

OPERATION ZERO – FIDEL'S LAST HURRAH?

For the first time since the 1959 revolution Fidel Castro's charisma might not be enough to keep the old regime alive.

BY EDGAR J. DOSMAN AND JOHN M. KIRK

WITH THE OVERTHROW OF COMMUNISM in Eastern Europe, it was commonplace in 1989 to predict that Cuba's Fidel Castro would himself soon be overthrown. And without doubt, Cuba is now facing the most severe crisis of its thirty-three year revolution: shortages in fuel have led to many problems, food has been rationed more seriously than at any time in the last thirty years, the number of buses in use has been cut by almost half, the workday reduced by nearly thirty percent, and subsidized workplace meals eliminated.

But a political analogy with Central and Eastern Europe fails to take into account the basic differences between Cuba and the Eastern bloc countries. Unlike them Cuba was not carved out of post-World War II Europe, but rather saw a popular revolution unite opponents of dictator Fulgencio Batista in a widely supported coalition. And unlike leaders in Eastern Europe, Fidel Castro has remained popular among important sectors of his population. Finally, the short-sighted obsession with Cuba held by Washington has been skilfully used by Castro to rally nationalistic sentiment behind the revolution.

THE GOVERNMENT OF CUBA HAS SOUGHT TO lessen the difficulties faced by Cubans by imaginative means: some 700,000 bicycles have been imported from China, 100,000 oxen have been trained for agricultural work (with another 100,000 currently in training) carrier pigeons are being used again to deliver some mail, baby chicks have been provided to households for people to raise, and a massive effort has been put in place to encourage people to work in the countryside producing food. Comparisons with Eastern Europe aside, the question remains whether all this will suffice to shore up the Castro government – or whether the long-suffering populace will rebel against continued adversity.

The most obvious cause of the current crisis is the demise of the Soviet Union, upon which Cuba has depended since the United States broke off diplomatic relations in January 1961. Some basic statistics show the level of that

dependency: 75% of Cuba's trade, 40% of its food imports and 90% of its fuel were tied up with the Soviet Union. The demise of the socialist bloc in Eastern Europe had some impact on Cuba's centrally planned economy, but the unravelling of the USSR sealed its fate. Its principal market and supplier have disappeared in one fell swoop, and the disorganization and in-fighting among the Commonwealth of Independent States augurs ill for Cuba's trade prospects with this traditional market.

A FURTHER FACTOR TO BE EXAMINED IS THE ROLE of the Cuban government. For more than three decades, the ruthless, brilliant, cantankerous, innovative and single-minded leadership of Fidel Castro has directed the national political strategy. To a large degree it has worked: Cuba's social network (particularly in the fields of education, health care and job creation) is exemplary for any country, developed or not. In short, the model was a viable development option for Cuba – as long as the relationship with Moscow held firm.

In a speech given in November 1991 to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the massive literacy campaign of 1961 (which reduced illiteracy from 24% to 4%) President Castro explained the essential strength of the Cuban revolutionary model. He compared his government's approach to the current "special period," with measures capitalist governments typically employ in tough economic times. In Cuba no workers had been laid off, no schools or hospitals closed, no factories boarded up. Supplies had been severely reduced, he noted, but this had been done on a basis that was equitable for all. In this he was absolutely correct, for the revolutionary ethos encountered in Cuban society – unlike the system found in the former socialist bloc – clearly has fostered a political "conciencia" or social awareness.

What Fidel did not explain was that instead of dividing up available resources equitably (so that all Cubans received similar benefits), the "pie" could have been far larger if the government – and he in particular – had been more pragmatic. For more than thirty years his gov-

ernment has shrugged off adversity, developing its personalistic approach to politics, while ignoring all those who disagreed. It worked in the past – but then he had always had the Soviet safety net.

Even in today's omnipresent difficulties – the *Comandante en Jefe* embodies many national characteristics. Fidel is the person who has brought this small country – population eleven million – to the centre of the world stage on many occasions, and who has carefully nurtured the nationalism and sense of dignity which is such a component of the Cuban identity, and which is so often misunderstood by Western political commentators.

Fidel Castro still enjoys widespread personal popularity in Cuba. His tireless endeavours on behalf of his people, electrifying public rapport, and widely recognized communication skills are legendary. Yet it is also true that his power base and popularity are slowly and steadily shrinking, and that many are quietly questioning whether Fidel is up to the challenges posed by a post-Soviet world. The irony of the current dilemma is that, for most Cubans, the revolution without Fidel is inconceivable, yet in order to progress in the 1990s it is abundantly clear that a radically new approach is required. It is a paradox which has to be resolved if the Cuban revolution is to survive, since the traditional policy of "muddling through" by means of charismatic appeals and political voluntarism is no longer viable.

THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF CUBA – LIKE ITS First Secretary – is also facing a crisis of identity. Despite small perquisites for its members, the party has never been the elitist organization found in the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe. Cubans are not rushing out to burn their party cards or renounce their memberships. Yet the October 1991 congress of the party showed clearly that it has to reform itself radically if it wants to retain the loyalty of the Cuban people.

One major step taken in October was to allow Cubans – for the first time – to elect their deputies to the National Assembly. That this absolutely necessary first step should only be taken more than thirty years after the revolutionary victory speaks volumes about the