

## **LEFT GOVERNMENTS IN POWER**

**Cuba 60 years of revolution, 60 years of standing firm against imperialism**

Rob Miller



**The first of January 2019 marked the sixtieth anniversary of the Cuban revolution. On that day in 1959, following years of struggle, the Cuban people finally defeated the forces of the brutal dictator Fulgencia Batista and his backers in the United States. In the years since, the revolution has developed and today encompasses the early struggle against dictatorship, the ongoing fight for independence and national sovereignty, and the building of a socialist economy and society. This evolution has taken place under the ever-present threat and aggressions from the world's biggest superpower just seventy miles away.**

The Cuban revolution has proven to be a defining moment in history. The defence of the revolution by the Cuban people and their leadership with the support of international solidarity has remained at centre stage in the world's fight for socialism and for a better future for all.

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**Abstract** This year marks the sixtieth anniversary of the Cuban Revolution. Despite ever-present threats and aggressions from the world's largest superpower, just seventy miles away, the Cuban Revolution has survived and developed over time. Cuban achievements in education and health have been remarkable and so have Cuban expressions of international solidarity in practice. There is so much to celebrate. But the need for solidarity against the US blockade continues, supporting the Cuban people in their right to independence, building a better world for all.

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The history of the revolution reads as a David versus Goliath struggle pitting this small Caribbean island against the onslaught of violent aggression, invasion and intervention from its northerly neighbour. Yet, against all the odds and despite the seemingly endless animosity towards it, Cuba has survived and indeed thrived. The former president and historic leader of the revolution Fidel Castro was always very clear that the US would never cease in its efforts to destroy the revolution. At a speech in 1968, on the hundredth anniversary of the beginning of the Cuban war of independence, he said:

This revolution needs to depend on power, because the enemies will not give up easily. Imperialism, using all its resources, will not leave us in peace.

The US has indeed tried every means possible to destroy the revolution, ranging from the CIA-backed invasion at the Bay of Pigs, and the hundreds of assassination attempts on Cuba's leadership, to the billions of dollars spent on regime change activities. Above all, it has imposed the most vicious and longest blockade of any country in history outside of actual war.

In the same speech, Castro went on to say: 'The enemy's hate grows as the revolution becomes stronger, as it realises that its efforts have been fruitless.' In a rhetorical question to the crowd, he asked: 'To what degree will they go? They will go till they make fools of themselves.'

In these comments made back in 1968, a year when revolutionary fervour was felt across the globe, Castro understood that imperialism would never cease in its struggle to turn back the tide of progressive movements, peoples and nations that sought to wrest power from a ruling capitalist class. Wherever people tried to build a more equitable and fairer society, it was clear that every means necessary would be used to destroy those ideals, and to ensure that the unfair distribution of wealth which the capitalist system enshrines was protected for the benefit of the few.

In many moments of history, the struggle of the Cuban people has been at the cutting edge of this epic class battle. The little island of Cuba has so often been at the heart of the conflict between the international capitalist class and the vision of a better world: at Playa Giron, when US-backed forces invaded Cuba and were defeated in 1961; at the battle of Cuito Carnavale in Angola in 1987, when Cuban forces helped defeat the South African Defence Force to win a decisive breakthrough in the ending of apartheid; in the 'Cuban' missile crisis of 1962, when the Soviet Union and the United States came as close as ever to outright confrontation and nuclear war. Most importantly, it is the example and beacon of

Cuba that shines firmly in the hearts and minds of people across the globe whenever they struggle for a better future.

Cuba has supported national liberation struggles across Latin America and beyond. Cuba was among the first to support Salvador Allende's government in Chile, and Castro visited in 1971. Cuba directly helped the Nicaraguan Sandinistas over many years before, during and after the victory of the revolution in 1979. A personal and close relationship between Castro and Hugo Chavez has left a lasting legacy of solidarity between Cuba and Venezuela. In all the liberation struggles of Africa and Asia, Cuba has always played a major role. Cuba has always punched well above its weight in the world's anti-imperialist struggles.

When Nelson Mandela was released after twenty-seven years imprisoned by the apartheid forces of South Africa, the very first country that he visited was Cuba. It was there he thanked the Cuban people for their historic solidarity with his peoples. Despite attempts by the west to rewrite history and forget Mandela's Cuba connection, this moment was yet another illustration of the unique role of Cuba throughout the past sixty years in the battle between capitalism and progress.

### **60 years of achievements**

Today, sixty years into the revolution, this small, fiercely independent country continues to defy all the odds. Twelve US presidents have come and gone, with each one declaring his intention to defeat the Cuban revolution in one way or another. In the early 1990s, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and other socialist countries, Cuba lost its main trading partners. Its economy shrank by over 70 per cent overnight. The ensuing 'Special Period', which lasted most of the decade, stretched the Cuban people to their absolute limits and many felt that Cuba could not survive. The US took the opportunity to strengthen the blockade and increase its destabilisation efforts.

The country had to undertake a great transformation that saw the rise of international tourism, a refocus away from sugar production, the development of what became an internationally significant domestic pharmaceutical industry and the search for international investment. Cuba has also adopted some market mechanisms, including an increase in self-employment, to help see it through the crisis. Through amazing national efforts at every level and in the most difficult circumstances, Cuba has been able to survive and continue to build its socialism. Yet Cuba doesn't just survive, it thrives in so many ways.

Cuba's healthcare system is legendary. The country ended 2018 with the lowest infant mortality rate in its history, at four deaths per thousand live births. This figure, lower even than in its rich neighbour the US, has not been achieved by chance. It is the result of determined efforts to prioritise universal healthcare, and an inclusive social system designed to help every Cuban regardless of colour, occupation, wealth or location. It is just one of the many achievements made through the efforts and professionalism of thousands of medical staff throughout Cuba. It is a testament to a nation that meticulously plans the use of its scarce resources to ensure the best possible results for the good of its people, at a fraction of the costs in the richest countries. Just imagine what the health indicators across the developing world could look like, and how many millions of lives could be saved, if Cuban medical models could be applied.

In education, even the World Bank has declared that 'no Latin American school system, with the possible exception of that of Cuba, has the high standards, strong academic talent, high or at least adequate salaries and high degree of professional

autonomy that characterises the world's most effective educational systems, such as those of Finland, Singapore, Shanghai (China), the Republic of Korea, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Canada'. Indeed hundreds of British teachers have, over the past few years, been visiting the island on delegations from the National Education Union and their reports have been quite staggering. From the pedagogy used to the aspirations and achievements being made, teachers have come back full of admiration for a system that is geared up to encourage nothing but the best results for students, teachers and families across the island.

Cuba has developed a society based on the needs of humanity, with education, health, social care and internationalism its core priorities. Today, more than 50,000 Cuban medics are working in over seventy countries, mainly in the developing south, often working in the poorest communities where private doctors will not go. They have served in the mountains of the Himalayas following the Kashmir earthquake of 2005, the terrible aftermath of the Haiti earthquake in 2010, and in the frontline of the Ebola crisis in West Africa in 2014. Cuban medics provide primary care consultations and treatments for many millions. Their work mirrors the successful strategy used within Cuba, which aims to prevent illness in the first place rather than treating illnesses that are so often preventable using relatively cheap and efficient methods such as inoculations, diet and lifestyle changes. For people across the globe, and particularly those in the global south, achievements such as these show that with a socialist system a better world can indeed be built for the benefit of the many not the few.

### **United States imperialism**

Imperialism is once again flexing its muscles in Latin America. In September 2018, President Donald Trump addressed the United Nations general assembly. His speech invoked the nineteenth-century doctrine of President James Monroe, which asserted that the US had a right to assert its control over the countries of the region and that it would not tolerate any expansionist foreign power encroaching on the western hemisphere. Today's administration is likewise asserting its right to dictate what happens on the whole of the continent of Latin America. In his interventionist threats to Cuba through the continuing blockade, and to Venezuela through increased sanctions, Trump is behaving like many of his predecessors — President Richard Nixon, for instance, who backed the overthrow and assassination of Salvador Allende, the elected president of Chile, in 1973.

Trump's speech spelled out a simple message: that economic sanctions, and more, would be used anywhere in the world to win compliance with US policy. He made a clear threat that the US would use its wealth and power to get its own way, and would use trade and aid to push all recipients into submission. Those who resisted would be punished, while those who acquiesced would be rewarded.

The election of Trump has opened the door to the hard right who want to reassert US supremacy across the hemisphere, revisiting the claims set out in the 'Monroe Doctrine'. Through a host of interventionist foreign policy initiatives, most recently in Nicaragua and Venezuela, these far-right stormtroopers are threatening any opposition with bloody violence.

Trump used his speech to launch an all-out attack on socialism, blaming it for all the evils of the world. Now John Bolton, the most pro-war hawk in Washington, is the White House national security adviser. He has described Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela as the 'Troika of Tyranny' and is threatening that 'their day of reckoning awaits'.

When the far-right Jair Bolsonaro was dubiously elected in Brazil having overseen the imprisonment of Lula, the main candidate from the left, Bolton celebrated alongside the hardline Cuban Americans in Florida. He spared no time meeting Bolsonaro, with discussions reportedly covering strategies to defeat progressive governments in Cuba and across the region. Immediately Bolsonaro forced the removal of 8,000 Cuban doctors who had been working in Brazil since 2013 as part of the *Mais Médicos* (More Doctors) programme, delivering healthcare to the poorest and most remote peoples of the country. Now Bolton is heading up the hardline group of neocons who clearly see their opportunity under the Trump presidency to destroy the progressive governments in Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba.

US policy across the region is driven by the powerful Cuban American lobby that is concentrated in Florida. Powerbrokers in many US presidential elections and with deep links to the far right of the Republican Party, this group exercise excessive influence over US policies in Latin America. They are driven by sixty years of bitterness and greed following their defeat by the Cuban people. They are led by the presidential candidate Marco Rubio, backed by senators such as Bob Menendez and Ted Cruz and a long list of influential hardliners across government, the media and industry. Many of these politicians have direct family ties back to the ruling elite of pre-revolutionary Cuba. It was a time when the mafia worked hand in glove with US business interests to fleece the Cuban people, and when they made vast fortunes through prostitution, gambling, drugs and alcohol.

Today, this Cuban American-led latter-day mafiosi not only want their Cuban property back, they also have their eyes on the wealth of resources from across the continent, from the Amazon rainforest to Venezuelan oil. Indeed, this personal crusade has aligned perfectly with the voracious demands of US business, which desperately looks for new profits in the Americas. It seems that Trump and his ilk are turning to the old ways of direct intervention and basically stealing resources from other countries to make money. It is imperialism in its most naked form.

Bolton made clear his reasoning behind his latest aggression against Venezuela when he said, 'It will make a big difference to the United States economically if we could have American oil companies invest in and produce the oil capabilities in Venezuela.' It would appear that US multinationals, including US oil companies, view the vast reserves of Venezuelan oil as rightfully theirs — and when you are desperately searching for new profits to uphold your margins, backing a military adventure against another country makes perfect sense.

The 2003 Iraq war was among the first major resource wars of the twenty-first century. Some now clearly view a similar campaign in Venezuela to be a viable option, and one that would reap similar rewards regardless of the human cost. We are now at a crucial stage in this struggle, where once again the US is marshalling its covert and armed forces to break any resistance to its policies of privatisation and greed. For the time being at least, the Sandinista government in Nicaragua has defeated the violent coup attempt of late 2018. Now Venezuela is under attack from every imperialist canon.

Increasingly, Cuba is once more at the centre of this battle. In his February speech, Trump decried Venezuela's president, Nicolas Maduro, as a 'Cuban puppet' and went on to say that 'the twilight hour of socialism has arrived in our hemisphere'. 'The days of socialism and communism are numbered, not only in Venezuela, but in Nicaragua and in Cuba as well.'

Raúl Castro, in his speech on the sixtieth anniversary of the revolution, said

that ‘Now once again, the US government seems to be taking the course of confrontation with Cuba, presenting our peaceful country of solidarity as a threat to the region. It resorts to the sinister Monroe Doctrine to try to roll back history to the shameful era in which subjugated governments and military dictatorships joined it in isolating Cuba.’

Vicki Huddleston, who was head of the US Interests Section in Havana from 1999 to 2002, has warned, in a similar vein, that the situation in Venezuela could lead to a ‘confrontation’ between the US and Cuba. In an interview with *Intelligence Matters* magazine, she said that she thought ‘most Cuba watchers and experts on Cuba believe the policy is now regime change for Cuba, as well as other countries in the world’, and cited Venezuela and Iran as examples.

It is not a coincidence that the US is considering lifting the historic waiver on one section (Title III) of the infamous Helms–Burton legislation that underpins the US blockade of Cuba. This would allow Cuban Americans to sue any international company that has traded with Cuba over the past sixty years under the spurious claim that it will have profited from the illegal use of confiscated property that was nationalised after the revolution. Such a measure would further stifle international trade and investment with Cuba, and create a further reason for tension and conflict.

### **A dangerous coming together**

There is a dangerous coming together between the historic greed of the Florida-based Cuban mafiosi, the drive for profits from US and international multinationals, and the anti-socialist ideology of Trump, Bolton and the far right. The election of Trump has opened up a window of possibilities, and it seems that there is little to hold back the rampant aggression, intervention and war that is being promoted.

Raúl Castro’s sixtieth anniversary speech clearly illustrated the depth of the conflict being played out between two opposing ideologies.

Increasingly, senior officials of the current administration, with the complicity of certain lackeys, disseminate new falsehoods and again try to blame Cuba for all the ills of the region, as if these were not the result of ruthless neoliberal policies that cause poverty, hunger, inequality, organised crime, drug trafficking, political corruption, abuse and deprivation of workers’ rights, displaced people, the eviction of campesinos, the repression of students, and precarious health, education and housing conditions for the vast majority.

### **A vibrant developing society**

Despite these dangerous times, Cuba is today a vibrant developing society. In its recent general election, seven million people (82.9 per cent of eligible voters) elected 605 members of parliament. More than 53 per cent of them are women, giving Cuba the second-highest female representation levels in the world. The Cuban people have been discussing the updating of their constitution across all sectors, mass organisations and trade unions. Issues of widespread debate have included sexuality, gay marriage and the role of the church, as well as the role of different cultural forms in society. This has been a huge and extensive debate, which really has involved virtually everyone on the island, with more than 135,000 discussion meetings having taken place. An updated constitution was voted on in February 2019.



Cuban society and values have not stood still through the years of the ongoing revolution. A key example is the evolution of a progressive approach to homosexuality that has developed despite the ‘machismo’ of traditional Cuban culture. Today, Cuba is at the forefront of LGBTQ rights in the region, and although there is always much to achieve, an impressive level of BAME and women’s rights has been reached across all sectors of society.

The death of Fidel Castro and the changes in the constitution have led to media reports in the west speculating on how Cuba is ‘on the verge of change’. This narrative has been repeated over many years: in the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union; again when Fidel retired as president; and when Barack Obama visited Cuba. This media excitement about change is a fantasy of Cuba renouncing its socialism, rather than any reality. Cuba is constantly evolving and changing, but Cuban colleagues have made it clear that changes do not include renouncing their ideals, independence and socialism.

### **Britain and Cuba**

In November 2018, the Cuba Solidarity Campaign was honoured to host the visit of the new Cuban president, Miguel Díaz-Canel. The high-level delegation met with the leader of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, as well as with Philip Hammond, Chancellor of the Exchequer, and Prince Charles.

The visit came just days after Britain had voted in support of Cuba’s resolution to end the blockade at the United Nations general assembly. This was despite the US trying everything possible to sabotage Cuba’s annual success with the vote. In parliament, Díaz-Canel said that he was struck by the warmth of his welcome: ‘That in a place that is so far away from Cuba, we can find so much warmth, affection and love, that it seems like we have known each other for a very long time. And for that I want to thank you very much.’

Now even the royals, Charles and Camilla, have travelled to Cuba in a strange, but welcome, visit to the island. Their trip immediately resulted in accusations of ‘fraternising with the enemy’ from anti-Cuban hardliners in Washington and Florida. However, there are elements within the more traditional wing of the British ruling class that prefer British interests to dominate in the Caribbean region, rather than those of the US. So while Britain generally kowtows to Washington on international affairs, there are cracks within that special relationship which should be exploited and widened. Royal visits and developing cultural and trading links between Britain and Cuba are all to be welcomed and worked for.

Yet history has shown that the British government cannot be relied on to stand up against US aggression. Despite existing antidote legislation and various proclamations about British sovereignty, successive governments have failed to defend British companies' rights to trade with the island. Even without Title III, the US blockade is extraterritorial in its application. International companies including the Royal Bank of Scotland and Lloyds Bank have been fined billions of dollars by the US Office of Foreign Asset Control for historic trading with Cuba. The Cooperative Bank closed the accounts of the Cuba Solidarity Campaign in 2016, and the Open University banned applications from Cuban students in 2017, both due to the perceived threat of fines for breaking US sanctions. If Title III comes into effect, it will further ruin the chances of future foreign investment in Cuba, and scare off those currently working there.

The British government needs to make clear to the US that attempts to impose its unilateral blockade policies in Britain and on British companies will not be tolerated and are an affront to our own sovereignty and against our own interests. It should have been the British government, not the Cuba Solidarity Campaign, that challenged the Open University's blatant disregard for British laws when it banned Cuban students from enrolling in 2017, for example.

### **Cuba60**

The sixtieth anniversary of the Cuban revolution and the achievements of the Cuban people are being celebrated in a series of events held under the banner Cuba60. Yet we cannot allow ourselves just to celebrate. We must use the opportunity to redouble our efforts for solidarity with the Cuban people against the US blockade and in defence of their right to independence and to build a better world for all. The Cuban people are preparing once again to defend their revolution and their achievements. As Raúl Castro made clear in his anniversary speech, they are definitely not prepared to give up their revolution and their sovereignty in the face of aggression:

Sixty years after the triumph, we can affirm that we have seen it all before; we are not intimidated by the language of force or threats, they did not intimidate us when the revolutionary process was not yet consolidated, they will not even remotely achieve it now that the unity of the people is an indestructible reality; because if yesterday we were few, today we are an entire people defending their revolution.

At such a time, there is little room for liberal observations and sideline complaining. It is a time for people to stand up for the principals of sovereignty and independence. It is a time to say no to the blockade and intervention in Cuba. And now is the time to say no to more imperialist interventions and wars.