

The end of the revolution

Opinion
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By Jorge Castañeda

Fidel Castro turned 80 on Sunday, and his era has come to an end. The biological denouement in Havana is not yet discernible -- Is he dead? Will he recover? -- but he has relinquished power, temporarily to his brother, Raúl, but also permanently through the admission of his own mortality.

Obsessed as he has always been with history and his role in it, Castro has meticulously orchestrated his succession. So painstakingly have the steps been laid out that some observers speculate that the brouhaha over his illness is a dress rehearsal, not the real thing. Still, his best-laid plans will probably go astray.

He may write his epitaph, but not his biography. He may control Cuba's archives, but not everybody else's. He hopes his revolution will last forever, but he undoubtedly knows it will not. He may try to ensure that his legacy at home and abroad remains intact, but because his persona and influence are inseparable, it will not.

Influence on the left

This means that the absolute, binding link that has prevailed in Latin America since 1959 -- between Castro and the idea of revolution -- is consigned to history. The belief in a transformative revolution has been Castro's most important influence on the left throughout Latin America. He placed revolution -- socialist, nationalist, anti-imperialist, whatever -- front and center on the left's agenda.

Before Fidel, Raúl and Che Guevara entered Havana in January 1959, the left was populist or Marxist, but in any case moderate; it had abdicated revolutionary ambitions. After 1959, everything changed, and the Latin American left was sundered by endless debates and tensions between its reformist, social democratic, peaceful components and its revolutionary, radical, often violent members. Even today, when such divisions seem quaint and anachronistic in most of the world, in Latin America they are present and central.

Evo Morales in Bolivia and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela see themselves -- as do their followers -- as revolutionaries seeking to overhaul the economic and social order that was bequeathed to them by voters. Michelle Bachelet in Chile and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil view themselves, their goals and their strategies as eminently reformist, maintaining the status quo but with significantly less inequality and poverty. (That the moderates spring from a hard-line past, and the radicals from a distinctly populist one, is just one more paradox in the history of the Latin American left.)

Castro's failures

With Castro's fading, the hemisphere's revolutionary school loses its inspirational leader.

No possible successor -- neither Raúl at home nor Chávez abroad -- could ever dream of replacing him in this context. In addition, Cuba's transition inevitably will cast light on the true record of Castro's regime -- its failures, deceptions and disappointments, complicities and crimes, and presumed accomplishments in education and public health. And because that record will be largely negative, continuing to be a revolutionary will be impossible. One needs a revolution to look up to, after all.

Historians can argue whether injecting the idea of revolution into the Latin American left was a good or bad idea half a century ago. But today, it would seem that putting an end to the revolutionary chapter in the left's history can only make it stronger, more modern and competitive; in short, more democratic.

Latin America needs effective social democrats like Ricardo Lagos, (Chile's former, immensely successful president) and Uruguay's President Tabaré Vázquez. The end of revolution will make it easier for them to lead.

The best case in point is Mexico. It boasts perhaps the most pro-Cuban and revolutionary chapter of the Latin American left, much to its own detriment. In the dispute over the July 2 presidential election, many of Andrés Manuel López Obrador's followers openly proclaim their revolutionary vocation and fervor. At

López Obrador's rallies, one of the most prominent slogans is: "If there is no solution, there will be a revolution."

A total makeover

The party of the left, the Democratic Revolution Party, is not demanding a recount or a new election. It is, increasingly, calling for revolution, for a total makeover of Mexico's admittedly flawed and unjust society.

Fidel's temporarily handing power over to Raúl will not change anything overnight, but the transformation of the Mexican left -- of the Latin American left -- into an effective progressive movement cannot happen until it lays the idea of revolution to rest.

And that cannot occur until revolution's midwife, Castro, fades away.

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