute's Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity.