

## 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-