CHAPTER 30

FIDELISMO: The Communist Monarchy

Fidelismo began as the product of one man's political evolution and became a system of government organized around his authority. Marxism-Leninism supplied its institutional framework, Cuban nationalism supplied its historical legitimacy, and the July 26 tradition supplied armed struggle and sacrifice. Fidel decided how the pieces fit. His interpretation became the governing standard, which let policies change without surrendering the Revolution's claim to ideological consistency.[547]

Fidelismo was never a tidy doctrine with numbered principles a bureaucrat could look up and apply consistently to the next problem. Fidel did not govern for half a century by consulting a binder each morning to see what Fidelismo required of him that day. His politics were adaptive, contradictory, and unmistakably personal. Even so, it did not simply mean whatever Fidel happened to be doing at a given moment. The methods shifted constantly, but the underlying priorities held steady: keep the Revolution in control of the political system, defend Cuban sovereignty on Fidel's own terms, protect the Revolution's claim to historical legitimacy, and adjust doctrine or policy whenever survival demanded it. While he lived, Fidel remained the final word on what those priorities meant. What outlasted him was a political system that had spent decades absorbing which priorities came first.

That authority survived Cuba's turn toward institutions after 1976. Fidel remained head of government, Party leader, and commander, but he was also founder, teacher, and living witness to the Revolution's own history. A ministry had jurisdiction. The Party had structure. The armed forces had command. Fidel had something larger than any of it: the standing to explain what the whole system meant.[548]

His speeches functioned as governance for the same reason. Fidel rarely just announced a decision. He placed it within Cuban history, revolutionary survival, and national dignity, giving each policy the authority of the larger cause. The Revolution's political vocabulary had become a governing method. Fidel could interpret what the Revolution required, and that interpretation carried consequences through the Party, the ministries, the armed forces, and the institutions responsible for enforcing his decisions.[549]

Slavoj Žižek offers a way to see how a mixture like that holds together. Working from Jacques Lacan, he examines how an ideology can organize different beliefs around a central point that gives them meaning, a master signifier. Žižek never wrote this about Castro; the application is mine.[550]

In Cuba, that organizing point was Fidel. A movement that promised the Constitution of 1940 and free elections became a one-party socialist state, and the man who made the first promise explained the second. A revolution that proclaimed sovereignty came to

depend on Soviet money and weapons. A movement that condemned dictatorship shut organized opposition out of politics. A government that promised emancipation limited what its citizens could say.[551]

Each contradiction arrived with an explanation: American hostility, imperialist aggression, revolutionary necessity, or the price of survival. Fidel possessed extraordinary authority to decide which reversals counted as adaptation, which failures were temporary, and what remained authentically revolutionary.

The point is that this could work even on people who recognized the contradictions. Belief does not require ignorance. A supporter could know about the prisons and shortages and still treat them as the cost of something larger. A policy reversal could be understood as a correction authorized by the leader instead of evidence against the system. The distinction between a mistake by the government and a failure of the Revolution carried enormous weight.

The Revolution's past worked the same way. Fidel was the man who beat Batista, and he also decided what the victory required of everyone after it and which decisions could be justified in its name. The founding achievements were not just remembered. They were called up again and again to show why the system Fidel built should go on. But a victory, even a great one, does not settle who gets to govern the next generation.

American hostility did not invent that political architecture, and it does not by itself explain how long it lasted. It became one more resource for Havana to draw on. The Bay of Pigs, covert operations, assassination plots, sanctions, and decades of American regime-change rhetoric gave Fidel real material for tying domestic opposition to a foreign enemy. Some of his opponents did take American support; some exile organizations worked directly with Washington. Others did not. Fidelismo profited from treating that distinction as optional. Every government prefers opponents who confirm its own propaganda, and the United States handed Havana a generous supply of them.[552]

Fidel's authority also rested on something Marxist theory has little to say about: charisma. The word gets used too easily, but Fidel actually had it. His friends saw it, his enemies saw it, and American officials who despised nearly everything he stood for still recognized his gift for dominating a room. Foreign leaders found their meetings with him turning into performances. Journalists came to interview Fidel and sometimes discovered Fidel interviewing them instead. Cubans sat through hours of him talking about agriculture, medicine, foreign policy, sports, education, defense, whatever had occupied his attention that afternoon.[553]

Two scenes show the effect. On the night of January 8, 1959, speaking at Camp Columbia, the former army garrison, Fidel stopped to ask Camilo Cienfuegos whether he was doing well, and a white dove settled on his shoulder and stayed there. Many Cubans read it as a sign. On September 26, 1960, at the United Nations, he spoke for

roughly four and a half hours, the longest address the General Assembly had heard, and then went back to his hotel in Harlem.[554]

Raúl Castro sharpens the comparison. Raúl built substantial institutional power and commanded the armed forces, but he never had Fidel's relationship to Cuban history or to the Revolution's own mythology. Raúl administered. Fidel performed history.

That performance let Fidel turn ordinary governance into something bigger than administration. A shortage became another front in the struggle. A harvest became a national campaign. Military readiness became proof Cuba would never submit. Foreign deployments became proof of solidarity. Setbacks could be folded into a larger story in which the Revolution was always facing down one more test, and mere survival became evidence that the system had deserved to endure.

Revolutionary martyrs, sacred anniversaries, ritual, mass rallies, and constant invocations of sacrifice gave that political culture its symbols, but flattening Cuba into a crude personality cult makes the system sound simpler than it was. Martí, Che, the Revolution's martyrs, and the Revolution itself all shared the symbolic stage. Fidel's achievement was making himself nearly inseparable from the story those symbols told.

The Church of Fidel

There is an irony in the Cuban Revolution's relationship with organized religion that took me years to appreciate. Castro's government nationalized religious schools, restricted the Catholic Church's institutional influence, marginalized believers, and promoted an officially atheist state. Religious faith was not extinguished, but its independent public authority was substantially diminished. What emerged alongside that process was a political system that, viewed through the Catholicism of my own upbringing, bore some remarkable similarities to the religious world it had sought to displace.[555]

There was an additional irony. Fidel Castro was educated in Catholic schools, including institutions operated by the Marist Brothers and the Jesuits. He knew the Church, its rituals, its hierarchy, and its teachings. Yet the Revolution he came to lead embraced official atheism while developing a political culture that could look remarkably familiar to anyone who had attended Sunday school. The resemblance occurred to me much later, when I began examining the institutions, symbols, rituals, and demands for loyalty that had developed around Fidelismo. The more closely I looked, the more familiar it became.

Fidel occupied the place of supreme authority, the political figure from whom the Revolution derived much of its legitimacy. The Revolution itself became the faith, and the Communist Party its institutional church, responsible for preserving doctrine and determining orthodoxy. Castro's speeches and *History Will Absolve Me* supplied something resembling scripture. Revolutionary education became the catechism. The mass rallies, May Day celebrations, commemorations, pledges, and familiar chants

supplied the liturgy. Portraits, murals, monuments, and slogans became the iconography. The images were everywhere, reminding Cubans that the Revolution was not merely an event in their history but a permanent obligation in their lives.[556]

No political religion would be complete without its saints. Fidelismo developed an extensive revolutionary pantheon, complete with martyrs, warrior heroes, founding patriarchs, and revered women. Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos occupied prominent places among the revolutionary dead. Celia Sánchez and Vilma Espín acquired their own enduring positions in official memory, while José Martí, who had died long before the Revolution, was incorporated into its genealogy of legitimacy. Their images appeared in public institutions, commemorations, and political education. Their credentials came from Havana.[557]

The dead acquired a particular usefulness. They could be invoked indefinitely, their words interpreted by the living, their images displayed wherever the state wished to remind the population of its revolutionary inheritance. The icon could eventually become more familiar than the complicated human being it represented. Che Guevara's face became so ubiquitous that the image often eclipsed the historical figure behind it. In the revolutionary pantheon, the saints could be celebrated without having to answer inconvenient questions about their earthly conduct.[558]

Che, however, presented a particularly interesting case. As commander of La Cabaña, he supervised revolutionary tribunals and the machinery of revolutionary justice, including proceedings that ended before firing squads. In my Catholic analogy, Che was less a conventional saint than the Revolution's Torquemada, a guardian of orthodoxy whose revolutionary credentials included deciding the fate of those condemned as enemies. After his death in Bolivia, the Grand Inquisitor became a martyr, his image elevated into the revolutionary pantheon. The transformation was remarkable. The man associated with the firing squads became the face held before schoolchildren as an example of revolutionary virtue.[559]

Political disagreement could be transformed into ideological deviation, and deviation into betrayal. The Party supplied the guardians of orthodoxy. Political investigators, informants, and ideological authorities performed functions resembling those of inquisitors, while the state's coercive institutions constituted a secular arm capable of enforcing political judgments. The machinery could translate disagreement into surveillance, exclusion, imprisonment, or worse. The inquisitors identified the heretics. The secular arm carried out the consequences.[560]

The Revolution even found a role for the faithful who were not members of its political priesthood. The Spanish Inquisition had its familiares del Santo Oficio, lay auxiliaries who reported suspected heretics and assisted the inquisitors. Fidelismo developed its own neighborhood informants and Rapid Response Brigades, mobilized to confront those accused of betraying the Revolution. Their actos de repudio became public ceremonies of condemnation, with crowds assembled outside homes to shout insults, chant revolutionary slogans, and demonstrate the consequences of heresy. The

resemblance to the old autos de fe was difficult to miss. The inquisitors identified the heretics, the faithful supplied the congregation, and the accused received the sermon. Attendance, apparently, was not optional.[561]

The Revolution also developed its own liturgy. Mass rallies, commemorations, processions, political chants, and revolutionary songs supplied the ceremonies through which allegiance was publicly renewed. Its slogans became acclamations and professions of faith. Children pledged to become like Che. Adults answered calls of Patria o muerte with Venceremos. The congregation knew when to answer.

Even military preparation acquired a recurring ceremonial dimension. Under the Día Nacional de la Defensa, civilians participated in exercises intended to prepare the population for national defense. The government called it the War of All the People. The faithful were expected to prepare for the defense of the Revolution as well as profess their allegiance to it. I went to Sunday school, but I don't recall the nuns conducting infantry exercises between catechism and recess.

Revolutionary internationalism supplied the faith with its crusaders and missionaries. The crusaders carried the Revolution abroad through military expeditions, armed struggle, and support for foreign insurgencies. The missionaries arrived with medical instruments, textbooks, and literacy campaigns. Both represented different expressions of the same internationalist doctrine, although their methods, motivations, and consequences differed enormously. Cuban physicians could provide genuinely valuable medical care while their deployments also served Havana's diplomatic and economic interests. Nor were all missions financed alike. Some were subsidized, others involved substantial payments to the Cuban state. The crusaders carried the sword, the missionaries carried the stethoscope, and, when the arrangement permitted, Havana passed the collection plate.[562]

And then there was la lucha, the struggle. In the revolutionary narrative, hardship was not merely an unfortunate condition to be overcome. It could become evidence of fidelity. Scarcity was presented as sacrifice, endurance as revolutionary virtue, and deprivation as the price of resisting a powerful enemy. The struggle came to resemble a political sacrament, a recurring participation in collective sacrifice through which revolutionary belonging was reaffirmed. Suffering could be given a higher purpose, even when the promised material rewards remained elusive.

The question of succession exposed another weakness in this political theology. Raúl Castro inherited his brother's institutions, doctrines, and instruments of power, but not his singular place in the revolutionary imagination. Miguel Díaz-Canel inherited a system even further removed from its founding generation. Both could preserve the rituals, invoke the founder, and administer the political church. Neither could simply reproduce Fidel's personal authority. The succession of offices was possible. The succession of charisma was another matter.[563]

The Cuban government's formal position toward religion eventually changed. Religious believers were admitted to the Communist Party, constitutional atheism gave way to secularism, and public religious activity became more visible. The political liturgy, however, remained. Fidel's image continued to occupy public space, revolutionary anniversaries remained occasions of official devotion, and the Revolution continued to present itself as something greater and more permanent than an ordinary government.[564]

The Revolution had challenged the Church's authority to define truth, morality, and acceptable conduct, only to develop a political orthodoxy with its own articles of faith, sacred figures, ceremonial obligations, and punishments for dissent. It had not eliminated the human inclination toward belief. It had redirected some of its *expressions toward politics.*

A political religion does not need to deliver salvation. It needs to keep salvation permanently promised, and the faithful permanently struggling. Fidel's successors inherited the church, the scriptures, the saints, and the rituals. What they could not inherit was the god.

Comparing Cuba to other Marxist-Leninist states shows what made the Cuban version distinctive. North Korea turned inward under Juche, the doctrine of self-reliance, and eventually constructed a hereditary system around the ruling family. Juche presented self-reliance as ideology even while the country depended heavily at different times on Soviet and Chinese support. Cuba did something less extreme but structurally similar: Fidel constantly emphasized sovereignty, revolutionary independence, and a specifically Cuban path while depending enormously on an outside patron of its own. Juche sought independence by reducing dependence. Fidelismo sought independence in decision-making while accepting dependence in resources.[565]

Cuba never became a Caribbean version of the hermit kingdom. Fidel wanted Cuba engaged with the world. Cuban troops fought in Africa, Cuban intelligence operated abroad, Havana trained revolutionaries, joined the Non-Aligned Movement, sent doctors and teachers across the developing world, and cultivated governments far beyond the Caribbean. North Korea made isolation part of its identity. Cuba made internationalism part of its own.[566]

The political architecture diverged too. North Korea institutionalized its leader through dynasty, ritual, hereditary succession, and pervasive social control. Cuba built enormous authority around Fidel's revolutionary legitimacy, his personal history, and his standing as the Revolution's interpreter to the country. The difference was not a clean split between fear on one side and reverence on the other; both systems used elements of each. Fidel did not need every Cuban to believe he was infallible. He needed enough of them to identify him with the Revolution, while the state made organized dissent costly for everyone else.[567]

Vietnam took a different road altogether. Its Communist Party kept political control while the reforms known as Doi Moi opened wide stretches of the economy to markets, private enterprise, foreign investment, and profit. Vietnam proved that a one-party socialist state could tolerate extensive economic liberalization without giving up its political monopoly. Cuba adapted economically as well, but more grudgingly, and usually only under greater pressure. Even pointing to the Asian example carried risk. In 1992, in the depths of the crisis, Carlos Aldana, the Party's ideology chief and widely regarded as the third man in the hierarchy, was removed while reputed to favor Chinese-style reform, and the cadres took the point. Fidel never held up Asian growth as proof of socialism's superiority, because the obvious next question was why Havana refused to follow.[568]

By the late 1980s, there was a touch of Tito in Fidel Castro, though not economically. Tito's Yugoslavia had experimented with decentralization, worker self-management, and forms of market socialism that Fidel increasingly distrusted. The resemblance was political. Tito had broken with Stalin over the idea that Yugoslav communism belonged to Yugoslavia, not Moscow: not a rejection of socialism, but a declaration that Yugoslav socialism would answer to Belgrade. Fidel never made an equivalent break with the Soviet Union, and Cuba could not have afforded one, but the instinct rhymed. He repeatedly resisted the idea that dependence gave Moscow any authority over Cuban revolutionary policy.[569]

The Microfaction was the plainest proof. The men Fidel jailed in 1968 were not exiles, liberals, or CIA assets. They were Communists of longer standing than he was, and the charge against them, stripped of its conspiracy language, was that they had looked to Moscow for the doctrine instead of to him.[570]

Gorbachev made that tension impossible to duck. Fidel had spent decades insisting Cuba was no Soviet satellite, and near the end of the Soviet era Moscow itself supplied some of his best evidence.

Fidel's communism was proprietary. It combined Soviet organization, Cuban nationalism, Martí, revolutionary internationalism, and a considerable amount of Fidel himself, and anything that threatened his control stayed out. He could borrow Soviet methods, criticize Moscow, return to Soviet methods, denounce markets, later tolerate them, and swap foreign patrons, all while speaking the language of sovereignty. Fidelismo was his own method for deciding what could change without giving up what he considered essential.

Longevity reinforced the whole effect. The Revolution survived invasion, and Fidel was there for it. It survived the Missile Crisis, and Fidel was there for that too. Cuba defied Washington, fought wars abroad, endured economic failures, lost allies, rewrote economic policy, and built lasting institutions, and through all of it, Fidel remained. American presidents came and went while he kept speaking from the same stage. Survival itself could be presented as another revolutionary accomplishment, and after

enough decades, the Revolution's endurance and Fidel's own began reinforcing each other in the public imagination.

That same longevity eventually created a problem charisma could not solve. Charisma cannot be inherited. A successor can take over an office without inheriting the founder's history. Cuba therefore had to grow institutional enough that the Revolution no longer depended on Fidel personally deciding every question. The Communist Party became a functioning organization. The armed forces developed institutional discipline. State Security built expertise and continuity. Bureaucracies learned their routines, and mass organizations tied workplaces and neighborhoods into the political system.[571]

Those institutions were often subordinate to Fidel, but they were institutions all the same. Their existence explains how the system endured beyond his direct supervision. Fidel did not personally run every ministry, military command, intelligence operation, provincial Party office, or state enterprise. Other people learned to run them, protect them, and hand them down to the next generation. Their subordination was also a matter of record. Fidel's primary title remained Comandante en Jefe, not First Secretary, and the Party statutes requiring a Congress every five years bound everyone but him: after the Fifth Congress in 1997, the next did not meet until Raúl convened it in April 2011. That is the cleanest measure of where power sat. The Party could discipline any member in Cuba except the one who decided whether the Party met.[572]

Fidelismo cannot therefore become a catch-all explanation for everything Cuba later did. The institutions developed their own interests, routines, professional cultures, and leadership. Raúl was not Fidel under a different first name. Later governments inherited a political structure Fidel had shaped, but inheritance is not duplication. Policy can descend from a founder without every later decision being one more expression of his personality.

Fidelismo served as the bridge between the charismatic Revolution and the institutional state. It made Marxist ideology Cuban enough to be delivered through nationalism, made nationalism revolutionary enough to sit alongside socialism, and kept Fidel central enough that contradictions could be resolved through his interpretation whenever the pieces stopped fitting together. The system that followed would have to run without that interpreter, but by then the hierarchy he had built was second nature to the people and institutions working beneath him. The Constitution gave the Revolution permanence in law. Fidelismo gave it permanence in political culture.

The purge of the pro-Soviet Microfaction settled who ruled Cuba. Castro welcomed Soviet subsidies and weapons and crushed Soviet political oversight inside the country. Personal allegiance to Fidel outranked alignment with Moscow, and ideology counted for nothing beside it. Fidelismo was a personalist monarchy running inside a Leninist frame, and it was kept like a church: one prophet, a scripture he could amend

from the podium, and heresy defined as doubting him rather than Marx. The Microfaction’s real sin was not loyalty to Moscow. It was believing in the doctrine more than in the man.