

Castroite purge in Cuba as US slightly eases sanctions

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The wholesale sacking of top government officials announced last week in Cuba is symptomatic of a bourgeois nationalist regime in deep crisis, which is conspiring against the interests of the masses of Cuban working people.

The Castro government has carried out its most sweeping purge in its 50-year existence without any explanation to the people of Cuba as to the underlying political issues.

Relieved of their posts were a total of 10 ministers, fully one-third of the government, including virtually all of those occupying key economic posts. For the most part, those fired were replaced with senior army officers in what is seen with some trepidation by ordinary Cubans as a growing militarization of the government.

The most prominent of those removed in the shakeup were Carlos Lage, who was the secretary of Cuba's powerful Council of Ministers and vice-president of the Council of State, and Felipe Pérez Roque, the country's foreign minister, who has directed Cuban foreign policy for the past decade.

Both men had been groomed by Fidel Castro and had been widely seen—before the ailing Cuban comandante relinquished power to his brother Raul two years ago—as likely successors from the "new generation" that had not participated in the guerrilla army that brought Castro to power in 1959.

Lage, 57, was a physician who took charge of the Cuban economy during the disastrous period following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the cutoff of the multi-billion subsidies from Moscow that had sustained the island's economy. When the Cuban parliament elected a new Council of State last year, Lage received more votes than anyone but Raul Castro, who was formally taking the reins of power from his brother.

Lage was one of only three civilians on the seven-member Political Bureau of the Cuban Communist Party. He was replaced by Major General José Amado Ricardo Guerra, who until last week had been the head of the armed forces ministry.

Pérez Roque, 43, was also a member of the Council of State and of the ruling party's Central Committee. As a young man, he had been a leader of the state-run student organizations before being tapped by Fidel Castro as his chief of staff, in which post he remained for a decade. As the official newspaper *Granma* put it when he assumed the foreign minister's post in 1999, his essential qualification was that he was "familiar as few are with the ideas and thoughts of Fidel."

A terse statement issued by the Council of State March 2

announced the replacement of eight ministers and the merging of several ministries and noted without comment that Lage, the chief official in charge of the country's economic policy, and Pérez Roque, who had directed its foreign policy, had been "freed" of their positions.

The surprise replacements sparked speculation that, one year after formally assuming the presidency, Raul Castro was putting in place his own loyalists—drawn primarily from the armed forces, which he headed for nearly five decades—and removing those of his brother, Fidel.

In an evident attempt to quash such conjecture, the Cuban press published on its front pages March 4 one of the regular essays—known as "reflections"—that Fidel has dedicated himself to writing from his protracted convalescence. This one described the government shakeup as "healthy."

Fidel claimed, improbably, that when he was Cuba's president he had nothing to do with appointing figures like Lage and Pérez Roque to their posts, yet he assured the public that he had been consulted on the selection of their replacements "despite the fact that no norm obliges those who proposed them to do so, as I already renounced the prerogatives of power a while ago."

The former Cuban president went on, however, to provide the first—and so far only—political justification for the removal of the two senior officials.

He wrote, "The sweet nectar of power, for which they had made no sacrifice, awoke in them an ambition that led them to play a disgraceful role. The external enemy built its hopes on them."

This essay was followed a day later by the publication in *Granma* of virtually identical letters from Lage and Pérez Roque admitting to their "errors," taking "responsibility" for their actions and acknowledging that the criticisms leveled against them had been "just and profound." They concluded by swearing their continued fealty to Fidel, whose essay had branded them as corrupt and possibly traitors.

As to the content of either their "errors" or the criticism of their actions, the nature of their "disgraceful role" or the way in which they gave hope to external enemies, neither Fidel's "reflection" nor the confessional letters of the accused provided a clue, nor has there has been a word published in Cuba in the subsequent week.

The sickening characteristics of this episode are all too familiar. The ritualistic "criticism and self-criticism," echoing the odious methods of Stalinism, are designed to conceal the political content of the dispute from the masses, while simultaneously serving to

intimidate them.

The history of the Castro regime is littered with similar events, among the most infamous the 1989 frame-up on drug charges of General Arnaldo Ochoa, previously declared a "hero of the revolution" for leading Cuban troops in defeating South African and CIA-backed forces in Angola in the 1980s. He and three other officers were convicted in a drumhead trial and executed by firing squads.

Those who have attempted over the course of decades to portray Castroism as a new revolutionary road to socialism—and petty-bourgeois guerrillaism as a worthy substitute for the conscious and independent political mobilization of a revolutionary working class—have only helped to besmirch the name of socialism by identifying it with these methods.

While the Castro regime itself provides no political explanation for the shakeup of the government and the sacking and vilification of two of its most prominent officials, its motives have to be sought in the objective situation and the increasingly desperate crisis confronting Cuba.

At the end of 2008, Cuba's Economy Minister José Luis Rodríguez described that year as "one of the most difficult since the special period began," referring to the economic abyss that Cuba confronted with the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991. Rodríguez was one of the 10 top officials relieved of his post last week. His replacement was a former army colonel.

The government has been forced to cut in half its economic growth estimates for 2009. Dependent upon imports for 80 percent of the island's needs, Cuba has seen import costs climb by 50 percent, while the price of its leading export, nickel, has declined by 41 percent under the impact of the global economic crisis.

A similar decline in the price of oil has called into question the sustainability of the aid offered by the government of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, which accounted for half of the Cuban state's revenues in 2007.

In the face of this crisis, the government of Raul Castro has attempted to impose austerity measures, while at the same time pressing for an increase in productivity by the Cuban working class.

At the same time, it has signaled its willingness to forge new diplomatic and economic relations with the US, after the nearly five-decades-old economic blockade imposed by Washington in retaliation for the nationalizations of US corporate property following the 1959 revolution.

The Obama administration has likewise indicated its desire for a change of course on Cuba. The \$410 billion omnibus spending bill passed by the US Senate and signed by President Obama included a provision defunding the enforcement of tighter US sanctions imposed by the Bush administration against Cuba, including severe limits on visits to the island by Cubans living in the US and on the remittances that they can send to their relatives on the island.

This half-measure aroused the ire of the anti-Castro lobby, and the entire funding bill was almost stalled briefly because of opposition from New Jersey Democratic Senator Robert Menéndez, a hard-line anti-Castroite. In response, the Obama administration rushed to assure the right-wing Cuban exile lobby

that the main economic sanctions on trade remain firmly in place.

Nonetheless, the prospect that these restrictions too could be eased—an outcome firmly desired by the US Chamber of Commerce and National Association of Manufacturers, which see the prospect of hefty profits in Cuba—raises a serious dilemma for the Castro regime.

For decades, Castroism has drawn much of its political legitimacy inside Cuba from nationalist hostility to the unrelenting campaign of US aggression and economic pressure. Any move towards normalization of relations with Washington, and with it the further opening up of the island's economy to foreign capitalist investment, would inevitably unleash severe political and social tensions.

Significantly, while Fidel charged that the two sacked officials had aroused the hopes of the "external enemy," there are indications that in reality US imperialism sees the shakeup as a preparation for closer US-Cuban ties.

Outside of the right-wing Cuban exile press, there has been little or no denunciation of the Castroite purge in the corporate media. Indeed, *Time* magazine, in a piece on the shakeup, expressed approval, favorably comparing Cuba's new foreign minister, Bruno Rodríguez, the former ambassador to the United Nations, with Pérez Roque, who once described himself as part of the Cuban "Taliban."

Referring to the prospects of rapprochement between Washington and Havana, *Time* wrote: "The Cuban Taliban was certainly not the man for a diplomatic challenge like that. So if Raul is smart, he chose his new Foreign Minister to be more than just a figurehead—and if Obama is wise, the White House will make the effort to engage the new man at Cuba's Foreign Ministry."

In the meantime, the placing of military officers in charge of key economic and industrial ministries constitutes a warning that the Castro regime is preparing repressive measures against the inevitable resistance of Cuban workers to deepening austerity, intensified exploitation and the further subordination of their interests to those of foreign capital.



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