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The Cuban Revolution: Defying Imperialism From Its Backyard

By Vijay Prashad
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Fidel Castro died at age 90. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of the United States and Cuban exiles had tried for decades to kill him. In the U.S. Congress' Church Committee Report (1975), U.S. politicians wrote: "The proposed assassination devices ran the gamut from high-powered rifles to poison pills, poison pens, deadly bacterial powders and other devices which strain the imagination." One of these devices was an exploding cigar, which was to be given to Castro at the United Nations. None of these succeeded. In April 1959, when Castro visited New York, he marvelled at the headline of an American paper: "All Police on Alert—Plot to Kill Castro!" The Cuban leader ducked all these attempts, 634 by one count. He gave up smoking in 1985 and suffered poor health over his last decade. It was old age that took him, not the wiles of the CIA.

Cuba's new revolutionary government in 1959 made noises that sounded awfully familiar to the elites in Washington, D.C. They did not hear echoes from the Soviet Union (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, or the USSR) since Castro had not made his intentions towards communism clear. What they found objectionable was Castro's agenda: to conduct land reforms, to expropriate the entrenched elite and to expel the American mafia. The template for the U.S.' displeasure at the Castro government was set in Guatemala, where the CIA conducted a coup in 1954 against the democratically elected government of Jacobo Arbenz. His crime was land reform and protection of workers' rights, both anathema to the old rural elites and the U.S.-based United Fruit Company. When Arbenz's nationalist government went to work, the CIA planned to

assassinate leading figures in his government and to allow its proxies to start an armed struggle. In 1952, the CIA created a “disposal list” containing the names of 58 leaders in the country. The text on assassination is chillingly precise: “The simplest tools are often the most efficient means of assassination,” the CIA wrote, pointing towards hammers, axes, wrenches, lamp stands “or anything hard, heavy and handy”. The CIA also primed its agent on the ground, Carlos Castillo Armas, who had no qualms about brutality. “If it is necessary to turn the country into a cemetery in order to pacify it,” Armas said, “I will not hesitate to do it.” Arbenz was dispatched in a coup in 1954. Castro’s fate, by 1960, was to be the same.

Castro saw what the U.S. would try to do as he moved on his socialist programme. He had seen what happened to Iran’s Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953 and to Arbenz in 1954, and he watched as the U.S. helped overthrow Brazil’s Joao Goulart in 1964 and intervened in the Dominican Republic in 1965 to prevent the restoration of the democratically elected government of Juan Bosch. In Africa, most spectacularly, the West and a section of the Congolese military assassinated the democratically elected President Patrice Lumumba. These men were not communists but liberal, anti-colonial nationalists. Their liberal nationalism pitted them against local elites and U.S. multinational corporations, at whose behest the U.S. government acted to prevent them from being in power. A decade later, when other nationalists attempted to come to power in Central America—from El Salvador to Nicaragua—they faced the same fate. Castro was their beacon. Cuba had escaped the dragnet of imperialism.

Castro knew that the CIA would not be able to do in Cuba what it had done in Guatemala. In October 1959, Castro met with the Soviet intelligence agent Aleksandr Alekseyev. Alekseyev, a veteran KGB agent, reported to Moscow that Castro had presciently told him: “All U.S. attempts to intervene are condemned to failure.” Why was Castro so certain of his position? The Cubans knew that over 90 per cent of the population had supported the revolution against the dictator Fulgencio Batista. The encrusted elite fled rapidly to the U.S., 144 kilometres away, where they set up shop in Miami’s new Little Havana. The CIA went to work amongst these exiles to find a Castillo Armas to lead the revolt against Castro and to find an assassin to kill him. When the CIA-backed exiles tried to invade Cuba in April 1961, they were routed by the Cuban forces and the armed Cuban population at the Bay of Pigs. The attention now went towards the assassination of Castro, which would sow chaos and allow a U.S.-backed force to seize power. That was the hope.

In April 1960, the U.S. State Department created a memorandum on Cuba. It found that “the majority of Cubans support Castro” and that “there is no effective political opposition” on the island. Communist influence, the memorandum noted, was “pervading the government and the body politic at an amazingly fast rate”. What could the U.S. do to undermine the Castro government on behalf of the old Cuban elites and the U.S.-based corporations? “The only foreseeable means of alienating internal support,” wrote the State Department’s Lester D. Mallory, “is through disenchantment and disaffection based on economic dissatisfaction and hardship.” The U.S. government must, therefore, use “every possible means” to “weaken the economic life of Cuba”. Castro knew this. During his meeting with Alekseyev, Castro said that he did worry about Cuba’s economy.

As with many colonies, Cuba had been forced into a one-crop economy, in its case sugar. The Batista government had relied upon sale of sugar to the U.S. and on tourism from the U.S. Both would have to end if Cuba was to succeed. “The only danger for the Cuban Revolution,” Castro told Alekseyev, “is Cuba’s economic weakness and its economic dependence on the U.S., which could use sanctions against Cuba. In one or two years, the U.S. could destroy the Cuban economy.” In October 1960, almost two years after Castro came to power, the U.S. Congress decided to embargo exports to Cuba. This blockade (*el bloqueo*) was extended in 1962 to basically throttle the island.

What saved Cuba was that Castro’s government had the support of the island’s people and the Soviet Union, which provided Cuba with material assistance. Castro told Alekseyev in 1959: “Never, even under mortal danger, will we make a deal with American imperialism.” Instead, Cuba turned to the USSR for assistance. This assistance, which included military protection, would last until the USSR collapsed in 1991. In a stroke, Cuba lost its market for sugar and its supplier of foodstuffs and fuel. The U.S. saw an opening. The U.S. Congress tightened the noose. The Torricelli Act (Cuban Democracy Act of 1992) and the Helms-Burton Act (Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act of 1996) extended the embargo to include foreign companies. Cuba was isolated. It was during this Special Period that Cuba had to be innovative: reusing, repairing and recycling its products. It was a difficult time, and yet the Cuban Revolution did not collapse. It did not follow the USSR into oblivion. “Why did we resist?” Castro asked a decade later. “Because the Revolution always had, has, and increasingly will have the support of a nation, an intelligent populace, which is increasingly united, educated and combative.”

Every chink in the armour is an opening for the U.S. to insinuate itself against the Revolution. Castro had aggravated the U.S. by providing material assistance to national liberation forces across Africa and Latin America and medical and educational aid to his neighbours in the Caribbean. Castro took a leadership role in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which Cuba hosted in 1979 and 2006, and in the more radical Organisation of Solidarity with the People of Asia, Africa and Latin America (OSPAAL), which is based in Havana. Cuba did not retreat into a shell. It went outwards, building solidarity networks across the world to help it break the embargo. In fact, during the Special Period, the Indian communist movement raised 10,000 tonnes of wheat and 10,000 tonnes of rice, which were shipped to Cuba. Each Cuban received a loaf of bread from that shipment. Castro would call the Communist Party of India (Marxist) general secretary Harkishan Singh Surjeet the “Bread Man”. Such solidarity, in material and moral terms, kept Cuba going and allowed it to stand firm against U.S. pressure. When NAM became pliant and OSPAAL became dormant, Cuba turned towards the “pink tide” in Latin America—with the rise of Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez and Bolivia’s Evo Morales providing a new fillip to Cuban ambitions. The weakness of the “pink tide” threatens to push Cuba once more into isolation.

Castro outlasted 11 U.S. Presidents, including Barack Obama. The Americans reached out to Cuba, via the Vatican, to begin diplomatic relations. Castro’s brother Raul accepted the invitation to a dialogue partly to break out of the isolation. There was no clear sign, however, that the U.S. wanted to invalidate its 60-year history of supporting Cuban exiles and big corporations who are eager to exploit the Cuban landscape and its population. The talks between the countries produced no real breakthrough. Some gestures were allowed, such as the start of

some direct flights between the U.S. and Cuba. Also, Obama restored diplomatic relations between the countries in 2015: The Cuban embassy opened in Washington, D.C., on July 20 and the the U.S. embassy opened in Havana in August with Secretary of State John Kerry there for the raising of the flag. Obama became the first sitting U.S. President to visit Havana after the 1959 Revolution when he made a trip in March 2016.

Nothing more was on the table. But even these small moves are now to be rolled back by the administration of Donald Trump. Trump believes that the death of Castro will hasten the end of the Cuban Revolution. The U.S., which had wanted to assassinate Castro all these decades, has come to believe that the Revolution is merely his fancy and not a commitment of the Cuban people. Trump will squeeze the Cubans for more concessions until the negotiations will break down. There is no appetite in Washington for peace. In one of his last pieces in *Granma*, Castro wrote of the “uncertain destiny of the human species”. He worried about the ascension of Trump and other like-minded politicians, but he also worried about the policies of Obama. None portend well for the planet. Trump and Obama might appear different, Castro suggested, but they are united in their fealty to the U.S., the “most powerful imperialist country that has ever existed”. Both Trump and Obama, wrote the old revolutionary on his deathbed, “will have to be given a medal of clay”. The earth cannot afford to give them anything else. They have already laid claim to everything.