

Personalistic Political Leadership in Castro's Cuba

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Governments of developing nations are often led by a single charismatic leader who has a strong personal following.¹ Fidel Castro's Cuba is no exception. Personalistic political regimes, such as Castro's, are different from regimes based on institutions because the personality and charisma of the leader carry more weight than he or she stands for. As a result, the leader obtains a high degree of freedom with his or her policies and influence. However, this type of administration is successful only as long as the leader's charisma lasts, and is therefore inherently unstable.

According to leadership theories, there are two major types of power motivation: socialized and personalized. Socialized power is motivated by a desire to cooperate with others and to work with them rather than dominate or control them. Personalized power, on the other hand, is motivated by a wish to dominate others, which is reflected in an excessive concern with status. Those leaders who are motivated by personalized power are apt to use power to aggrandize and satisfy their strong need for esteem and eminence. They are inclined to exercise power impulsively, and seek to dominate others by keeping them weak and dependent.

Charismatic political leaders who are motivated by personalized power are common to developing nations – in this case, Cuba. Cuba's political administration is characterized by a single charismatic officer – Dictator Fidel Castro – with a strong personal following. Sociologist Max Weber defines charisma as follows:

The term "charisma" will be applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers of qualities...and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a 'leader'...What is alone important is how the individual is actually regarded by those subject to charismatic authority, by his "followers" or "disciples."²

Charisma has typically been studied as a trait and as a set of behaviors. The trait approach to charisma looks at qualities such as being visionary, energetic, unconventional, and exemplary. Charismatic leaders are also thought to possess outstanding rhetorical ability. This certainly holds true for Fidel Castro, who has maintained his power since 1959, largely through highly visible, charismatic leadership and popular appeals to the Cuban people.³

In general, there are two factors which directly contribute to the rise of a charismatic leader. One is self-selection of the leader: a belief in one's sense of mission coupled with a high need for personal power. The second, according to sociologist Paul Hollander, is "the need of new, revolutionary political systems for legitimation and for filling the gap left behind by the destruction of pre-revolutionary institutions and values."⁴ Thus, it is not the personality of the ruler in itself which explains its occurrence, but also the distressing state of affairs which opens the door for a charismatic leader to emerge. Indeed, psychologist B. M. Bass argues that charismatic leadership is less likely to emerge or flourish in a transactional (bureaucratic) culture, and is more likely to thrive within a transformational culture.⁵

For example, the phenomenon of personalistic political administrations is likely to occur in underdeveloped nations which possess several particular characteristics. Low levels of military professionalism, limited citizen participation, extensive political corruption, and little semblance of representative government are all factors which provide a fertile soil for the seeds of a personalistic political regime to take root.⁶ Because revolution is an aspect of modernization, personalistic leaders are also more likely to gain influence in those societies that already possess some elements of modernization – namely, in countries where the processes of social and economic development have accelerated faster than political modernization and development.⁷ These observations are again consistent with Cuba, which enjoyed one of the highest per capita incomes (and one of the most dramatic wealth disparities) in Latin American before Fidel Castro came to power in the Cuban Revolution of 1959.

The rise of charismatic leaders can occur in response to other unusual conditions as well. In the case of Cuba, its years of surviving under European imperialist control led to its extreme nationalism of the twentieth century.⁸ Cuba was the last major Spanish colony to gain independence in 1898, following a lengthy struggle that had begun in 1868. After 1898, independent Cuba was often ruled by authoritarian political and military figures, such as Dictator Fulgencia Batista, who either obtained or remained in power by force. The unity fueled by nationalism helped propel the charismatic Fidel Castro to the political forefront in the Revolution of 1959 – and ultimately to dictatorship.

Once a charismatic leader has gained command of a country – in Castro's case, by means of military force – his or her control is maintained in various ways. According to Weber, charisma responds to "the unusual circumstances that have called it into being by destroying existing norms and transforming old values."⁹ Of primary importance is citizens' need to rely on such figures for legitimation and social cohesion.¹⁰ Because

these types of developing political systems demand deferred gratification of material results, there is also a need for the personalization of the leader as a godlike figure.¹¹

This leads directly to a cult of personality which surrounds the leader. Two features of this cult are prominent. The first is that of persuasiveness, in which images of the cult figure are displayed everywhere.¹² In Cuba, the images of Fidel Castro and other prominent “Revolutionary” figures are plastered everywhere. Not only are the state-run media an effective vehicle for this phenomenon, but the arts also produce images such as statues, photos, posters, and murals which are inescapable in the public arena.¹³

Second, the personalistic political leader is portrayed as godlike: as a singular force determining the lives of millions of people. His benevolence, wisdom, and universal genius are touted as being able to solve all problems.¹⁴ Author Bradford Burns writes that “they become the most trusted people in the society...their radical ideas excite popular enthusiasm; their slogans are repeated everywhere.”¹⁵ Thus, charisma undermines tradition by replacing established norms and values with a new faith. The centralized power that surrounds the personalistic political leader is what seems to be real and essential about the country, and all feel completely dependent on him—rather than on other institutions—for their survival.

Consequently, the institutionalization of personalistic political leadership allows the leader to attain a high degree of freedom with his policies.¹⁶ In Cuba, for example, Fidel Castro’s presence helped to fill the institutional void that was present after the overthrow of the Batista regime. Castro was able to amass popular support for greater state intervention in the economy regarding foreign ownership and trade, and he engaged in economic nationalism by means of expropriating foreign-owned banks, utilities, railroads, and mining enterprises.¹⁷ The new political system was restructured around his charismatic leadership, which allowed him to consolidate personal rule over Cuba.¹⁸

When leaders cast themselves in the charismatic roles and their followers are cast as allies in pursuit of the vision of the charismatic leader, however, contradictions can occur because the typical charismatic leader tends to balance self-consistency over the longer term with the desire for shorter-term social goals.¹⁹ For example, although Castro’s personalization and centralization of power was instituted as a way to efficiently address socioeconomic problems, it has ultimately stunted the growth of institutions and organizations, marginalizing democratic institutions such as national legislatures, political parties, electoral agencies, and civic organizations.²⁰

Fidel Castro’s personal rule over Cuba also serves to illuminate another dark side of charisma. Although Castro had promised a return to constitutional rule and democratic elections along with social reforms, he used his control of the military to consolidate his power. This is consistent with Erving Goffman’s idea of “facework” (how the leader justifies actions that could be negatively evaluated by others)²¹ and with leadership expert Gary Yukl’s observations that charismatic leaders are prone to use manipulative behaviors, such as “covering up mistakes and failures,” and “limiting communication of criticism and dissent.”²² By repressing all dissent from his decisions, marginalizing

other resistance figures, and imprisoning or executing thousands of opponents, the charismatic Castro used “facework” and manipulation of public perceptions in order to protect both his image the image of the ruling Cuban Communist Party at the expense of the Cuban people.

Despite the great power wielded by personalistic leaders – or perhaps because of it –, Max Weber believed that charismatic authority is naturally and inherently unstable. A personalistic regime is precarious, he wrote, because “unless the publicists maintain sufficient confidence in the existing regime to give it their loyal support,” the leader will not retain his or her popularity.²³ Moreover, citizens have a desire to fulfill material interests, and a leader’s failure to deliver on his or her promises will render the power of charisma incapable of maintaining absolute control.²⁴ Old regimes are continually collapsing, and “the factors giving rise to revolution...are as likely to be found in the conditions which exist after the collapse of the old regime as in those which exist before its downfall.”²⁵ Although Castro has ruled Cuba more than forty five years, the success with which he has remained in power seems to be more of an exception than of a rule.²⁶

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- ¹ Handelman, Howard, *The Challenge of Third World Development* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 237.
- ² Bernhard, Michael, "Charismatic Leadership and Democratization: A Weberian Perspective," *Columbia International Affairs Online*, January 1998, available from <http://www.ciaonet.org/wps/bem01/bem01.html>.
- ³ Fidel Castro demonstrates his rhetorical abilities on a regular basis, giving frequent speeches of up to eight hours. When I was in Cuba, I sat through one speech that lasted over four and one half hours, and attended another that lasted three hours!
- ⁴ Hollander, Paul, *Discontents: postmodern and postcommunist*, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2002, p. 379.
- ⁵ Bass, B. M., Avolio, B. J., & Goodheim, L., 1987, "Biography and the assessment of transformational leadership at the world-class level," *Journal of Management*, 13: 7-19.
- ⁶ Handelman, p. 237.
- ⁷ Huntington, Samuel P, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968, p. 265.
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- ¹⁰ Hollander, p. 380.
- ¹¹ Hollander, p. 387.
- ¹² Hollander, p. 381.
- ¹³ See page 8 for some examples of common images used in Cuba.
- ¹⁴ On September 13, 2004, Fidel Castro visited Pinar del Rio province before Hurricane Ivan passed over it. "We are so happy to have him close to us," 78-year-old Elsa Ramos was quoted as saying in the *Associated Press*, "Fidel protects us from all bad things." I find this to statement to be representative of the way that many people in Cuba feel about Castro.
- ¹⁵ Burns, Bradford E., *Latin America: Conflict and Creation, a Historical Reader*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice Hall, 1993, p. 211.
- ¹⁶ Van de Walle, Nicholas. *African Economies and the Politics of Permanent Crisis 1979-1999*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 117.
- ¹⁷ Van de Walle, p. 142.
- ¹⁸ Hillman, Richard S. *Understanding Contemporary Latin America*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001, p. 78.
- ¹⁹ Gardner, William L., & Avolio, Bruce, "The charismatic relationship: A dramaturgical perspective," *Academy of Management Review* (1998), 23: 42.
- ²⁰ Hillman, p. 100.
- ²¹ Goffman, Erving, *Interaction ritual: Essays on face-to-face behavior*, Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1967.
- ²² Yukl, Gary A., *Leadership in Organizations, 4th Edition*, Prentice Hall 1998, p. 296.
- ²³ Burns, p. 209.
- ²⁴ Bernhard.
- ²⁵ Huntington, p. 67.
- ²⁶ Elaboration on the subject of how Castro has been able to remain in power could fill a book. Because it is not entirely relevant to the topic of personalized political leadership, I have refrained from discussing it in the text of the paper. However, there are three main reasons for Castro's success in maintaining power in Cuba.
- First, Cuba has the best secret police force in the world, and most dissident groups have been heavily infiltrated by state agents. This makes successful revolt against the regime very difficult.
- Second, emigration from Cuba to the United States is very common. This emigration represents the exportation of the country's counterrevolutionary force, which means that any sustained and internal challenge to the Castro regime is highly unlikely.
- Third, the continuation of the U.S. embargo against Cuba has provided a scapegoat for Castro's own repression and economic failures and let him portray himself as standing up to U.S. imperialism. Because Castro is able to retranslate the message of the sanctions into punishment and retribution as Cuba, he creates popular support for the regime in a "rally round the flag" effect.