

Cuba under Castro was a hellhole

Frans Cronje says it is frightening that many of our politicians would like to emulate what the late dictator did to his country

Frans Cronje

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Castro's achievements were a load of nonsense – his country was a hellhole

From Jacob Zuma to Cyril Ramaphosa (and scores in between) South Africa's politicians (and a fair number of journalists and social justice activists) have engaged in a week of nauseating adulation of deceased Cuban dictator Fidel Castro.

Speaking in Cape Town, Mr Ramaphosa is reported to have said South Africans should “draw comfort from the conviction that Fidel Castro's spirit lives on amongst us”, and that South Africa's politicians should seek to emulate Castro to become "leaders who would not be afraid to confront difficult issues ... (l)eaders who would not be afraid to charge ahead to ensure the people are taken care of".

The *Mail and Guardian* described as “moving” and “graceful” Jacob Zuma's address at Castro's funeral in Cuba in which Mr Zuma is reported to have said: “We must endeavour to take forward the ideals that he espoused – internationalism, freedom, equality, justice and a better and more just world.”

It was welcome, then, when Marian Tupy of the Cato Institute, a think-tank in Washington, sent out a note last week under the title “Castro's accomplishments in Cuba a load of nonsense”. Tupy pointed out among other things that GDP per capita in Cuba had remained well below the average for Latin America and the Caribbean for the past 40 years. Chile and Cuba had shown roughly similar GDP per capita levels in the 1970s, but Chile's figure is now almost double that of Cuba.

Much has been written this past week about Cuba's purportedly excellent education system, but Tupy shows that literacy rates rose faster in other Latin American and Caribbean states than in Cuba. As regards Cuba's much-praised healthcare system, Tupy is able to demonstrate that between 1960 and 2015 life expectancy in Cuba rose more slowly (25%) than the average (34%) for the broader Latin American and Caribbean region. In terms of living standards, Tupy points out that car-ownership levels in Cuba fell between the 1950s and the late 1990s while rising quickly in Brazil, Ecuador, and Colombia.

In 2015 the Brookings Institution, another think-tank, reported that the average take home salary in Cuba was approximately US\$20 per month – less than 10% of Mr Ramaphosa’s proposed new minimum wage for South Africa. This is a figure confirmed by the Cuban statistical agency as being in the right zone for civil service salaries. In 2014, Associated Press reported that doctors would see their salaries rise to US\$67 per month and nurses to US\$25.

The Castro regime survived as long as it did partly through the brutal repression of civil rights.

The opening paragraph of a 2016 report by Human Rights Watch on Cuba states: “The Cuban government continues to repress dissent and discourage public criticism. It now relies less on long-term prison sentences to punish its critics, but short-term arbitrary arrests of human rights defenders, independent journalists, and others have increased dramatically in recent years. Other repressive tactics employed by the government include beatings, public acts of shaming, and the termination of employment.”

In a second report, published two weeks ago, Human Rights Watch said: “As other countries in the region turned away from authoritarian rule, only Fidel Castro’s Cuba continued to repress virtually all civil and political rights. Castro’s draconian rule and the harsh punishments he meted out to dissidents kept his repressive system rooted firmly in place for decades. The repression was codified in law and enforced by security forces, groups of civilian sympathizers tied to the state, and a judiciary that lacked independence. Such abusive practices generated a pervasive climate of fear in Cuba, which hindered the exercise of fundamental rights, and pressured Cubans to show their allegiance to the state while discouraging criticism. Many of the abusive tactics developed during his time in power – including surveillance, beatings, arbitrary detention, and public acts of repudiation – are still used by the Cuban government.”

Amnesty International reported (for 2015/2016) on “more than 8,600 politically motivated detentions of government opponents and activists during the year”. These included journalists and human rights activists, which makes the praise heaped on Castro by South African journalists and activists this past week all the more bizarre.

What will no doubt come as a shock to many of Mr Castro’s supporters in South Africa is the alleged extent of racism in Cuba. News reports are full of snippets about the subjugation of black Cubans. Black Cubans were reportedly largely unrepresented in Cuba’s political leadership for all the years of Mr Castro’s reign. Their unemployment and incarceration rates are reported to be significantly higher than national averages. When they protest they are alleged to be singled out for particularly harsh treatment by the security forces. A most fascinating snippet was that the Castro regime had banned the following song by a black Cuban rap artist for drawing attention to the racism of the regime:

Hey, yo

The black Cuban wants to be just like the white man

Because he thinks that darkness is obsolete and that whiteness is progress

And even though he has no master, he crawls like a worm

He has nothing of his own because his self-esteem and pride are broken

The black Cuban is the rubbish of his island

Because the great majority of Cubans were treated like rubbish by their government hundreds of thousands sought to flee the island. In 2015 *The Economist* reported on the “thousands of impoverished Cubans in makeshift boats and rafts, risking their lives to flee the communist island despite a five-month-old thaw in relations with America that both governments hope will bring more prosperity to Cuba. In the first quarter of the year the number of Cuban migrants arriving in America more than doubled, and 2,460 have been apprehended at sea since October”. It is estimated that more than two million Cubans or Cuban Americans have sought refuge in the United States.

Cuba was a hellhole, its people denied liberty and freedom and instead held prisoner in an oppressive time warp of poverty and backwardness for the past 50 years. It is frightening that South Africa’s politicians see its example as something to emulate.