

Fidel Castro, The Architect of National Sovereignty, Resistance and Self-Determination

By [Salim Lamrani](#) and [Cathy Dos Santos](#)

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Salim Lamrani is an expert in US-Cuba relations. He explains the reasons behind Fidel Castro's aura and the leader's place in the revolution in a changing society.

As a Cuba specialist you have just published a book dedicated to Fidel Castro (1). Is it possible to characterise the trajectory of this man, whose stature is recognized even by his detractors?

Salim Lamrani: To my mind, three aspects characterize the personality of Fidel Castro. First and above all, he is the architect of national sovereignty who made real what the Apostle and the national hero José Martí had only dreamed about: an independent Cuba. Fidel Castro has given back the people of the island their dignity back. Next, he is a social reformer who came to grips with the social realities and plight of the underprivileged, by moulding a society that is one of the least unjust in the Third World. Finally, he is an internationalist who has lent a generous hand to people who need it and has placed solidarity and integration at the heart of Cuba's foreign policy.

How do you make sense of the aura that he enjoys in Cuba and across the world?

SL: Fidel Castro is a controversial person in the West because the Western media tends to present a caricatured image of him. In contrast, he is revered by the people of Latin America and the Third World for whom he symbolizes resistance to oppression. He is also seen as someone who champions the aspirations of the people of the countries of the South : independence, sovereignty and self-determination. He is a mythic rebel, who, while still alive, entered the Pantheon of the great liberators of the American continent. The former guerrilla of the Sierra Maestra saw his prestige spread beyond the confines of the continent, making him the archetype of 20th Century anti-imperialism and the bearer of a universal message of emancipation.

Western media throughout the world have failed to grasp the importance of the figure of Fidel Castro. Since Martí, there has been no other personality that has so forcefully symbolized the aspirations of the Cuban people to national sovereignty, economic independence and social justice. Fidel Castro is a symbol of pride, dignity, resistance and loyalty to principles. The historic leader of the Cuban revolution has taken up arms on behalf of the oppressed and has championed their right to a decent life.

At the time of his withdrawal from political life in 2006, a number of commentators predicted the end of the Cuban revolution. They thought that following Fidel's departure the revolution would fail to survive. What has become

of it ten years later?

SL: The mistake made by many observers was thinking that the Cuban revolutionary process rested on the shoulders of one man alone, Fidel Castro. In fact, the revolution has been built by several generations of Cubans. Today, Cuba's institutions are robust and a numerous cadre have taken up the challenge following the gradual retirement of the historic generation. No cataclysm has come to pass in Cuba following the retirement of Fidel Castro in 2006 because the island's people share a highly developed political conscience and are attached to their country's independence, its political system and social model.

At the announcement of Fidel Castro's death, an immense sentiment of sadness entered the hearts of all Cubans, a sadness triggered by loss of their moral guide, their political compass, someone who always stood in the front line of defense of the right of his people to self-determination. Fidel Castro's legacy is a just and generous idea: it is an eternal struggle for the dignity of those bereft of privilege, a fairer division of wealth and an unyielding solidarity with any people struggling for a better life.

Following his retirement, what place did Fidel Castro play in a Cuban society undergoing rapid change?

SL : Fidel Castro has defined himself as a "soldier of ideas". He was a sort of spiritual father for the Cuban people, the savant that one consulted, in light of his immense experience, on strategic decisions. Up until his final breath, Fidel Castro attentively observed Cuban and world society, expressing serious concerns over climate change and the nuclear threat.

What did he think of the normalization of relations with the US?

SL : We might well recall the historical truth. Following the triumph of the Cuban revolution in 1959, Fidel Castro had expressed his desire to maintain friendly and peaceful relations with the United States, both for reasons of principle as well as more pragmatic considerations. In return, Washington would be required to respect three basic non-negotiable principles: sovereign equality between states; reciprocity and non-interference in internal affairs.

Thus, while Havana held out an olive branch to its neighbour, Washington responded by imposing a openly hostile policy on Cuba. Since 1960, the United States has imposed implacable sanctions that to this day inflict intolerable suffering on the Cuban people. President Kennedy then organized the invasion of the Bay of Pigs in 1961 and threatened the island with nuclear disintegration during the missile crisis of 1962. The CIA multiplied terrorist attacks against Cuba, which have cost the lives of 3,478 persons and inflicted permanent injury on 2,099 civilians. Since 1959, the United States has led a political, diplomatic and media war against Cuba.

Also, we should recall that the conflict that Washington has imposed on Havana is asymmetric because the hostility is unilateral. It is the United States that is imposing sanctions on Cuba; the US, that is illegally occupying part of Cuba's territory (Guantanamo) and funding internal opposition through which it seeks to secure regime change.

Barack Obama recognized that US policy towards Cuba was obsolete and unjust and chose to establish a dialogue with Raul Castro. Fidel who has worked so hard for peace throughout the world, of course endorsed the peaceful resolution of the conflict between Washington

and Havana even if he did not sugar-coat the true intentions of Cuba's Northern Neighbour.

Raul Castro has announced that he would not continue with his duties past 2018, a gesture that signifies the end of the "revolutionary generation". How has this political change been received?

SL : The Cubans have known for several years that Raul Castro will definitively end his political career in 2018. They will thus be required to face three considerable challenges: the generational change at the head of the country, the current reform of the economic model and the new relationship with the United States. But history has shown that the Cuban people have always responded with intelligence to new realities and that they are attached to the basic values that cement the Cuban revolution.

Since 2009, the island has been engaged in a process of structural economic reforms. Do these conflict with the ideals that have prevailed till now and that Fidel Castro defended up until his death?

SL : Fidel Castro lent his complete support, without reservation, to the process of updating the Cuban economic model because it was necessary to do so. As he said in his celebrated definition of the concept, enunciated on May 1, 2000, « Revolution means changing that which must be changed ». There is no rejection whatsoever of socialist ideas. The State still retains control over the means of production and the strategic sectors. While the new economic model has introduced market mechanisms, it remains based on socialist planning at all levels and the enterprise of the Socialist State still remains the principal form in the national economy. The country is opening up to foreign investment - in order to attract capital essential to the development of the nation - through the vehicle of mixed enterprises wherein the Cuban state always maintains a majority ownership of at least 51%.

Thus, the new Cuban economic model is based upon planning and a policy of central pricing. It prohibits the concentration of wealth, introduces both a minimum and maximum salary and protects all groups within the population, notably the most vulnerable, (there have not been, for example, massive layoffs). Thus, it remains undeniably socialist. But, based upon the philosophy of Jose Marti, according to whom "the first duty of man is to be a man of his epoch", it has adapted to its time. The new Cuban economic model aims to achieve greater economic efficiency, fight bureaucracy and corruption, preserve the social gains won in the Cuban revolution, reinforce the socialist Republic and improve the material and spiritual well-being of all Cubans.

(1) *Fidel Castro, héros des déshérités*, Paris, Editions Estrella, 2016.

Article in French :



[Salim Lamrani : « Les Cubains répondent avec intelligence aux nouvelles réalités »](#)

Translated by Anoosha Boralessa

*A Doctor of Iberian and Latin American Studies at the University of Paris IV-Sorbonne, **Salim***

Lamrani is a lecturer at the University of La Réunion, and a journalist specializing in relations between Cuba and the United States.

His new book is Fidel Castro, héros des déshérités, Paris, Editions Estrella, 2016, with a preface by Ignacio Ramonet.

Contact: lamranisalim@yahoo.fr; Salim.Lamrani@univ-reunion.fr

Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/SalimLamraniOfficie>

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and [Cathy Dos Santos](#)

About the author:

Docteur ès Etudes Ibériques et Latino-américaines de l'Université Paris IV-Sorbonne, Salim Lamrani est Maître de conférences à l'Université de La Réunion, et journaliste, spécialiste des relations entre Cuba et les Etats-Unis. Son nouvel ouvrage s'intitule Fidel Castro, héros des déshérités, Paris, Editions Estrella, 2016. Préface d'Ignacio Ramonet. Contact : lamranisalim@yahoo.fr ; Salim.Lamrani@univ-reunion.fr Page Facebook : <https://www.facebook.com/SalimLamraniOfficiel>

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