

EQUIPO DE COORDINACIÓN Y APOYO AL COMANDANTE EN JEFE: CUBA'S PARALLEL GOVERNMENT?

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Fidel Castro, who is in his forty-second year in power and domination of Cuba's political landscape, has utilized different political mechanisms to ensure his dictum over the Cuban polity. Among these mechanisms have been institutional conflict, rivalry and the use of parallel structures of government that have been the successful keys in perpetuating his unilateral hold of Cuba's government.

The Equipo de Coordinación y Apoyo al Comandante en Jefe (Coordination and Support Staff—GCA)¹ is a parallel structure of government that has been, from its inception, Fidel Castro's executive staff implementing and executing his policy initiatives for the country. It functions as a parallel structure of government that answers to only Castro and is an extension of his power.

Exactly what is the Staff? Why was it created? Are there historical examples for the use of such a mechanism? Who makes up this group? How are they selected? Does the Staff dare advise Castro or do they function as a group who just carry out his personal whims?

This paper will analyze the Staff as a parallel structure that functions as a government. The first section will give a brief overview of structures and functions within a political system. The second section will ad-

dress the Staff as a structure and its function within Cuba's government. The final section contains the conclusion.

STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION OF THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

In any type of political system there are numerous components that collectively make a whole and gives the system a balance. Gabriel Almond believes that "anything we call a system must necessarily have two properties: it has a set of independent parts, and it has boundaries towards the environment with which it interacts."² These parts act independently or in unison to achieve their desired tasks within their capability. H.V. Wiseman suggests:

Any political system involves political structures, political roles performed by actors or agents, patterns of interaction between actors, whether individuals or collectives, and a political process. This is, basically, a continuous series of patterns of interaction between political actors, in which leaders secure the support they need, and get their followers to accept restrictions (power and influence are important considerations here), while followers procure direction and decisions, and give the necessary support.³

Political structures are one of the many components that make up a political system. Almond believes:

1. See, e.g., Central Intelligence Agency, *Directory of Officials of the Republic of Cuba* (Washington, D.C.: National Foreign Assessment Center, 1989), p. 41.

2. Gabriel A. Almond, et al. *Comparative Politics: A Theoretical Framework*. 3rd Ed. (New York: Longman, 2001), p. 17.

3. H.V. Wiseman. *Political Systems: Some Sociological Approaches* (New York: Praeger Publishers), p. 98.

There is no such thing as a society that maintains internal and external order, which has no “political structure”—i.e., legitimate patterns of interaction by means of which this order is maintained...all types of political structures which are found in the non-Western and primitive ones. The interactions, or the structures, may be occasional or intermittent.⁴

The order maintained, as Almond describes, centers on the capacity of the structure to allocate the authoritative means to function in the polity.

The presence of structure gives a foundation to any system. Therefore, a stable dynamic in a political system exists because of that structure. David Easton argues, “the structures of political regimes come in many different shapes and forms—as democracies, dictatorships, or monarchies, as absolutist, constitutional, republican, developing, traditional types, and the like.”⁵

Functions are just as important because they are the action of a structure. “The functioning of any system may be viewed on different levels. One level of functioning is the system’s capabilities, that is, the way it performs as a unit in its environment.”⁶ These actions illustrate the interaction of structures within a political system. “Governments in other words, as concrete groups also have integrative, pattern-maintenance, and even economic (or adaptive), as well as goal-attainment functions. Here we have the basis at least of our separate consideration of ‘the political system’ and its functions and structures.”⁷

COORDINATION AND SUPPORT STAFF

The Staff is a group of about 20 individuals who serve Fidel Castro and with his authority carry out his conceived programs and tasks. Their offices are located in the Palace of the Revolution (Palacio de la Revolución). Gustavo Pérez-Cott⁸ asserts, “the team is nothing more than a reflection of the personality of the direction of the Revolution, the direction of the Cuban state in the hands of Fidel, that responds to his egocentrism.”⁹ Norberto Fuentes, author of *Dulces Guerreros Cubanos* and linked to Fidel Castro’s intelligence service until his departure from Cuba in 1994, states: “the group is an organization that gives an official and legal body to Fidel’s desires ... [it was] created as an institution to support everything he wants.”¹⁰ Carlos Cajaraville, an ex-captain of Cuba’s counterintelligence service who defected to the United States in 1995 adds: “many of the tasks, special plans and ideas created by the Commander needed direct attention from the point of view of assuring their immediate completion.”¹¹ In essence, the Staff is the structure capable of executing the tasks set forth by Castro.

Exactly where does this Staff fit within the Cuban government’s structure? In 1999, the author, under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), requested from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) all documents dealing with the Staff. The Agency rejected the request citing it cannot reveal its sources and methods. However, the author obtained under the mentioned FOIA from the U.S. Department of State

4. Gabriel A. Almond and James S. Coleman, eds, *The Politics of Developing Areas*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1960), p. 11.

5. David Easton, *The Analysis of Political Structure* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 11.

6. Almond and Powell. *Comparative Politics: System, Process, and Policy*, p. 28.

7. Wiseman, *Political Systems: Some Sociological Approaches*, p. 106.

8. Vice-Minister of the Cuban State Committee for Technical and Material Supplies (Comité Estatal de Abastecimiento Técnico-Material) until he defected in 1988 when he was returning to Cuba from Romania as head of the Cuban delegation to the last session of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON). COMECON was an organization that was created by the Soviet Union in 1949 to coordinate economic policy among nations under Communist domination. The organization was active from 1956 to 1991. For an assessment of COMECON see Lee Kendall Metcalf, *The Council of Mutual Economic Assistance: The Failure of Reform* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

9. Radio Martí, “Cuba Sin Censura,” Entrevista con Gustavo Pérez-Cott sobre el Grupo de Coordinación y Apoyo, Transcript, 1989.

10. Norberto Fuentes, Telephone Interview by author, 11 July 2001.

11. Carlos Cajaraville, Electronic mail Interview by author, 28 June 2001.

Central Foreign Policy Records a diplomatic cable from the U.S. Interests Section categorizing the “Coordination and Support Staff under the President in the section dealing with the Council of Ministers.”¹² The Staff is not officially defined by the Cuban government in its publications. The CIA up until 1989 made available to the public its Directory of Officials of the Republic of Cuba; it listed the Staff as reporting to the President in the section dealing with the Council of Ministers and listed a total of six members, including a chief.

Origins

Fidel Castro created the Staff in 1975 when the Russians, after the failure of the 1970 sugar harvest, forced him to institutionalize the public administration and political system following the Soviet pattern. Castro gave them the impression of ceding, but to continue running Cuba as a caudillo, he created this group and through it retained control of the government.¹³ Enrique Baloyra and Roberto Lozano suggest that, “by the late 1970s the Soviets were more preoccupied with improving Cuba’s dismal and costly economic performance, and correcting deviations from the central-command planning system implemented in the rest of the socialist world. Most likely, the midterm objective pursued by Soviet policy makers was the institutionalization of Cuba’s political and economic system and its integration as a full member of the socialist community of states.”¹⁴ However, Pérez-Cott submits that the Staff was created “at the beginning of the 1980s, with five or six comrades that all came from the National Assembly. They were chosen from the National Assembly for a job that was not exactly the same as the one they car-

ried out. Fidel understood that it was convenient for this to continue and he expanded the rank of activities to be carried out.”¹⁵

The use of parallel structures by Fidel Castro dates back to the Sierra Maestra. Fuentes argues that, “the conception of this group is found in the Sierra Maestra—it was the way he directed operations. He would give missions to his commanders that at times were contradictory and he would create rivalries between commanders, e.g., one would conspire against Batista’s army while the other would conspire against the Americans—it is a way to govern by conspiracy.”¹⁶ An example of a type of parallel structure that was very much a parallel government was the Office of Revolutionary Plans and Coordination¹⁷ (Oficina de Planes y Coordinación Revolucionaria), operated as a secret task force carrying out fundamental policy assignments for Castro—e.g., the creation of a new agrarian reform law.

Members and Their Selection

The Staff is the route to the pinnacle of Cuba’s government. Its most notable members have been Carlos Lage Dávila (Vice-president of the Council of State) who at one time was its chief; Yadira García Vera (Member of the Politburo); Marcos Javier Portal León (Minister of Basic Industry); and Felipe Pérez Roque (Minister of Foreign Affairs), who also served as head of the Staff. The Cuban government’s web site lists Wilfredo López Rodríguez¹⁸ as the Staff’s present chief; however Carlos Valenciaga Díaz,¹⁹ who in 1999 assumed the role of Fidel Castro’s personal secretary, is also a member and perhaps might be the Staff’s new chief. Roberto Damián Alfonso

12. U.S. Department of State, Unclassified Cable 02599 from the U.S. Interests Section, La Habana, dated May 3, 1985.

13. Ernesto F. Betancourt, Personal correspondence, Electronic mail, 16 November 1999.

14. Enrique A. Baloyra and Roberto Lozano, “Soviet-Cuban Relations: The New Environment and Its Impact,” in *Conflict and Change in Cuba*. Eds. Enrique A. Baloyra and James A. Morris (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), p. 271.

15. Radio Martí, *ibid.*

16. Fuentes, *ibid.*

17. See Tad Szulc, *Fidel: A Critical Portrait* (New York: Post Road Press, 1986), p. 476 and Guy Gugliotta, “Gobierno paralelo dió control a Castro,” *El Nuevo Herald*, 19 de Octubre 1986.

18. <<http://cubagob.cu/gobierno/cur-min.htm>>

19. Pablo Alfonso. Personal correspondence. Electronic mail. 12 December 1999.

González²⁰ has also been mentioned as a current member.

Careful attention is given to individuals who are chosen to become a member of the Staff. They generally originate from communist youth organizations.²¹ Pérez-Cott further explains:

Men and women are chosen who have labored with determined attitude in these entities and who the direction of the Revolution, specifically Fidel, considers have sufficient merit to be part of the team on which he depends. They are his eyes and ears in what occurs in important factories and in important businesses. But in practice, this is only a mechanism that seeks to exalt, elevate and idolize the personality of Fidel. Through this mechanism, it gives answers and solutions to the problems that have been affecting production, services or health, etc., and then miraculously these persons are known to those who visit them as directly linked to Fidel and later come with the solution to their material problems and in that manner Fidel's personality is exalted and glorified.²²

Fuentes states that “young individuals are recruited because of their school record, individuals who were thinkers, who have reached conclusions and share Fidel Castro's philosophy of what government was.” Felipe Pérez Roque, Cuba's Foreign Minister, as a child showed exceptional talent as a chess player and was groomed from the time he was very young in communist youth organizations; he became Castro's personal secretary and later led the Staff. The Lenin School (Escuela Vocacional V.I. Lenin) is an elitist school that has provided a solid technical and professional formation to thousands of Cuban youngsters who today occupy positions of responsibility in the political and administrative apparatus of the regime.²³

Functions

In executing the tasks set forth by Fidel Castro, the Staff makes its power known within the government bureaucracy. Pérez-Cott illustrates in the following commentary a function of the staff that protects Castro's image:

An anecdote that illustrates the root of Fidel's interest is the gigantic pothole problem of the City of Havana in 1982. He would meet with the Party leadership in the city and constitute what would be called a working group to attend to the city's problems that he would support and finance. At that time, Marcos Portal, the present Minister of Basic Industry, was a member of the Group, and we would visit some pothole work brigades. And I remember there were workers with powerful jackhammers who had no ear protectors. Marcos would visit them and ask them—in the name of the Commander-In-Chief—what was the problem, what was needed, and what were their limitations. The workers said that they needed gloves, ear protectors for noise from the jackhammers. Immediately, in the same afternoon, as a member of the Ministry of Supplies I had all of the ear protectors, gloves and the rest of the resources in hand for that brigade.²⁴

Carlos Cajaraville, who also worked with the Staff, relates with regard to its functions:

The group was the direct thread between the different economic sectors and the Comandante. These persons investigated many reports made by the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) militancy about aspects of the economy. Yadira [García] for a long time attended to the sugar harvest and many times our inspection visits would coincide at the same places. This is another example of the enormous bureaucracy of the socialist economy. For example, the Sugar Minister had delegates in all the provinces that would raise the ur-

20. See Pedro Mora, “Homenaje en Bayamo al Padre de la Patria,” *Granma Internacional Digital* <<http://www.granma.cu/documento/espanol01/011-e.html>>, 28 Febrero 2001.

21. Ernesto F. Betancourt, “Necesidades de Asistencia Técnica Para La Transformación Democrática E Institucional Durante La Transición en Cuba,” Seminario Sobre Preparación Para El Cambio En Cuba, Rutgers University y Cuba-On-Line, 3-4 de Mayo 1999, p. 11.

22. Radio Martí, *ibid.*

23. See Pablo Alfonso, “Discriminación en una escuela élite,” *El Nuevo Herald Digital*, 11 Junio 2001 and the school's web site <<http://www.lalenin.com>>.

24. Radio Martí, *ibid.*

gent necessities through the administrative and party routes. Osmani [Cienfuegos] would send us through the Council of Ministers and Fidel would send a member of the Coordination Group to inform and verify the real situation.²⁵

An example of how the Staff addresses Castro's special projects has been in the biotechnology field. This industry is managed under the direct supervision of Castro, with his personal Support and Coordination Group acting parallel to the formal chain of command.²⁶

A recent example of the Staff's activity and function has been the decision of the Politburo of the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) to create a series of commissions directed by members of the Coordination and Support Staff to oversee the political control of the population and the radicalization of repressive measures.²⁷

CONCLUSION

Fidel Castro's Coordination and Support Staff is a government within a government. It was created as a parallel structure by Castro to guarantee his policies and desires are implemented. To skirt the institu-

tional structures of government, Castro relies on the Staff to accomplish the tasks he conceives.

Membership in the Staff is selective and is the path to power within the Cuban political system. Members are part of an elite endowed with political authority behind them. When they are called to the field, they represent Castro. In one swift order, a member of the Staff can overturn the decision of a government minister that Castro feels is not serving him—whether it is the construction of a beer factory or a task devised by the Maximum Leader. Norberto Fuentes states, “when members of the Staff exercise their authority, everyone bows in their presence.”²⁸ That is why other government officials resent them and their power.

The authority of Fidel Castro lies with this Staff. The use of a parallel structure stems from his days in the Sierra Maestra, where he would pit one commander against another to maximize the realization of his desires. A process of political and economic institutionalization of the Cuban state made this Staff an important extension of his power as a caudillo. The Staff serves Castro's whims and does not dare to be an advisor but rather projects his objectives and desires. Fidel Castro is the sole arbiter of power and the Staff assists him in its execution.

25. Cajaraville, *ibid.*

26. See Ernesto F. Betancourt, “The Encephalitis Outbreak, Hussein and Castro: A CIA/CDC Cover-up? *CubaNet* <<http://cubanet.org/opi/11099901.htm>>, 9 Noviembre 1999.

27. Pablo Alfonso, “Se recrudescen el control político,” *El Nuevo Herald Digital*, 13 junio 2001.

28. Fuentes, *ibid.*