

## A Cuban Leader's Vulnerable Relationship with His People: Fidel Castro

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*In 1959 Fidel Castro seized power from Fulgencio Batista, a capitalist dictator known for corruption and the exploitation of Cuba's resources. Castro's communist regime operated under the image of "defender of the downtrodden and dispossessed" and in Castro's view, it provided excellent systems of health, education, and energy. According to Erikson in this viewpoint, even at the age of eighty, Castro remained the strong absolute dictator of his country who claimed never to have made a dollar for his own personal benefit. Yet Castro was despised and experienced numerous assassination attempts, says Erikson, often on trips to other Latin American countries—even though, paradoxically, he was considered to be a world hero, "a rock star," in much of South and Central America. Despite his alleged reforms, states Erikson, Castro still behaved as a tyrant, cultivating a police state and punishing dissidents. Castro's hypocritical practices stirred hidden hatred for him in his own country.*

Fidel Castro [president of Cuba] was accustomed to keeping his country immersed in a state of feverish speculation, but now the time for a decision loomed. Nearly nineteen months had passed while he tried to battle back from the illness that had forced him to relinquish power in July 2006. His

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health had collapsed during the early months, leaving him at death's door, but he had been gradually gaining strength and weight, and it was possible that he would live for some time more. His brother Raúl, who had assumed the provisional powers of government in Fidel's absence, had proved to be a competent administrator, but he was also growing restless. Moreover, Fidel was aware that his precarious health had ushered his nation into a strange twilight zone that had left him at the mercy of his successors, not the other way around.

Fidel had not been seen publicly in Cuba since his health crisis began, but he remained a prominent voice by writing periodic "reflections" in the national press about international issues that grabbed his attention. . . .

### Conflicting Emotions Over a Revolutionary

"I die just about every day," Fidel Castro told a television interviewer several weeks before reaching his eightieth birthday in 2006. "But it's really a lot of fun for me, and it makes me feel healthier." Indeed, the aging bearded leader who had ruled Cuba for decades appeared to be in fighting form during that long, hot summer. Hundreds of thousands of Cubans gathered in Havana's Plaza of the Revolution to see him speak at the country's annual May Day celebrations, where he peppered his remarks with statistics about Cuba's health, education, and energy programs and sarcastically thanked the United States for its long-standing embargo of Cuba. After more than forty-seven years in power, Castro still provoked deep and conflicting emotions within the Cuban population, where he was adored, feared, and despised—sometimes all at once. But no one doubted that he remained fully in charge of his country, a picturesque island just off the coast of the United States that was one of the world's last remaining communist regimes.

Castro loved to bask in the limelight, and controversy followed him throughout the spring and summer. In May, he be-

came entangled in a surreal sparring match with *Forbes* magazine, which featured him in a special survey of the world's richest "Kings, Queens and Dictators" and ranked him as the seventh richest, with an estimated wealth of nine hundred million dollars, nearly double the estimated wealth of the queen of England. The claim sent Castro into a state of apoplexy, prompting him to make a special appearance on Cuban television in which he pounded the table and denounced his presence on the *Forbes* list as "repugnant slander." The magazine admitted its back-of-the-envelope calculations were "more art than science," but Castro was incensed. Accusations of illicit wealth threatened to undermine his carefully cultivated image as an international defender of the downtrodden and dispossessed, and he dismissed the *Forbes* statistic as a smear campaign engineered by the [George W.] Bush administration and the Central Intelligence Agency. Castro then issued a challenge: "If they can prove that I have one single dollar, I will resign from all my responsibilities and the duties I am carrying out. They won't need any more plans of transitions!"

### Assassination Plots Against Castro

In July, Castro remained an active force in Cuba, presiding over high-level government discussions, approving a series of new joint ventures with Canadian and Spanish companies, and overseeing plans to celebrate his eightieth birthday on August 13. Toward the end of the month, Castro made a snap decision to attend a South American summit meeting in Argentina at the invitation of his close friend and ally Hugo Chávez [president of Venezuela]. Castro always enjoyed the element of surprise, and it was his custom to leave his travel plans unannounced until the last minute, in part for security reasons. Some of the most brazen assassination attempts against him had occurred at international gatherings in Latin America, and this trip marked his first overseas venture since a short visit to Barbados the previous December.

Besides, Castro was a popular figure in Argentina, a country still suffering from the scars of a brutal economic collapse in 2001 triggered in part by the "neoliberal" economic policies that the Cuban leader never tired of railing against. Castro had been greeted like a rock star during a visit three years earlier, and cries of "Viva Fidel!" followed him as he arrived in the country anew on July 21. "Sometimes I have to misinform even my own friends. Not even I knew I was going to come," he told a crowd at an "anti-imperialist" rally in Argentina's second city, Córdoba. He joined with Hugo Chávez the next day to visit the boyhood home of Ernesto "Che" Guevara, the Argentine medical student who went on to become one of the most iconic figures of the Cuban Revolution. It was an emotional event for the two leaders, especially Chávez, who explained, "Fidel invited me to come and get to know the house. For me, it's a real honor being here." Their celebrity tour left some nearby neighbors reeling from the experience, including one Argentine housewife who commented that the uproar "has thrown the whole city into a state of shock."

### An Example of Tyrannical Behavior

Castro's Argentine tour ended on a sour note, however, when an enterprising journalist provoked him into an angry tirade by asking about a sensitive case involving one of Cuba's most noted dissidents. Hilda Molina was one of Cuba's top neurosurgeons and had been a medical superstar until the island's economy started to unravel following the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. During the resulting crisis, Cuban medical care facilities were ordered to turn away needy Cubans and instead set aside beds for foreign patients who could pay in hard currency. Molina protested the new policies, which ended her glittering career in the communist system. In 1994, her son fled abroad to Argentina, but the Cuban government refused to allow her to leave, arguing that "your brain is the patrimony of the nation." Molina was unable to

even meet her grandchildren, who were later born in Argentina, a situation she decried as “supreme cruelty.” The plight of a grandmother separated from her grandchildren turned the case into a cause célèbre, and Argentine president Néstor Kirchner had repeatedly tried to use his cordial relationship with Castro to help Molina gain her coveted exit visa, to no avail.

In Argentina, Juan Manuel Cao, a Cuban American television reporter from Miami, dogged the official Cuban delegation with questions about Molina. When Castro joined the South American presidents at the summit for an official photo ceremony, the scene consisted of barely constrained chaos as photographers, journalists, and spectators jockeyed for the best view of the Cuban leader. Sensing his opportunity, the Miami reporter cried out to Castro, “Why don’t you free Dr. Hilda Molina? Why don’t you let her come see her grandchildren?” Fidel Castro immediately fixated on the journalist, asking, “What’s your name? Who is paying you to come and ask questions like this?” The reporter volunteered that he was from Cuba, and Castro nearly flipped with rage. “I already asked you who paid you,” he shouted. “Why don’t you look for Bush and ask him about Posada Carriles and the crimes they have committed in his country? Cuban?! You are not Cuban. He is Cuban. You are an intruder that is living like a mercenary. That’s what you are.” Most of the exchange was captured on videotape, with photographers’ flashbulbs erupting in rapid succession. The stray question had clearly provoked Castro. The fearsome Cuban dictator was getting pretty thin-skinned in his old age.

### Castro’s Earlier Overthrow of a Capitalist Dictator

Castro arrived back in Havana on July 23, and several days later he traveled down to Bayamo, a sleepy provincial capital located about seventy miles west of Santiago de Cuba, his

hometown and the city where his initial assault on the established order of Cuba unfolded on July 26, 1953. On that date, Castro led a group of 150 rebels in a surprise attack on a military garrison in Santiago with the intention of igniting a movement to unseat the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista. The attack was a military debacle that resulted in the deaths of dozens of rebels, but it succeeded in launching Castro as a major national figure at the tender age of twenty-six, and he later defended himself in a famous speech titled “History Will Absolve Me.” He spent nearly two years in a Cuban prison before winning early release in 1955 and leaving for exile in Mexico, and in December 1956, he captained a barely seaworthy vessel named the *Granma* from Mexico to the southern shore of Cuba to relaunch the revolution that would eventually bring him to power on January 1, 1959. Castro christened his revolutionary organization the 26th of July Movement, in honor of the date that marked his first military excursion. As president, he made that date a national holiday in Cuba, and he commemorated it with a major speech annually. . . .

### Hidden Views of Castro

Once I was on the edge of a plaza in Old Havana talking with two teenage boys about life in Cuba. It was several years before Castro fell ill, and his seemingly never-ending rule cast a long shadow over his country. “We can’t wait until the old man goes,” they told me. “Everything here needs to change.” By sheer coincidence, an official convoy pulled up across the street in the middle of our conversation, and Castro stepped out of one of the vehicles. It was a spur-of-the-moment visit to a local school, and a crowd immediately surrounded him. The two teenagers pivoted—almost in mid-sentence—and began to chant, “Viva Fidel! Viva Fidel!” with a starstruck look in their eyes. Later I recounted this story to an older Cuban man from the generation that helped thrust Castro into the center of power. He told me, “It’s true—he’s a hero, but we

hate him." When I suggested that he would probably cry on the day that Castro died, he smiled and murmured, "Of course I will. But they will be tears, of joy."

## Communist North Korea Becomes Increasingly Isolated: Kim Jong Il

*Richard Worth*

*Richard Worth is an author of nonfiction, including the book Gangs and Crime.*

*In 1980 the leader of North Korea was chosen, not by the people or even by a parliament, but by the new leader's own father, who had been dictator before him. According to Worth in the viewpoint that follows, Kim Jong Il used terror tactics before and during his rule, including kidnapping citizens of other countries and imprisoning thousands. Among those he kidnapped and imprisoned were an actress and a film director he needed for a film project. While he was spending millions on his filmmaking and building up the military, Worth explains, the economy was becoming weaker and his people more destitute. Meanwhile North Korea's foreign policy decisions influenced broken alliances, and the nation found itself increasingly isolated under Kim Jong Il's leadership. Under these conditions North Korea began a nuclear weapons program, says Worth, in order to gain the attention and respect of the world's major powers.*

**I**n 1980, Kim Il Sung made an official announcement that his son, Kim Jong Il, would be his successor as head of the North Korean government. Meanwhile, the younger Kim had also become a secretary—that is, a leader—of the Communist Workers' Party. He was known as the Dear Leader to distinguish him from his father, the Great Leader. Portraits of the Dear Leader and the Great Leader appeared side by side inside

Richard Worth, "Chapter 6: The Struggles of the Kim Il Sung Regime," in *Kim Jong Il*. Chelsea House, 2008. Copyright © 2008 Infobase Publishing. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.