

Fidel Castro retires as Cuban president after 49 years in power

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Fidel Castro, the last of the “third-world” nationalists who rose to power in the 1950s and 1960s and came into conflict with American imperialism, announced Tuesday that he was retiring as president of Cuba and commander-in-chief of its armed forces.

The decision came barely a month after the 49th anniversary of the victory of the Cuban Revolution—January 1, 1959, when Castro’s guerrilla force marched into Havana and US-backed dictator Fulgencio Batista fled the country.

Castro has been out of the public eye since undergoing emergency surgery to halt intestinal bleeding in July 2006. He survived the immediate crisis and returned to some political activity, mainly writing commentaries for the Cuban press, but has never again appeared in public. In December, he suggested in a message that it would soon be time for him to step down from his leading positions, but the next month he was a candidate for reelection to the Cuban parliament.

The parliament meets on February 24 to elect the Council of State, the day-to-day ruling executive authority, which in turn selects the president of the council, the formal title of Castro’s government position. Castro’s announcement means that the Council will select a successor on Sunday—most likely Castro’s brother, Raul, the defense minister who has been acting head of state for the past 18 months.

The US government responded to the announcement with declarations making clear that, along with Castro, something else has survived since 1959—the hunger of the American ruling class to regain its semi-colonial domination over Cuba and return the island to its previous status as a sugar plantation and Mafia outpost, with perhaps the additional fillip of potentially lucrative oil and gas deposits.

Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte—a veteran of US counterinsurgency wars in Latin America—said that Castro’s resignation would not change US policy. “I can’t imagine that happening any time soon,” he said.

President Bush called for international actions to further isolate the Cuban regime, claiming this would produce “a democratic transition,” and adding, “The United States will help the people of Cuba realize the blessings of liberty.” This is coded language for a return to free-ranging plunder of the island nation by US agribusiness and other corporate interests.

The Bush administration is tied politically to the most right-wing elements in the Cuban-American community, whose conception of “democracy” is a counterrevolution in which Cuban workers and peasants are slaughtered in order to restore the exiled bourgeois and landowner elements.

Bush has even sought to outdo the old “gusanos” in his anti-Castro fervor, imposing additional restrictions on top of the nearly 50-year-old US embargo on trade with Cuba, including measures that have slashed the number of US tourists going to the island by more than half and penalized Cuban-Americans who sent money or consumer goods to their relatives on the island.

Castro has survived for half a century as head of a small island nation only 90 miles from Florida. The failure of the repeated US efforts to overthrow his regime—most notably in the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion—was largely due to the support for Castro among a large majority of the Cuban people, as well as the sympathy of tens of millions of people throughout the world.

When Washington found it could not destroy the Castro regime through military force, it attempted to assassinate the Cuban president, with dozens of abortive plots to murder Castro concocted by the CIA and various fascistic Cuban exile groups. Nonetheless, Castro outlived the administrations of nine US presidents: Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush, Clinton. He will leave office far more popular among Cubans than George W. Bush is among Americans.

The Cuban regime enacted important social reforms, including greatly improved education and health care, as well as nationalizing the property of American corporations and wealthy exiles. A hostile article in the *New York Times* last November noted sourly that Cuba’s biggest product, besides sugar, was a cadre of tens of thousands of well-trained, highly motivated doctors, who have played a legendary role throughout much of Africa and Latin America and won popular goodwill toward their homeland. The article made no attempt to explain why no other Third World government has been able to develop such a valuable and socially beneficial “export.”

But despite these achievements, and Castro’s own public avowals of a conversion to “communism” after coming to

power in Havana, Cuba was never a socialist state. There have never been independent organs of workers' power in Cuba, and the Cuban Communist Party enjoys a political monopoly. Castro has responded with savage violence against any challenge to his political authority within the ruling party, including frame-up trials and executions.

Castro himself was never a genuine socialist, in the sense of a conscious revolutionary fighter for the liberation of the international working class. He was perhaps the most radical of a generation of bourgeois nationalists in Asia, Africa and Latin America who came to power as a result of the mass anti-colonial movement. Ultimately, Castro left his country in the same blind alley as his counterparts like Ben Bella in Algeria, Sukarno in Indonesia, Mandela in South Africa and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, however different the course of their political careers.

The Cuban regime is a personalist dictatorship in which power is being transferred dynastically from Fidel, age 81, to his brother Raul, age 76, and in somewhat better health. Raul has had perhaps the longest apprenticeship in history, serving as second-in-command in Havana since 1959.

In the January parliamentary elections, exactly one candidate was permitted in each election district, each vetted by the Cuban Communist Party. In lockstep response to party directives, Raul Castro was the top vote-getter of the 614 candidates, receiving 99.4 percent of the vote, down slightly from the 99.75 percent he received in 2005.

Despite Fidel Castro's revolutionary pretensions, his regime has never been truly independent of imperialism and Stalinism. In the early 1990s, after the collapse of the USSR removed the longtime economic and military prop for his regime, Castro found two new bases of external support—European tourism, attracted by the country's mild climate and gorgeous beaches, and encouraged by governments that hoped to muscle in on a former US colony; and Venezuelan oil, provided at cut-rate prices by Hugo Chavez, who came to power in Caracas in 1998.

The Venezuelan subsidy to Cuba, estimated at \$3 billion to \$4 billion last year, now rivals the support provided in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s by the Soviet bureaucracy.

Chavez visited Cuba last month for the inauguration of an oil refinery in Cienfuegos—built by Soviet engineers and shut down in 1991 after the collapse of the USSR, but now revived as a joint Cuban-Venezuelan venture. Explorations off the Cuban coast have whetted the appetites of oil moguls in the US and Europe, with the US Geological Survey estimating that there are 4.6 billion barrels of undiscovered oil and 9.8 trillion cubic feet of undiscovered natural gas offshore.

The danger that the European powers or South American countries like Venezuela and Brazil could cement strong economic ties to Cuba has caused sections of the US ruling elite to question the longstanding policy of total economic embargo of the island. Even sections of the Republican Party in

Congress, linked to agribusiness interests in the Midwest, have sought to relax the embargo to promote a potentially lucrative market.

These differences were reflected in the statements issued by the three major presidential candidates, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama for the Democrats, and John McCain for the Republicans, in response to Castro's retirement.

McCain issued a statement that could have been copied from any State Department communiqué of the past 49 years, declaring that "freedom for the Cuban people is not yet at hand" and demanding the complete dismantling of the present regime. "The Castro brothers clearly intend to maintain their grip on power," McCain said. "That is why we must press the Cuban regime to release all political prisoners unconditionally, to legalize all political parties, labor unions and free media, and to schedule internationally monitored elections."

Needless to say, McCain has made no such demands on loyal US client states that are far more brutal than Castro's dictatorship—the Saudi monarchy, the Musharraf dictatorship in Pakistan, or any of the African military strongmen counted as allies by Washington.

Barack Obama issued a more conciliatory statement, suggesting that Castro's resignation "is an essential first step," and expressing the hope that this action "begins opening Cuba to meaningful democratic change." He suggested that the US government should respond with economic and diplomatic concessions to any moderation by the Cuban regime.

Clinton was more categorical in calling for a change in US policy, saying that if she is elected president, "I will engage our partners in Latin America and Europe who have a strong stake in seeing a peaceful transition to democracy in Cuba, and who want very much for the United States to play a constructive role to that end."

Neither Obama nor Clinton represents any fundamental change in US policy towards Cuba. They simply recognize that the five-decades-old blockade has failed to oust the Castro regime and that other powers are making headway in establishing their influence in the former US semi-colony.



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