

Cuba: the castro effect



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Have you ever patronized a Cuban establishment and wondered why they were so passionate to emphasize " Before Castro" when referring to their product? Before the regime of Castro, Cuba was a different place socially, economically, and politically. Before Castro, Cuba was under Spanish rule from the days of discovery back in 1492 when Christopher Columbus landed on the island, until 1898 when the Cubans finally won their independence from the mother country. The United States helped greatly in their victory and in 1899 a treaty made Cuba a free republic under U. S. protection, which also allowed the U. S. to intervene in Cuban affairs. This treaty was terminated by Cuba in 1934. In 1933, a group of army officers, including army sergeant Fulgencio Batista, overthrew the President at the time- President Gerardo Machado. Batista became president in 1940 at which time he ran a corrupt police state. In 1956, Fidel Castro launched a revolution to overthrow Batista. After many unsuccessful attempts previously, in 1959, Batista fled into exile and Castro took over the Presidency. Fidel Castro received overwhelming popular support. The Cuban people had never idolized someone like they did Castro. He won them over with his extraordinary leadership and vision with the ability to relate to all Cubans. The U. S. initially welcomed what looked like a democratic Cuba, but within a few months they had a rude awakening. Castro's government established military tribunals for political opponents and jailed hundreds. Castro turned away from Cuba's military pact with the U. S. He confiscated U. S. assets and established Soviet-style collective farms. Castro's firing squads had murdered an estimated 600-1, 100 people, and Cuba's jails held ten times the number of political prisoners as under Fulgencio Batista, who Castro overthrew with claims to liberating Cuba. The U. S. broke relations with Cuba

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on Jan 3, 1961, and Castro made formal his alliance with the Soviet Union. Thousands of Cubans fled the country. In 1961, a group of Cuban exiles backed by the U. S., invaded Cuba. The landing at the Bay of Pigs on April 17, 1961 was a fiasco. They did not receive popular Cuban support and were easily driven back by the Cuban military. Castro regained his popularity momentarily because he was able to embarrass the superpower. A Soviet attempt to install medium-range missiles in Cuba, capable of striking targets in the United States with nuclear warheads, provoked a crisis in 1962. Denouncing the Soviets for " deliberate deception, " on Oct. 22 Kennedy said that the U. S. would blockade Cuba so the missiles could not be delivered. Six days later Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev ordered the missile sites dismantled and returned to the USSR, in return for a U. S. pledge not to attack Cuba. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union was the only supporter of Cuba because of their Communist like rule. They were the only one who would trade with Cuba; therefore, they were their only financial supporter. In 1990, this relationship ended, causing Cuba to lose billions of dollars per year. Other countries did not want to trade with Cuba either because Castro was not very reputable when it came to paying the bill. The people of Cuba were forced to live in poverty, eating even a banana peel to comfort the hunger pains. Castro's government also limited the people of their human rights of free speech, press, and religion. The government incarcerates people for their peaceful political beliefs or activities and commits serious abuses, and denies citizens the right to change their government. They have the right to freedom of speech as long as they conform to the aims of a socialist society. The government does not tolerate protest. It targets protesters by directing militants from the CP, the Communist Youth League, Committees for the

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Defense of the Revolution, the Federation of Cuban Women, the Association of Veterans of the Cuban Revolution, and other groups to stage a public protest against the individual, usually in front of his/her house. These protests, called "acts of repudiation," involve the shouting of insults and the sometimes violence. The events generate intense fear and are aimed at ostracizing and intimidating those who question the government's policies. Also the access to the Internet is strictly controlled and given only to those deemed ideologically trustworthy. Freedom of assembly is not a right in Cuba either. The law punishes any unauthorized assembly of more than three persons. The government also restricts freedom of movement and prevents some citizens from emigrating because of their political views. Cubans need explicit exit permission from their government to leave their country and many people are held hostage by the Cuban government, despite the fact that they have received travel documents issued by other countries. Prison conditions are harsh and life-threatening. Although physical torture is rare, cruel treatment of prisoners, particularly political prisoners, is common. Prison authorities frequently beat, neglect, isolate and deny medical treatment to inmates. Authorities often deny family visits, adequate nutrition, exposure to sunshine, and pay for work. Overcrowding is common. Inmates friendly with prison guards often receive preferential treatment. This leads to abuse, whereby connected inmates assault others with their connections. Suicides and acts of self-mutilation occur and are common amongst the prisoners. Worker rights are largely denied. The law does not allow Cuban workers to form and join unions of their choice. The government-approved unions do not act as trade unions, promote worker rights or protect the right to strike. Rather, they are geared toward ensuring

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that production goals are met. Some workers lose their jobs because of their political beliefs. And salaries are not high enough to meet food and clothing. Fidel Castro has offered nothing but destruction and famine to the once thriving Cuba. Despite the corrupt government before his regime, the economy was booming. In 1958 Cuba had a higher standard of living than any Latin American country and half of Europe. The Cuban social structure consisted of a large middle class. Cuban workers were more unionized than U. S. workers and the average wage for an 8 hour day in Cuba in 1957 was higher than for workers in Belgium, Denmark, France and Germany. Cuba was one of the youngest Latin American countries, but yet one of the most economically advanced. Before Castro, foreign capital was being gradually replaced by Cuban capital, mainly because of the country's development of their natural resources, especially sugar cane. In 1958 Cubans had the 3rd highest protein consumption in the hemisphere. Today, it ranks last. In 1962 Castro's government introduced ration cards that persist to this day. Ration cards are often used in times of war and limit the consumption of valuable resources. The number of automobiles in Cuba has fallen since the 1950's, the only country in Latin America for which this is the case. The number of telephone lines in Cuba also has been virtually frozen at 1950's levels. Cuba once ranked first in Latin America and fifth in the world in television sets per capita. Today, it barely ranks fourth in Latin America and is well back in the ranks globally. Cuba's rate of development of electrical power since the 1950's ranks behind every other country in Latin America except Haiti. Cuba is the only country in the hemisphere for which rice production today is lower than it was four decades ago. By any measure of macroeconomic stability, Cuba was in far better shape in 1958 than it is today. The Castro government

shut down what was a remarkably vibrant media sector in the 1950's, when the relatively small country had 58 daily newspapers of differing political hues and ranked eighth in the world in number of radio stations. The health care system is often acknowledged by many as one of the Castro government's greatest achievements. What this analysis ignores is that Castro's government inherited an already advanced health care sector when it took power in 1959. Cuba's infant mortality rate of 32 per 1,000 live births in 1957 was the lowest in Latin America and the 13th lowest in the world. Cuba ranked ahead of France, Belgium, West Germany, Israel, Japan, Austria, Italy, Spain, and Portugal. Cuba has been among the most literate countries in Latin America since well before the Castro revolution, when it ranked fourth. Since then, Cuba has increased its literacy rate from 76 to 96 percent, which today places it second only to Argentina in Latin America. Prior to 1959 Cuba experienced net immigration. In fact, as a percentage of population, Cuba took in more immigrants in the 20th century than the U. S. took in and this includes the Ellis Island years. In 1958 the Cuban embassy in Rome had a backlog of 12,000 applications for immigrant visas from Italians clamoring to immigrate to Cuba. From 1903-1950 Cuba took in over one million Spanish immigrants. These immigrants were all coming from first world countries. Also, before Castro, more Americans lived in Cuba than Cubans in the U. S. Back then people were as desperate to enter Cuba as they are now to escape. By 1992 two million Cubans had fled Cuba, most with only the clothes on their back. By most estimates this is a tiny fraction of those who actually wanted to leave. Also to support the misery and desperation created by the Castro regime is Cuba's suicide rate, which reached 24 per thousand in 1986 -- making it double Latin America's

average, making it triple Cuba's pre-Castro rate, making Cuban women the most suicidal in the world, and making death by suicide the primary cause of death for Cubans aged 15-48. At that point the Cuban government ceased publishing the statistics on the self-slaughter. The figures became state secrets. In 1997 for the first time since the revolution, Christmas became an official holiday. This was in response to Pope John Paul II's 1998 visit to Cuba, which raised hopes for greater religious freedom. The Bush administration tightened its embargo in June 2004, allowing Cuban Americans to return to the island only once every three years (instead of every year) and restricting the amount of U. S. cash that can be spent there to \$50 per day. In response, Cuba banned the use of dollars, which had been legal currency in the country for more than a decade. In July 2006, Castro-hospitalized because of an illness-turned over power temporarily to his brother Raul. It was revealed that Castro has cancer and will not return to power. Before the regime of Castro, Cuba was a different place socially, economically, and politically and older Cubans do not forget what it was like to live during that time, when they were free to think and act accordingly. Works Cited Books Jorge I. Dominquez. Cuba: Order and Revolution. Harvard University Press, November 1978. Brian Latell. After Fidel. Palgrave Macmillan, October 2005. Online Resources The Website of the Governement of the Republic of Cuba. 21 October 2007. The Close Up Foundation. 21 October 2007. Cuban History. 10 Novemeber 2007. Congressional Digest. " Cuba Timeline: Chronology of Events Under Castro's Government. " International Debates Sept 2005, Vol. 3 Issue 6, p167-192. Academic Search Premier. EBSCO. RVCC Library, North Branch, NJ. 15 October 2007.