

Fidel Castro: The Truth about his Struggle

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Global Research, December 12, 2016

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)
Theme: [History](#), [Media Disinformation](#)

Over the last 17 days since the death of Fidel Castro on the 25th of November 2016, I have been trying to assess how far sections of the mainstream media (MSM) would go in their vicious campaign to denigrate and demean a leader who had defied the world's sole military superpower just 145 kilometres from his small island -state. Since the MSM knew that Fidel's remarkable resistance to US hegemony would be highlighted in tributes to the man, they decided to tarnish his image by presenting him as a womaniser with an insatiable appetite for sex. It is worth observing that a number of newspapers around the globe played up the same utterly ludicrous story of how Fidel had slept with 35,000 women, quoting an unnamed former Cuban official. The MSM is fully aware that it is this sort of scurrilous lie that will divert attention from his stupendous achievements as a principled, resolute champion of justice.

This preposterous tale was often juxtaposed in the MSM with a more serious allegation of how Fidel had crushed dissent right through the 47 years he was in power. While all of us value dissent, its character and its role in a particular setting can only be understood if one appreciates the overall context. Since the Cuban Revolution of 1959, the US elite, for decades, through various agencies and proxies sought to overthrow the Fidel government. There was the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961; a total economic blockade imposed in the same year which is still in force albeit with minor changes; terrorist attacks in Cuba itself including the downing of a Cuban commercial plane in 1976 ; and hundreds of attempts to assassinate Fidel himself. No individual leader and no nation on earth have been subjected to such threats for such a long period of time. It explains why the Cuban leadership was often forced to act against individuals and groups who in the guise of dissent were actually subverting the Revolution.

The MSM have seldom paid attention to this organised subversion and de-stabilisation of a small, independent, sovereign state by a superpower which characterised most of Fidel's period in office, first as Prime Minister and then as President. What was behind this subversion? Was Cuba a threat to the US? Did Fidel seek to destroy the US?

The main reason for the hostility of the US elite towards Fidel was because he and his comrades had through a popular movement ousted a US puppet in Havana, Fulgencio Batista, and established a government that was determined to safeguard its independence and sovereignty and ensure that the Cuban people shaped their own destiny. In his passionate desire to protect the right of his people to determine their own future, Fidel was in the same category as Mossadegh of Iran, Lumumba of the Congo, and Sukarno of Indonesia, among others. But for the US elite, this commitment to a nation's independence, a people's sovereignty, was an unpardonable sin which had to be punished.

The continuing imposition of an economic blockade against Cuba is part of the punishment. Other countries in Latin America do not condone the US attitude towards Cuba which is why

it has found itself increasingly isolated in the region in recent years. It explains to a great extent why President Obama had no choice but to restore diplomatic ties with Cuba in July 2015.

In fact, the whole world does not approve of the US's stance towards Cuba. For a number of years now, the vast majority of nation-states have asked the US to end the economic blockade of Cuba. At the recent 2016 UN General Assembly, 191 states voted against the blockade. Only two countries — US and Israel — abstained.

The UN vote is, in a sense, an indirect endorsement of Cuba's desire to preserve its independence and sovereignty. This is Fidel's greatest achievement. He had not only succeeded in the face of huge odds to protect his people's independence. He had also persuaded the human family to recognise the central significance of this principle. It is not just countries in the Global South with their colonial background that should uphold their independence, whatever the costs and consequences. Even countries in the Global North faced with the challenge of US control and dominance, should assert their independence.

If Fidel's struggle to assert his nation's independence resonates with people elsewhere, it is because it was accompanied by a gigantic effort to improve the well-being of the ordinary Cuban. With almost 100% literacy, Cuba has a comprehensive education system which is free right up to the tertiary level. Its much lauded health care programme sustained through neighbourhood clinics, polyclinics and hospitals provides free, good quality health care service to its entire population. The Cuban ratio of one doctor for 159.2 persons is among the best in the world and its under 5 infant mortality of 6 deaths per 1000 live births equals that of developed societies in the West.

Under Fidel, Cuba had also developed a reputation as a leader in medical research. It has pioneered new vaccines and made significant advances in the study of certain types of cancer. It is largely because of its solid scientific base that Cuba has emerged as a major player in the field of biotechnology.

It is its emphasis upon science that enabled Cuba in the nineties when it was undergoing grave economic difficulties following the collapse of the Soviet Union, to convert its fertilizer and pesticide dependent agricultural sector into organic agriculture. Today, its organic agriculture is one of the pillars of its economy. It is perhaps the first nation in the world to have transformed its agricultural base in this manner on such a vast scale.

It is equally significant that the Cuban economy organised through state and municipal corporations, cooperatives and collectives in agriculture, commerce and industry has up to this point succeeded in keeping income differentials to the minimum. There is no privileged economic class in Cuba. It is a society where egalitarianism is the order of the day.

This is due in part to Fidel's determined endeavour to ensure that those who were entrusted with more power and authority than others did not abuse their position. While he was in power, he strove to curb corruption. His own simple, unostentatious lifestyle set the right example for others in the leadership stratum.

Fidel's other outstanding accomplishment was the eradication of racial and cultural discrimination. A deeply segregated society before the 1959 Revolution with whites enjoying privilege and prestige, Cuba today is one of the most harmonious multi-racial and multi-cultural societies in the world with equal opportunities for blacks, meztizos (people of mixed

ancestry) whites and minority groups. The various professions and social life reflect the integration of Cuban society.

Gender equality was also at the top of Fidel's national agenda. Not only are there equal opportunities for women in the workplace, in a number of critical professions there are in fact more women than men. 56% of all doctors are female. Women constitute 36 % of the National Assembly and are well represented at all levels and in all spheres of public-decision making.

In evaluating Fidel's record, one cannot overlook his patronage of the arts and culture. Musicians, dancers and film-makers have carved a niche for themselves in the international arena. Indeed, the various facets of Cuban culture, already vibrant before the Revolution, have become even more dynamic since 1959.

The same can be said about sports. From baseball to boxing, from athletics to cycling, sports as a whole figure prominently in the life of the nation.

It is not just in the domestic sphere that Cuba has registered spectacular success. For Fidel, reaching out to the poor and needy beyond Cuban shores was always in the forefront of his struggle. Thousands of Cuban doctors, nurses and other medical personnel have served in other parts of Latin America, Africa and Asia. Cuba also offers medical training to students from other countries and has established medical schools in other Caribbean and Latin American countries. There is perhaps no better proof of how much Cuba's humanitarian medical assistance means to people in other countries than its 'Operation Miracle' programme through which Cuban ophthalmologists have restored the vision of tens of thousands of mostly poor people in Latin America and the Caribbean.

There is another dimension to Fidel's involvement with other countries that the MSM had manipulated to malign the man. Fidel was ever willing to send his soldiers to fight against oppression in other lands. Cuban soldiers fought against the South African apartheid regime in Angola forcing out the aggressors and compelling them to leave illegally occupied Namibia. The defeat of the apartheid regime especially in the decisive battle of Cuito Cuanavale shattered the myth of white supremacy and inspired the South African people in their struggle against apartheid. As Nelson Mandela himself put it, "during all my years in prison, Cuba was an inspiration and Fidel Castro a tower of strength — (they) destroyed the myth of the invincibility of the white oppressor and inspired the fighting masses of South Africa — a turning point for the liberation of our continent — and of my people — from the scourge of apartheid — What other country can point to a record of greater selflessness than Cuba has displayed in its relations with Africa?"

Whether it is in the international arena or on the home front, Fidel's selfless service and sacrifice had no equivalent. This does not mean that there were no shortcomings in his governance. He made mistakes, some more serious than others. For instance, he made the grievous error of equating small and medium sized businesses with capitalist enterprises and sought to eliminate them to the detriment of the Cuban economy. His view of 'private property' had some of the rigidity of Marxist dogma.

Nonetheless, if one considered the larger picture, Fidel's contribution to Cuba and the world was immense. For centuries to come, people will remember his resistance to the unjust and arrogant power of the mighty and how he bestowed the Cuban masses — and indeed the poor and oppressed everywhere — with dignity and self-respect.

Before he died, Fidel had expressed the wish that his name and likeness should never be used “on institutions, streets, parks or other public sites and that busts, statues and other forms of tribute” should never be erected. He will not need them. For Fidel will live forever in the heart of humanity, an eternal inspiration for all those who yearn for justice and dignity.

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