

Fidel Castro, the immortal

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Africa is not conflicted over Fidel Castro, screamed a headline this week, on the world's reaction to the transition to eternity of Cuba's Fidel Castro. That is probably the understatement of the year. To Africa, there was no one quite like Fidel Castro. Indeed, no one close. African leaders, including President Muhammadu Buhari, sent their condolences, and tributes. Robert Mugabe praised him as "the leader of all revolutionaries." But his service to the continent went far beyond the calls of duty, his friendship, his sacrifice were without precedent. And he offered them at the most inauspicious moments, when things were hard, when there were no alternatives and when he could have shrugged them off because he owed no obligation.

Africa cannot thank him enough. In 1961 he did not feel intimidated by the French as the Algerian war of independence got more difficult for the nationalists. He did not stop to weigh the consequences of shipping military hardware to the Algerians. In 1963 he did not just ship arms, he sent a tank battalion. He was thus not content giving treasure; he was ready to give blood, too. In 1965, he had mandated his ablest lieutenant, the immortal Che Guevara, to train Congolese 'revolutionaries' following the assassination of Patrice Lumumba. This scheme was aborted by the untimely death of Che himself in Bolivia.

Every African nationalist found in Fidel Castro a willing ear, a comrade, and a benefactor, from Algeria's Ahmed Ben Bella, Angola's Augustinho Neto, to Namibia's Sam Nujoma through Tanzania's Julius Nyerere and Mozambique's Samora Machel and Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah. When, therefore, Nelson Mandela was released from prison, and Mandela announced that Castro was one of the first foreign leaders he wanted to meet and greet, a great murmur arose in some quarters, especially in the West. Castro was internationally isolated, or so the West thought, but Mandela well knew. "We are now being advised about Cuba by people who have supported the apartheid regime these last 40 years," Mandela scoffed.

Where did his commitment to Africa come from? It is hard to say. But a cursory look at his early political beginnings reveal that in 1947, he had joined the Party of the Cuban People, founded by veteran politician Eduardo Chibas, a charismatic figure who advocated social justice, honest government, and political freedom. The party fought and exposed corruption, and worked for reforms. They lost in the election but Castro remained committed to the cause. Later, he offered a modification, saying that "Africa is the weakest chain in the imperialist struggle." Anyone familiar with the state of African nations in the colonial period, in the age of decolonization in the 1960s cannot but agree. Thus, the communist dogmas of Marx and Engels and Leninism, came much later to Fidel Castro. He was simply a good man committed to certain fundamental principles which included equality, respect for human dignity and against oppression in all its forms.

Fidel Castro was akin to the proverbial cat with nine lives, his regime having survived 10 American presidents, each of whom, except for President Jimmy Carter, actively worked for his demise or overthrow, and, privately, if not publicly, wished he was dead. Yet one cannot but see that the regime ran a disciplined, enlightened, administration, respectful of other cultures, humble in orientation and decent in dealing with other peoples. For example when Castro sent the military help which the Algerians solicited in 1963, it arrived with the following code of conduct for the Cuban officers:

The commander of the Special Forces was Efigenio Ameijeiras, a highly respected officer who presided over the five-member Military Council. "The orders I had from Fidel," Ameijeiras recalled, "were to place myself at their [the Algerians'] complete disposal, to go wherever they wanted, whenever they wanted."

From Havana, Raúl Castro issued firm instructions to the Military Council. These included a strict code of conduct: no alcoholic beverages of "any type whatsoever, at any time...no intimate relationship, of any kind, with women...a complete and absolute respect" for Algerian customs and religion. "Do not boast about our

Revolution, or our ideology,” Raúl went on. “Be modest at all times, share the little we know and never act like experts.” The members of the Military Council “should enforce these instructions, above all, by dint of their own example.” Is it any wonder that Cuba sometimes beats the United States in the gold medals tables? As it turned out, the Algerians eventually didn’t need to use the arsenal and the forces. The Cubans’ sheer presence, which couldn’t be hidden, ended the conflict and a ceasefire agreement was signed establishing the status quo ante.

Fidel Castro provided a tower for African liberation. His influence was everywhere. Mozambique’s Samora Machel liked to dress like him – in army fatigues, and to speak like him, in motivational, patriotic speeches. Any African liberation movement found a nesting place in Fidel Castro’s Cuba – the African National Congress, the South West African Peoples Organization (SWAPO), the Zimbabwe African Peoples Union (ZAPU). Castro was partial to African governments that had socialist bent. He supported the government of Alphonse Massamba-Debat in Congo Brazzaville. In 1977, he sent 15,000 Cuban troops to help Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam in Ethiopia against a Somali attempt to seize control of the Ogaden region.

When the apartheid regime in South African became a clear and present danger to the independence of Angola, Fidel Castro sent in an awesome 36,000-man force which embarrassed the US-backed South African military, forcing it to withdraw hastily back to South Africa. It was the first sign of a crack in the invincibility of the apartheid forces which hastened the regime’s willingness to grant independence to Namibia. Ultimately the racists realized, too, that the apartheid regime cannot be sustained by force eternally. Was it any wonder that when Castro visited, “the South African Parliament broke into a song” and an emotional Sam Nujoma, the founding President of Namibia, “thanked Castro for helping to free his people.”

Fidel Castro will always be remembered for his support for the independence of African states. He will also be remembered as a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement which became the alternative to joining either of the two blocs during the Cold War. He gave freely in aid in terms of teachers, doctors, soldiers, and other kinds of assistance like sugar and other commodities. He was a good example of altruistic international aid. He never asked for anything in return. This is why the gratitude of many Africans who name their children “Fidel” or “Castro” goes beyond international politics.

He was not a perfect man. And no one is. But he acted in pursuit of his passion to help the down-trodden. Cuban economy could have been better managed, hindsight being what it is. China has proved that state capitalism can work under

a communist party. Worse, the communist system has disregard for fundamental human rights, which is one area his critics have justifiably harped on. Yet this is not to take away the enormous achievements of the Castro regime. It has the best healthcare system in the world, has free medical care from the cradle to the grave and produces the best doctors in the world. When Ebola arrived, the Cubans did not hesitate to lead the fight. Africa has lost its most reliable friend.

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