

Fifty years of Castroism

By Edwin Madunagu

THE exercise I want to attempt here arose from a double need. One is the need to review the history of Cuba since the revolutionary triumph of January 1, 1959 - that is, 50 years ago. The other is the need to review some of my own writings on the subject. My published essays on which this double-review is based span a period of 26 years: From November 1980 to October 2006. All the essays, except the first one, were published in *The Guardian* newspaper.

In the month of November 1980, *The Alliance of Progressive Students* (ALPS) of the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University), Ile-Ife, invited me to deliver a public lecture on its platform. The lecture was to mark the 31st anniversary of the brutal killing, in November 1949, of 21 Nigerian miners and the maiming of 59 others at the Iva Valley Mines, Enugu, by the colonial police. It was to be a four-part lecture, delivered over four consecutive evenings. Incidentally I was able to deliver only two parts. Partly for this reason, a decision was taken to publish the full text of the lecture as a book.

The book came out about six months later with the title *Human Progress and Its Enemies*. The fourth chapter of the six-chapter book is on Cuba and carries the title: *The power of socialism: the case of Cuba*. My first definitive essay on Cuba, published in *The Guardian*, appeared on January 7 and 14, 1988. It was a two-part commentary on an article written by Oladapo Fafowora, a retired top Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Fafowora's article, published in *The Guardian* of January 1, 1988, carried the title *29 Years of the Cuban Revolution*, while my commentary was titled *Telling the Truth*.

A year later, in January and February, 1989, I wrote a three-part essay: *Cuba: 30 years of Castroism*. In August 1989 came *Castro and Perestroika*. Then, in February 1994, I wrote *To Cuba at 35, a Salute*. Fidel Castro was 75 years old in July 2001, and for this event I wrote *Fidel Castro at 75* (August

30, 2001). And shortly after Fidel Castro temporarily relinquished office in July 2006, I wrote a commentary, *Anticipating Castro's departure* (September 9, 2006). In addition to these general essays, I paid three published tributes to Che Guevara: *Remembering Che Guevara* (November 26, 1987); *Celebration of Che Guevara* (November 6, 2003); and *From Guevara to Chavez* (October 12, 2006).

Were I to be endowed with unlimited space and time and, of course, energy, I would use the material listed above (which I humbly commend to readers, especially the younger ones), and my unpublished notes, to organise this review into six separate themes and essays, namely: Foundations of Castroism; Consolidation of Castroism; External attempts to destroy Castro and Castroism; Castroism, Internationalism and Foreign Relations; Castroism, Crisis of Socialism and the end of the Cold War; and The Future of Castroism. But as things stand presently, these themes will only serve as indicators, guide, and pledge to return to the subject at an appropriate time.

The Republic of Cuba is the largest island in the Caribbean Sea, about 160 kilometres south east of the coast of the United States of America. It has a land area of about 110,860 square kilometres and its present population is about 11.5 million, distributed as follows: 51 per cent mulatto (mixed race); 37 per cent white; 11 per cent black; and 1 per cent Chinese. The official language is Spanish; and the major religion is Christianity. Life expectancy of men is 76 years, but 80 years for women. Cuba was a Spanish colony until 1898 when, through its war of independence in which the United States of America intervened, it became an "American protectorate". Although Cuba's independence was proclaimed in 1902, the country periodically came under American

military occupation until 1934.

From 1933 to 1959 Cuba was ruled by a dictatorship which, at various times, was under the leadership of Fulgencio Batista who had seized power as an army sergeant but rose to become a General. Batista fled the country on January 1, 1959 when the rebel army under Fidel Castro, Ernesto "Che" Guevara and Raul Castro, among others, entered Cuba's capital city, Havana. During World War II America seized and built a "strategic military base" at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba. The Bay is still under American control.

In preparing *The power of socialism: the case of Cuba*, I naturally consulted many sources: books, journals, newspapers, unpublished documents, etc. From these, I now isolate three particular publications for mention: *Dynamics of the Cuban Revolution* by Joseph Hansen; *Socialism in Cuba* by Leo Huberman and Paul M. Sweezy; and *The economic transformation of Cuba* by Edward Boorstein. Most of the data and statistics in the remaining part of this piece were taken from these books.

Until January 1, 1959, Cuba was an American colony in every respect, except in name. On the eve of that date sugar accounted for two-thirds of the national income and 80 per cent of exports. But for the workers in this dominant sector of the economy, employment existed each year only for four months. The United States controlled 99 per cent of Cuban refineries, 90 per cent of Cuban mines, 90 per cent of Cuban cattle ranches and 80 per cent of Cuban utilities. Furthermore, private American investments totaled \$850 million, while earnings on those investments totaled \$77 million in 1957. In 1958, 70 per cent of Cuba's external

trade was with the United States, a trade relationship which between 1950 and 1960 yielded a balance of one billion dollars in favour of the United States. But American investments in Cuba together employed less than one per cent of the population.

On the eve of the revolution, 75 per cent of all cultivated land was held by 8 per cent of the population and "about 700,000 peasants had no land at all". With particular reference to the working class: "Of the total Cuban labour force of 2,204,000 some 361,000 were permanently unemployed throughout 1957, 150,000 were employed in unremunerated labour, e.g., as domestic servants, working for their meals and longings. Of 1,539,000 Cubans painfully employed, 954,000 earned less than \$75 a month in a nation where the peso was at par with the dollar and had even less purchasing power in Havana than in New York". Pre-revolutionary Cuba, a predominantly agricultural society, had to import its basic foods as a result of the domination of the economy by export-oriented sugar production. The result of American domination of the Cuban economy was abject poverty and misery for the vast majority of the Cuban people.

But what do we mean by poverty and misery in pre-revolutionary Cuba? We mean that: "The vast majority of the Cuban people ate malanga, which is something like a straight potato diet. Sugar cane was a second staple. Thus, they grew up stunted and subject to vitamin deficiency diseases. They lived in huts called BOHIS. No floor, just the bare earth, a roof made of thatch from the royal palm, much appreciated by all kinds of insects. Their clothes more often than not were patched rags; they went barefoot, they went without dental care, losing their teeth when they were still young. And they went without medical care".

The rapid transformation which took place in Cuba after January 1, 1959, was informed by two theses: *First*: "Unless and until the two ruling groups - the foreign and domestic capitalists - are forced to give up their power, property, and privilege, unless the economic and social structures are radically altered, nothing fundamental will be changed. The people will remain hungry" (Leo Huberman and Paul M. Sweezy). *Second*: "The key event in the Cuban Revolution was the capture of state power, through an armed struggle, by a people led by honest and resolute revolutionaries. All other developments followed from this singular act and Cuba's situation" (Edward Boorstein).

Illiteracy was wiped out in four years (1959 - 1962). In 1957, two years before the overthrow of the dictatorship, the population of Cuba was 6.4 million and "school enrollment was about 819,000 or roughly 12.8 per cent" of the population. In 1968, the population had risen to 8 million - an increase of 25 per cent; but school enrollment rose in the same period to 2,209,434 - an increase of almost 170 per cent. Huberman and Sweezy explained the phenomenal transformation in the health sector: "Capitalist medicine is mainly concerned with curing sickness, and this is done magnificently for those who live where the doctors are and have money to pay. Socialist medicine on the other hand, is mainly concerned with preventing illness for all the people, no matter where they live or how low their incomes".

The result: In 1958, Cuba had 57 hospitals; in 1968 the number had risen to 170. In 1958, there was only one hospital with 10 beds in the rural areas. In 1968, the number had risen to 47 hospitals and 1,300 beds. In 1958, there was no polyclinic (health centre) in Cuba in 1968 there were 250. In 1958 there were 6,000 medical doctors in the country (out of whom 2,000 left after the revolution); in 1968, the number had risen to 7,000. The transformation in land ownership was even more phenomenal.

Fifty years of Castroism (2)

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IN his article, 29 years of the Cuban revolution, which appeared in *The Guardian* of January 1, 1988, Ambassador Oladapo Fafowora said: "It is generally acknowledged even by Fidel Castro's worst critics, that phenomenal economic and social reforms have been successfully brought about in Cuba under Castro's leadership. Unemployment has been virtually wiped out. Rents have been eliminated, and illiteracy wiped out. There is no doubt that the conditions of the Cuban people have improved dramatically. There is social justice and equity in today's Cuba. No wonder Fidel Castro is revered and respected in Cuba as a national hero."

He continued: "Fidel Castro has no personal wealth, does not own villas abroad, and has no personal account. Through the force of his own example, he has virtually wiped out corruption in the public life of Cuba. There are no shady deals and no contracts. Health, income levels, and education have grown substantially. There are no beggars in the streets of Cuba". In my comment on the ambassador's article, published six days later, and titled *Telling the truth*, I said: "In addition to the achievements listed by Fafowora, we may add that Cuba is today a nation of well-fed citizens and has a doctor to 400 inhabitants; infant mortality has decreased from 110 per thousand in 1958 to 36; and life expectancy has risen from 46 years in 1958 to 74.2 years".

I went further to note that "Fafowora is not afflicted by 'undue radicalism'. He does not claim to be a Marxist, a communist or a socialist. He cannot be said to be a supporter or adherent of armed struggle through which the Castroite movement came to power in January 1959. Indeed, he appears, at least in his article, to wish fervently that it be avoided in Nigeria. For, addressing himself implicitly to the Nigerian situation in the closing sentence of the article, Fafowora advised: "The military must serve the needs of the people, if violent political and social conflicts are to be averted."

The author was not a poor man; he was

not a "destructive" critic, not a professional agitator or a troublemaker; he was not being "used" by mythical enemies of our system: Foreign or indigenous. He was simply a patriotic Nigerian reporting honestly on what he saw as a senior Nigerian diplomat and a three-time visitor to Cuba. Had Fafowora's article been signed by a professed Marxist, communist or socialist he or she would have been denounced and accused of prescribing violence and *Castroism* for Nigeria.

I ended my review of Fafowora's article by offering an "explanatory note" which appeared in the first installment of the present piece: "The point has to be made over and over again that the main event of the Cuban, revolution was the capture of state power by the popular masses led by honest, committed, selfless and resolute revolutionaries. All other developments, according to Edward Boorstein in his book *The Economic Transformation of Cuba*, follow from this single act and Cuba's situation". Any analyst, commentator or historian who misses this point has missed the road to understanding Cuba under Fidel Castro. He or she will end up either seeing nothing or seeing miracles.

To mark Fidel Castro's 75th birthday anniversary in 2001, I wrote a tribute in which I said: "One day, Castro will be no more. He may die a natural death. He may retire - for, as he once remarked, "even the long distance runner gets tired". The army of assassins maintained since 1961 may succeed. As he grows older, Castro's reflexes may weaken, allowing this to happen. An invasion disguised as a coup may succeed. There may even be an open external attack under one pretext or another. The "international community" will quickly endorse it. But in whatever circumstances the Castro era comes to an end, the struggle of the Cuban people will continue, if need be a *la* South Africa, a *la* Palestine".

(*Fidel Castro at 75*, August 30, 2001).

In *Anticipating Castro's departure* (September 21, 2006), I said: We may conclude by taking a brief look at Fidel Castro's Cuba today, 47 years after the Revolution: The country has an estimated population of 11 million. The economy has not fully recovered from the crisis that set in with the collapse of Cuba's allies in Eastern Europe; but it is rapidly picking up. The official growth rate is put at 10 per cent; even the American CIA conceded that it was as high as 8 per cent in 2005. As remarked by John Harris in *The Guardian Weekly* of August 11, 2006: "Unlike the old states of eastern Europe, the revolution has a few genuine jewels to defend: Chiefly its education system and globally acclaimed healthcare which emphasizes preventive care and locks doctors into their local populations".

The correspondent reported that "average life expectancy in Cuba is 77.3 as against America's 77.4. The rates of infant mortality are similarly close. But, whereas America spends an average of \$5,711 per head per annum, Cuba spends only \$251. And the country has a healthy population. Health care is accessible to all." Harris calls this the "Cuban miracle". Reporting in the August 2006 issues of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Hernando Calro Ospina said that by March 2006, about 25,000 Cuban doctors and other health professionals were working in 68 foreign nations. Complicated and desperate health cases were continuously being sent to Cuba - even from "advanced" countries!

The following not-too-friendly assessments, extracted from the Internet, were made, recently, by the mainstream Euro-American, or Western press. But I am including them here for the purpose of

"completeness". Readers may choose to assess the assessments.

- Raul Castro, the world's longest-serving defence minister, took over as President of Cuba in February 2008, succeeding his ailing brother Fidel, who has been in power for five decades. Raul Castro became acting President 18 months earlier when his brother was incapacitated by ill-health, and was formally named as President by the National Assembly days after Fidel announced his retirement. Fidel Castro, a devotee of Marxist - Leninist theory, brought revolution to Cuba and created the western hemisphere's first communist state. His bearded figure, long speeches, army fatigues and defiance of the United States earned him iconic status across the globe".

- "Under Raul Castro's leadership, Cuba's Revolutionary Armed Forces became one of the most formidable fighting forces in the Third World with combat experience in Africa, where they defeated South Africa's army in Angola in 1987. Known as a good administrator, Raul Castro substantially cut the size of the army after the collapse of Soviet Communism threw Cuba into severe economic crisis. He introduced Western business practices to help make the armed forces self-sufficient. But his choice of first Vice-President came as a shock to those hoping that a new generation might begin shaping the country's future. He picked Machado Ventura - a hardliner politburo member and one of the original leaders of the revolution - as his number two.

- "Although the US has tried hard to get rid of him, President Castro outlasted no fewer than nine American Presidents since he took power in 1959. The Communist leader - known for his long-winded anti-American rhetoric - was born Fidel Alejandro Castro Ruz in 1926 to a wealthy, landowning family. He

received a Jesuit education, and graduated from Havana University as a lawyer. But, shocked by the contrast between his own comfortable lifestyle and the dire poverty of so many others, he became a Marxist-Leninist revolutionary".

- "In April 1961, the US attempted to topple the Castro government by recruiting a private army of Cuban exiles to invade the island. At the Bay of Pigs, Cuban troops repulsed the invaders, killing many and capturing 1,000 later, US reconnaissance planes discovered Soviet missiles on their way to sites in Cuba. The world was suddenly confronted with the possibility of all-out nuclear war. The superpowers stood eyeball to eyeball, but it was the Soviet leader who gave way, pulling his missiles out of Cuba in return for a secret withdrawal of US weapons from Turkey".

- Cuba has survived more than 40 years of US sanctions intended to topple the government of Fidel Castro. It also defied predictions that it would not survive the collapse of its one-time supporter, the Soviet Union. Since the fall of the US-backed dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista in 1959 Cuba has been a one-party state led by Mr. Castro and - since February 2008 - by his anointed successor, younger brother Raul".

- "The CIA tried to assassinate Fidel Castro - more than 600 times, according to one Cuban minister. The attempts had included getting him to smoke a cigar packed with explosives. Other anti-Castro plots were even more bizarre, including one to make his beard fall out and ridicule him. But Cuba under his rule has made impressive domestic strides: Good medical care is freely available for all, there is 98 per cent literacy, and Cuba's infant mortality rates compare favourably with Western nations. Fidel Castro retains his ability to rattle and irritate the US. He is the David who stood up to the Goliath of America. Even after nearly 50 years, he remains a divisive figure".

The third and final installment of the review will briefly respond to the six assessments sketched here, and re-introduce Ernesto "Che" Guevara.

Fifty years of Castroism (3)

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became a member of the Cuban rebel army, the July 26 Movement. In December 1956, the rebels set sail for Cuba to begin a guerrilla war that ended on January 2, 1959, when they entered and captured Havana.

Che Guevara remained in the leadership of the Cuban revolutionary state and the ruling party until 1964, when he left Cuba for revolutionary combat in the Congo and Bolivia. He was killed in Bolivia on October 9, 1967. One of Che's biographers commented: *It is quite clear that Che Guevara is more alive today than when he lived, for he is the only example in the history of social revolutions of a man having reached the top and then voluntarily started from the bottom again.*

Jean-Paul Satre described Ernesto Che Guevara as, *the most complete man of his time, a man distinguished by the stupendous many-sidedness of his personality: a doctor and an economist, a revolutionary combat soldier and a banker, a military theoretician and an ambassador, a deep political thinker and a popular agitator, able to wield the pen and the sub-machine gun with equal skill, the most important exponent of guerrilla warfare since Mao and Giap, the most romantic revolutionary figure since Leon Trotsky, and perhaps the greatest Latin American since Bolivar.*

In a tribute to him, Fidel Castro said: *Che's writings, his political and revolutionary thinking will be of permanent value in the Cuban revolutionary process and in the Latin American revolutionary process. And we do not doubt that his ideas as a man of action, as a man of thought, as a man of untarnished moral values, as a man of unexcelled human*

him or her there subside.

If what I have said is incomprehensible to you, then shake off American propaganda and look at Cuba with human eyes, the eyes of oppressed peoples that we are. Then you will see that this tiny island has not demobilised since it won its freedom and dignity in 1959. Within 28 months of coming to power, the revolutionary regime had to engage a mercenary force sent from America to overthrow the regime. The attempt - called the Bay of Pigs invasion - failed. And barely a year later, America and the Soviet Union almost fought a nuclear war in and around Cuba. These two incidents led, indirectly, to the state assassination of the American President, John F. Kennedy (1963), and the removal of Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet ruler, from office (1964). Under this situation, the question of multi-partism and change of leadership, whatever its merits, could not arise except through a counter-revolution. And the "credit" for this situation goes, undivided, to American imperialism.

Ernesto Che Guevara was born on June 14, 1928, in Rosario, then the most important city in Argentina after the capital, Buenos Aires. Che was asthmatic from childhood, and had to cope with this ailment for the 39 years he lived. He was a very brilliant student, obtaining his Doctor of Medicine degree from the University of Buenos Aires in March 1953. By the time Che qualified as a medical doctor, he had become a Marxist and a revolutionary socialist. Immediately after his graduation, Che Guevara became an "itinerant" revolutionary, moving from country to country in Latin America, engaging in local struggles and looking for a revolutionary base. Eventually, he met Fidel Castro and his brother, Raul, in Mexico in 1955. He

THIS concluding installment on the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution will be devoted to the "defence" of two of its leaders: Fidel Castro Ruz and Ernesto "Che" Guevara. None of the two is still in office. The former, on account of ill-health, refused to be re-nominated in February 2008 for the office of President of the Council of State while the latter had resigned his state and party positions in 1965, seven years after the Revolution seized power in Cuba and two years before he was killed in a Bolivian jungle. But their influence - nationally, regionally and globally - remains undiminished.

To review the Cuban Revolution is to review the life and career of Fidel Castro, and conversely. This phenomenon is not strange in political history. But Fidel Castro is unique in that historical phenomenon. We have attempted to do this double review in the first two installments. But then, no review of the Cuban Revolution, however brief, can be complete without the mention of the world-historic revolution icon called Che Guevara. I shall therefore briefly sketch (or rather, conclude) my defence of Castro and then turn attention to Che Guevara.

Fidel Castro is accused mainly by American rulers, their ideologues and their media of being in office for too long and not permitting "Democracy" in Cuba. By this, they mean specifically that he did not allow political "competition" against the ruling Communist Party. My answer here is what it has always been, namely: that Cuba has been in a state of military alert and mobilisation since the triumph of the revolution 50 years ago. And the whole population is the army. You don't organise "parties" and factions in an army that is engaged in combat, and you don't remove a capable and committed military commander simply because he or she has been in that position for too long - even when all the conditions that put

for our separation. I want it to be known that I do this with a mixture of joy and sorrow. Once again, let me say that I absolve Cuba from any responsibility, except for that which stems from the example it has set. If my final hour comes under distant skies, my last thoughts will be for this people and especially for you. I thank you for your teaching and your example, and will try to be faithful up to the final consequences of my acts.

In the letter to his family, Che Guevara said: *Almost 10 years ago, I wrote you another letter of farewell. As I recall, I regretted not being a better soldier and a better doctor. I no longer care about the latter, but I am not such a bad soldier, now. In essence, nothing has changed, except that I am much more conscious; my Marxism has been deepened and purified. I believe in armed struggle as the only solution for people who are fighting for freedom, and I act according to this belief. Many will call me an adventurer, and I am, but of a different kind one who risks his skin in order to prove his convictions. Perhaps this will be my last letter. It is not my intention, but it is within the realm of logical probability. So, I send you a last embrace.*

On April 16, 1967, a message from Guevara was published in Havana by the Executive Secretariat of the Organisation of the Solidarity of the people of Africa, Asia and Latin America (OSPAAAL). In the concluding paragraph of that message, he said: *Our every action is a battle cry against imperialism, and a battle hymn for the people's unity against the great enemy of mankind: the United States of America. Whenever death may surprise us, let it be welcome, provided that this our battle cry may have reached some receptive ear and another hand may be extended to wield our weapons and other people be ready to intone the funeral dirge with the staccato singing of the machine guns and new battle cries of war and victory.*

sensitivity, as a man of spotless conduct, have and will continue to have universal value. Later, Castro told an American journalist that if Che had been a Roman Catholic, he would have been made a saint.

During his tour of Algeria in 1965, Che told a large audience in Algiers: *There are no frontiers in this struggle to the death. We cannot remain indifferent in the face of what occurs in any part of the world. A victory for any country against imperialism is our victory, just as any country's defeat is a defeat for all. The practice of proletarian internationalism is not only a duty for the peoples who struggle for a better future, it is also an inescapable necessity.*

In his letter to Castro when he was leaving Cuba in 1965, Che said: *I feel I have fulfilled that part of my duty which bound me to the Cuban Revolution on its own territory, and I bid farewell to you, to the comrades, and to your people who are now mine. I formally renounce my duties in the national leadership of the party, my post as minister, my rank of major and my Cuban citizenship. I have no legal ties to Cuba, only ties of a different kind which cannot be dissolved as official positions can, I have lived through some magnificent days, and at your side I have felt the pride of belonging to our people during those radiant yet sad days of the Caribbean crisis. Not often has a statesman acted more brilliantly than you did during those days, and I am so proud of having followed you unhesitatingly, identifying with your ways of thinking and realising the dangers and principle of our position.*

But then: *Other nations are calling for my modest efforts. I can do what you are unable to do because of your responsibility as Cuban leader. The time has come*