

Vilma Espin de Castro; Politician Empowered Women in Cuba

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Vilma Espin de Castro, 77, a daughter of privilege who became one of the most powerful women in Communist Cuba -- as the de facto first lady for her brother-in-law, Fidel Castro, and as a champion of women's rights -- died June 18 in Havana. Her husband, Defense Minister Raul Castro, is acting president of the country.

The cause of death was not disclosed by Cuban state television, but the Associated Press said she had "severe circulatory problems."

In 1986, Ms. Espin became the first woman elected to full membership on the Cuban Communist Party's Politburo, the country's highest policy-making body. Although this elite designation came late in her career, her long-standing authority stemmed from her work in the 1950s as an underground leader fighting with the Castros against the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista.

One of the most feared and ambitious of revolutionary fighters, she also was regarded as a gifted organizer and diplomat. She was an ideal roving ambassador for her country after Fidel Castro took power in 1959 and was reported to have smoothed relations with her country's Soviet sponsors during the Cold War.

For more than four decades, Ms. Espin filled the role of Cuban first lady because Fidel Castro was divorced and remained guarded about letting the public know too much about his female companions. It is still unclear whether Fidel Castro wed Dalia Soto del Valle, with whom he is said to have fathered five sons.

Starting in 1960, Ms. Espin spent nearly all her political career as head of the Federation of Cuban Women. According to news accounts, more than 3 million of the country's adult women belonged to the federation.

She was credited with improving the status of women in a society known for its history of machismo by articulating the need for a more equal environment between the sexes. She gave prominent voice to improvements in maternal and child health-care policies as well as the need for women to educate themselves.

She successfully lobbied for passage of the Cuban Family Code of 1975, which codified the duties of men to participate in household responsibilities, such as child raising.

"From the feminist perspective, she empowered women in a home to say to a husband, 'It's my national, patriotic duty to work, to volunteer in the community,'" said Ileana Fuentes, executive director of the Cuban Feminist Network, a Miami-based social-needs organization that tries to help women in Cuba. "Whether you are for or against Castro, that's an empowering tool for women."

However, some scholars found that Ms. Espin's federation had accomplished far less than Cuban propaganda revealed.

In her 1997 review of the book "Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba," Ann Ferguson wrote in the National Women's Studies Association Journal:

"The free higher education system allowed an unprecedented number of women in a Third World country to become professional and technical workers, but the highest posts of managers and supervisors, even in work coded as feminine (elementary school teaching, nursing, waitressing), were reserved to men."

Vilma Espin Guillois was born April 7, 1930, to an upper-middle-class family in the southeastern city of Santiago de Cuba. Her mother was French and the daughter of a diplomat. Her father, a Cuban, was an executive at the Bacardi rum distillery.

After graduating second in her class at Santiago's Universidad de Oriente, she took graduate courses in chemical engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

She had long been drawn to campus organizing, and by 1956, she dropped out of MIT after meeting Frank País, an early leader against the 1952 coup that returned Batista to power.

Within a year, Ms. Espin was a deputy to País in Santiago and took over in 1957 after he was killed by police during a street protest. Using the nom de guerre "Deborah," she became a key underground leader coordinating with Fidel Castro and his followers in the Sierra Maestra mountain range.

Her work in the underground was considered by some to be more dangerous than guerrilla warfare because she risked greater exposure as she arranged for medicine, money and weapons to be sent into the hills. She also was reportedly ruthless when it came to ordering the killing of suspected informers.

By mid-1958, Santiago had become too unsafe for her. She fled into the mountains with a rebel army faction led by Fidel's younger brother, Raul. They married in early 1959, soon after Batista fled.

After Fidel Castro assumed power, Ms. Espin became among the most powerful women in the country, with loyalists Celia Sanchez and Haydee Santamaria Cuadrado. Ms. Espin represented her country at women's summits abroad, from Copenhagen to Beijing.

In appearance, she dressed with little adornment. She kept her hair in a bun and could seem matronly. However, she brooked little dissent and became visibly irate when questioned about the government's notorious human rights abuses. She denounced human rights campaigners as "worms" and racist American lackeys.

In 2000, she became the leading spokeswoman among Cuban mothers to bring 6-year-old Elian Gonzalez back to his father in Cuba after the boy had become the focus of an international custody battle. Gonzalez was returned that year.

Ms. Espin's clout on the island nation increased with Raul Castro's assumption of presidential duties in July 2006, when Fidel Castro ceded power after multiple intestinal surgeries.

She and Raul Castro had four children. One, Mariela Castro Espin, heads Cuba's National Center for Sex Education.