

Moribund, powerless man

Opinion
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Approximately a year ago, about to die because of a grave intestinal upheaval, Fidel Castro gave up the management of the Cuban madhouse but left the country's helm on automatic pilot.

While he lives, the communist model -- chemically pure in its political and economic strains -- will go on, even if society falls apart in the useless effort, one thousand times failed, to build the paradise dreamed by Marx.

While the "Maximum Leader" breathes, the words opening, pluralism, tolerance and initiative will be opposed by fire and sword. In other words -- Stalinism and a presence to the grave.

Will Castro ever retake the functions he held before his three death-defying operations? I don't believe so. My feeling is that, mentally, Fidel has changed his role.

Reinventing himself

It usually happens when someone is at death's door. He retired as commander in chief and now reinvents himself as a biblical prophet who imparts slaps and admonitions from the Sinai in Havana.

I can't picture him leading sweaty marches or delivering seven-hour speeches. The time has come for going from chief to lighthouse keeper, from man of action to man of thought.

That's how he sees himself today: He is the light that shines, the revolutionary conscience that guides the world through the pages of Granma through incoherent columns -- pompously called "Reflections" -- that equally serve to combat the production of ethanol or to denounce the high cost of British submarines.

But Castro is something else in his twilight days. He is the strategist of 21st-century socialism, that peculiar name for the cruel collectivist blunder and new imperial spasm that has emerged in Latin America. To his recovery room flock Hugo Chávez, Daniel Ortega and Evo Morales to receive lessons in revolutionary survival.

True, they find an old man who rambles on, dulled by anesthesia and transitory cerebral ischemias, an old man who speaks nonsense and tells interminable stories about unimportant matters. But occasionally a timely spark glows during his conversation: how to crush an enemy, how to blame Washington, how to intimidate the Europeans.

He is no longer the father of the revolutionary homeland but the wily grandfather who is always willing to tell others what to do.

Another fact to bear in mind: Castro is the only authority who has placed the Cuban state at the service of the new Bolivarian adventure. Nobody else was consulted. Nobody else has been able to prevent it, although everyone, deep in their hearts, might have wished to stop that madness.

It is he who decided that 20,000 doctors, dentists and health specialists should dispense their services in the new territories conquered for the cause. It is he who ordered that Cuba's vast apparatus of intelligence, espionage and image-building (copied from the extinct USSR) should build the totalitarian structures in Venezuela and Bolivia.

The people around him know that cloning the failed Cuban model is more than just a crime; it's downright stupidity. But they all applaud and lower their heads.

Let nobody be fooled. Despite his garbled speech and a brain made mush by age and infirmity, Castro continues to rule. He is obeyed through fear, through inertia, because that's what the ruling class has done for half a century. That's all they know how to do.

Without a heart

That's what *caudillismo* is all about. It is to grant the power to reason and the right to decide to a supreme and unquestionable chief. And this isn't the first time that a *caudillo* continues to wield power after losing all his faculties.

In 1968, Portuguese dictator Antonio de Oliveira Salazar fell off a chair and practically scrambled his brain. But even though he was moribund, unconscious and connected to a resuscitator, he remained his country's prime minister until his death -- two years later. In all that time, nobody dared to modify the course he had set in 1932. He began by ruling without a heart and ended up ruling without a brain.

I fear that, in Castro's case, history will repeat itself.