

INTRODUCTION

Looking beyond Militarism

To observers both on and off the island, the handover of the Cuban presidency from Raúl Castro to Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez on April 19, 2018, constituted a historic change in the trajectory of the Cuban Revolution: for the first time in sixty years, the Revolution would be led by someone other than a Castro brother. Age fifty-seven at the time of his appointment, Díaz-Canel is significantly younger than his octogenarian predecessor, but crucially, he was born after the victory of the Revolution in 1959. The new president did not, therefore, form part of the “historic generation” that fought in the insurrection of 1956–1959 and has played a dominant role in shaping Cuba’s political life ever since.

While certainly a break with tradition in this respect, Díaz-Canel does not appear intent on disrupting the political status quo. With thirty-five years’ service to the Revolution in various roles including membership in the Politburo since 2003, the Communist Party stalwart has long been a prominent fixture on the Cuban political scene, maintaining a close relationship with Raúl and previously with Fidel Castro.¹ In his inaugural presidential speech, Díaz-Canel made clear his aim to uphold the legacy of both the Castro leaders and to guarantee continuity within the revolutionary project (Díaz-Canel 2018). Such sentiments were echoed by Raúl in his valedictory address on the same day, in which he underscored that new generations had a duty to continue constructing socialism in order to maintain the country’s sovereignty (R. Castro 2018). Leaving little room

for doubt, in the days leading up to April 19 the National Assembly called on the country's social media users to adopt the hashtag #somoscontinuidad (#wearecontinuity), which ended up trending on Twitter.

Yet, discursive declarations of continuity aside, there is no denying that Díaz-Canel represents a very visible, symbolic shift in the Cuban leadership. Aesthetically speaking, the new president stands out not just for his comparatively youthful appearance but also for his choice of attire. Unlike Raúl, Fidel, and their former comrades-in-arms who served or continue to serve in the Cuban government, Díaz-Canel's lack of revolutionary credentials mean that he does not sport the olive-green military uniform; when not dressed formally in suit and tie, he can often be seen performing official duties in jeans and guayabera, a traditional Cuban shirt, thus seemingly cultivating the image of an average Cuban, an everyman.

In contrast, the military fatigues favored by the historic generation deliberately mark them as men who participated in the struggle that brought the Revolution to power. Their purposeful display of lived military experience and the tendency since 1959 for the leadership to grant political authority to those with that experience have partly contributed to the long-standing and widely held perception of the Revolution among Western scholars as a "militarized" system of governance (Bonachea and San Martín 1972; Bunck 1994; Domínguez 1990; Dumont 1974; Guerra 2012; Horowitz 2008; Kruijt and Koonings 2012).

That vision of the Revolution was cemented by the official transition of power from Fidel to Raúl Castro in 2008. As the minister of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (FAR, Revolutionary Armed Forces) since 1959, Raúl has been considered first and foremost a military man, someone more suited to instilling military discipline than negotiating revolutionary politics (Bardach 2009; Dumont 1974; Latell 2005). Irving Horowitz, a longtime commentator and critic of the Cuban Revolution, has described Raúl as "the orthodox military figure" whose "orthodoxy extends to the cut of his uniform" (2008, 137).

Having assumed the presidency, Raúl thus wasted little time in surrounding himself with men cut from a similar cloth. Several well-known *raulistas* were awarded membership in the council, and others were granted direct vertical promotions at the expense of younger, more reformist figures. Among the *raulistas* was seventy-two-year-old Julio Casas

Regueiro, who, having held the position of first vice minister of the FAR up to that point, found himself promoted to one of five vice presidencies of the council in addition to replacing Raúl as the minister of the FAR. Ramiro Valdés Menéndez, one of a select few to have been awarded the distinguished title *comandante de la Revolución* (commander of the Revolution), was granted a vice presidential post on the Council of State and the Council of Ministers.

Raúl's move to surround himself with his former comrades-in-arms came as no surprise to external commentators; on the contrary, it was widely considered a vindication of the "militarism" perspective. Other events of recent years have also served in some ways as additional confirmation: Bastión, for instance, a strategic military defense exercise involving hundreds of thousands of Cubans (members of the armed forces and civilians) that has taken place several times since 1980, including in 2016, is perhaps an explicit example of the so-called militarization of the Cuban Revolution.

Many have argued that such a militarization process helps to explain, in part, the longevity of the political careers of prominent military figures like Raúl, as head of the FAR and first secretary of the Communist Party until 2021. Much of the literature that attests to the Revolution's militarism has viewed the process as one that has guaranteed the revolutionary leadership's hold on power through its accompanying disciplinarian approach toward the Cuban people, creation of a hierarchical society, concentration of political power in the hands of a select few, and active promotion of a siege mentality in the face of what is presented as an unrelenting threat of attack from the United States. It is often posited that, combined, these factors have played a key role in the very survival of the Revolution since the late 1960s and have enabled those at the helm of the revolutionary project to maintain a firm grasp on the reins of power (Bolender 2012; Gouré 1989a,b; Horowitz 2008; Malloy 1971; Petras and Morley 1985).

The labeling of the practice of revolutionary politics is hard to refute, given the pervasiveness of the Cuban military not just in the leadership but in all areas of Cuban life. This characteristic of the Revolution is indisputable. The physical presence of the FAR and its members has loomed large and still does within many spheres of the Revolution, including political governance, the management of mass agricultural work, and since the

1990s, economic projects; all are areas normally considered to be beyond the remit of most armed forces. It is also difficult to ignore that the FAR itself has undoubtedly been transformed from a relatively disorganized guerrilla army into a professionalized military institution. Its transformation brought a more hierarchical structure and greater emphasis on military discipline and order within the institution itself and the Revolution more broadly. Certainly, if we take into account Dirk Kruijt and Kees Koonings's broad definition of "militarism," then these characteristics of the revolutionary government render it a prime example: "militarism," conventionally defined, "equals the predominance of the military institution and its key ideological constructs in shaping national life because of real or perceived external security threats" (2012, 91).

As far as explaining the survival of the Revolution and the political durability of its leaders, however, the notion of militarism does not quite tell the whole story, particularly if we consider the idea of a military's "ideological constructs" in the context of the FAR. Cuba's armed forces have their origins in and developed out of the rebel army, the very guerrilla force that sprang up in the mountain regions of Cuba. Its revolutionary heritage renders the FAR distinct from other, more traditional militaries, notably those in the rest of Latin America that were created and developed for service to a state power (Klepak 2005). Cuba's armed forces, in contrast, were founded upon a struggle waged by and for the people. Members of Cuba's armed forces thus view themselves as "different from other Latin American armed forces because of their revolutionary past"; they are a "people's army" that is heir to a "revolutionary tradition" (Klepak 2005, 56). That tradition has imbued the FAR's ideological foundations and those of the Revolution with a set of beliefs and values that distinguish it from more conventional, corporatist armed forces elsewhere in the Americas.

Moreover, the FAR is distinct in that it does not exist as a monolithic entity completely removed from the civilian sphere. Since the creation in 1959 of the *Milicias Nacionales Revolucionarias* (MNR, National Revolutionary Militias), a volunteer force under the control of the FAR, the Revolution has cultivated a force of reservists who occupy roles in civilian and military spheres, and many members of the military have assumed responsibilities in the civilian sphere. The lines between the two domains are thus blurred. It should be noted that the labeling by non-Cuban observers

of certain political figures as “military” does not necessarily indicate that such individuals have ever served in the FAR. Many of those who possess military titles were awarded them solely on the basis of their participation in the guerrilla struggle of the 1950s, and they may not have been actively involved in typically military activities thereafter.

The nonbinary relations between the FAR and the civilian population in Cuba mean that the survival of the Revolution and its leaders is not predicated solely on the application of authoritarian discipline, a militaristic organization of society, or a type of “garrison-state mentality” (Fernández 1989, 3). While these features do exist to a greater or lesser extent depending on the internal and external factors affecting the Revolution at a given moment, it is also true that the Revolution does not function in the fashion of a conventional military dictatorship in the Latin American mold (Klepak 2005, 278). That is, although there is clear evidence of coercion and of the Revolution acting on its “authoritarian reflexes” at different stages and in different forms, often during times of increased international tension, it has by no means occurred to the same degree as in other Latin American nations, nor is it the largest pillar buttressing decades of revolutionary rule (Pérez 2012, ix). Rather, the Revolution’s leaders have had to seek popular legitimacy for the revolutionary project itself as well as their roles within it since the Revolution came to power.

Clues that might explain their legitimacy are plentiful in contemporary Cuba, perhaps most obviously in the leadership itself. Not only are men like Raúl Castro prominent members of the armed forces, they are also, inescapably, former *guerrilleros* (guerrilla fighters). Raúl, Valdés Menéndez, and figures like José Ramón Machado Ventura all played pivotal roles in the sierra during the uprising against the dictator Fulgencio Batista.

The prominence of *ex-guerrilleros* can also be seen in even the most cursory glance at images and slogans that abound in Cuba today. In Havana’s Plaza de la Revolución, Ernesto “Che” Guevara’s silhouette has adorned the Ministry of the Interior building since 1993; a similar outline of Guevara’s comrade-in-arms, Camilo Cienfuegos, was erected on the wall of the adjacent Ministry of Information and Communications in 2009. Elsewhere in the city and across the entire island can be found visual representations of Guevara and Cienfuegos along with other images of the rebel army, accompanied by revolutionary slogans such as “Hasta la victoria siempre!”