

Significance of photos of an ill Castro debated

Cuba watchers debate the reasons behind the Cuban government's release of unflattering photos and videos of a feeble Fidel Castro.

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As the head of a Cuban revolutionary radio station and newspaper, there was a time that Carlos Franqui worked a great deal on Fidel Castro's image.

Now he looks at the unflattering photographs and videos the Cuban government has released of the 80-year-old Castro since he got sick four months ago and wonders: *What are they thinking?*

Or rather, what was Castro thinking, for Franqui believes that it is the Cuban leader himself who has been directing the release of the images from his sickbed.

"Evidently, it shows he has lost mental control," Franqui said by phone from his home in Puerto Rico. "If he was in his right mind, he would never have published those pictures."

One of the photos shows an ugly purple mark on the back of Castro's neck. In another, a lump under Castro's track suit raised the possibility that he had been fitted with a colostomy bag. A third shows an almost gaunt figure in pajamas and slippers, resting on a rocking chair.

In videos of visits by Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, Castro doesn't even sit up, and a close-up of the Cuban leader's hand appears almost skeletal. A video of Castro walking shows an awkward gait as he swings his arms oddly.

And so a man who for 47 years created an iconic image of himself as a strong and defiant leader was suddenly in a bit of a jam: Allow people to think he's dead, and risk unrest, or let them see him alive -- shrunken, sickly, feeble, but breathing.

Since his illness, the Cuban government has released five videos and more than a dozen photos of Castro attributed to Estudios Revolución, the Communist Party central committee's photo department.

No new photos, however, were released to mark Castro's 80th birthday celebration, as some observers had expected.

"After years of seeing this furious and arrogant man and now seeing an elderly dying man, you almost feel bad -- if it weren't for all the crimes he's committed," said Franqui, who broke with Castro in the 1960s. "When I saw those pictures, I saw a man closer to death than anything else."

But other Cuba watchers say the images show Castro is willing to pay the cost of looking frail in public in order to ensure higher goals: letting folks know that he's alive; making them understand his brother Raúl is in charge; and preparing them for the inevitable.

Manuel Vásquez Portal, a former dissident journalist who now lives in Miami, said he believes the government is deliberately releasing unbecoming pictures to prepare Cubans for Castro's upcoming death and the transfer of power to Raúl.

Officially Castro's health is a state secret, and Cuban government officials insist he is continuing to recuperate from the July surgery. U.S. officials have said they believe Castro has terminal cancer and less than 18 months to live.

While theories abound as to why the images of Castro in his sickbed are being made public, most experts agree that there is but one photo editor involved: Fidel himself.

"I would have to assume it's him choosing those pictures, and it's to show he is alive," said University of Massachusetts professor Dick Cluster, author of *History of Havana*.

Dissident journalist Ahmed Rodríguez believes the images also carry a subtle message from Castro to the Cuban people: It ain't over till it's over.

"It's important to show his picture, even in deplorable condition, to keep the people quiet. They can't have people thinking he's dead and taking to the streets," Rodríguez said by telephone from Havana.