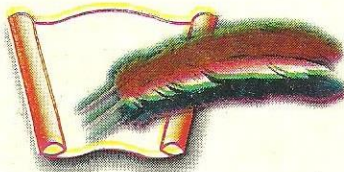


Vol. 4, No 1, March, 2004



The **Constitution**

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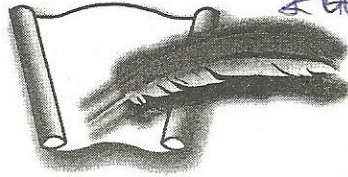
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**Centre for Constitutionalism &
Demilitarsation (CENCOD)**

**Published by
Centre for Constitutionalism and Demilitarisation
(CENCOD)**

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ISSN 1595-5753

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Printed in Nigeria by:

Panaf Press

26, Ogungbamila Street,
Akoka, Bariga,
Lagos.

E-mail: olapanaf@yahoo.com

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THE CUBAN REVOLUTION AND AFRICA: A RETROSPECT

P. F. Adebayo

'CUBA IS A LATIN – AFRICAN COUNTRY, AFRICAN BLOOD FLOWS FREELY IN OUR VEINS' – FIDEL CASTRO

INTRODUCTION

In these eternally valid words of the Cuban revolutionary leader, Fidel Castro, we could discern succinctly not only the historical connection between Cuba and Africa but also the compelling force as well as the *raison d'être* for Castro's internationalist revolutionary adventure and other undertakings in Africa. Indeed, right from the 1960s Cuba had started manifesting its readiness to engage in military and other socio-economic activities in Africa. Such military undertakings which in Castro's eyes represented "the national results of our principle, our ideology, our convictions and our own blood"², were for instance, successfully manifested during the Angolan and Namibia wars of independence in 1975 and 1989 respectively. In addition, Cuba's role in the decolonisation process of Africa especially of these two countries (Angola and Namibia) culminating in

their independence heralded Cuba as a factor to be reckoned with in the history of liberation struggle in Africa. Besides, Cuba's model of integration which was an instrument for co-ordinating and mobilizing people from grass root into an effective overall development plan was copied by some African countries such as Mozambique, Angola and Guinea Bissau.³

However, in spite of these achievements of Cuba in Africa, there were occasions when its policies floundered. These were evident in the provision of military and technical assistance to the regimes of the late president Francisco Macias Nguema of Equatorial Guinea and President Idi Amin of Uganda in the 1970s. Finally, the collapse of the former Soviet Union which culminated on the democratization process in Eastern Europe, Latin America and some African countries in 1990s diminished completely Cuba's activities in Africa as we shall see later.⁴

It is against this background, that the paper undertakes a retrospective

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examination of the Cuban revolution in Africa in the 20th century just as we begin the 21st century. However, the paper begins by highlighting briefly the historical background of the revolutionary situation in Cuba before discussing the impact of the revolution in Africa.

A SYNOPSIS OF THE PRE-REVOLUTIONARY SITUATION

Cuba is a republic occupying the largest Island in the Caribbean Sea. When Columbus discovered the Island of Cuba on October 24th 1492, it was inhabited by 2000,000 Indians, the Ciboney and the Taino speaking Arawak. Diego Velazquez acting under authority of the Spanish crown, brought the island under effective control by 1513. By 1515 seven Spanish towns among them Santiago and Havana had been founded⁶. Cuba remained under Spanish colonial rule from 1515–1898. The war of independence in Cuba lasted thirty years (1868-1898). Carlos Manuel de Céspedes led a Cuban Army of Liberation against Spanish presence in Cuba. After the attainment of independence from Spain in 1898, the American business class controlling the government in Washington moved into Cuba and dominated the its economy from 1898 to 1959. The U.S. consolidated its control of Cuba's economy through the Cuban constitution of 1907, which confirmed

the U.S.A. right to intervene militarily in Cuba if the political situation deteriorated. This right (the Platt Amendment) was valid until 1934 when it was abrogated in return for a trade agreement. U.S. marines intervened in 1906, 1912 – 13, 1917 and 1933 and during and after the Second World War the American built up a strategic base on the land leased out at Guantanamo.

However, disputed presidential elections and veiled dictatorships threatened anarchy intermittently between 1906 and 1933. The rule of Batista from 1933 to 1934 was succeeded by two inefficient, corrupt but nominally democratic presidencies under Grau San Martín (1944 – 48) and Prío Socarrás (1948 – 52). Batista returned in 1952 and his corrupt administration created social problems in which the blacks were at the pedestrian level of the society as shown in table below:

Middle class 86,000 professional's, 90,00 Executive and directors of companies 6,000 civil servants, 120,000 salesmen, 140,000 office workers.

Lower middle class 200,000 street vendors, waiter dancers in night clubs 400,000 unionised workers. 70,000 domestic servants.

Bottom class 600,00 landless seasonal cane cutters. 200,000 families renting

squatting on land. 5,000 beggars and unknown prostitutes.

Source: High Thomas, "*Cuba or the pursuit of freedom*", Eyre + spotiswoode, London 1991, pp.1109-1112.5.

Accentuating these problems was the open unemployment, which according to Seers was 16 percent in 1956/57. Poverty was equally widespread with a large fraction of the population that were illiterate and undernourished especially in the large rural families. This was not however due to inadequate national income, which at about \$5,000 per head was quite high enough to make acute poverty unnecessary⁶.

But the inefficient method of the distribution of this income had worsened the poverty situation in the country. The Batista administration become so tyrannical that in 1957 the U.S. Government cut off supplies of arms to Cuba and encouraged the resistance movement of Fidel Castro. Earlier, the Cubans had made several attempts to free themselves from U.S. neo-colonial rule as shown by the first Cuban communist party under the leadership of the great grandson of an African slave Blas Roca and the confederation of Cuban workers (CTC) led by another African descendant, Lazaro Pena, just to

mention a few. However, the revolution triumphed on the 1st of January, 1959 when the Rebel Army led by Castro Camilo Cine Fuegos, Juan Aleld (a black Cuban), etc, captured Havana, the capital of Cuba and set up a revolutionary government. Although the success of the revolution led to a deteriorating relationship between the U.S. and Cuba, the impact of the revolution was felt politically, economically and socially in Africa and the third world⁷, as we shall see later.

The success of the revolution was due to a number of factors. One of these was the high level of honesty, dedication and hardwork of the Cuban leaders. As a result of this, the leadership had been able to manage the foreign exchange realized from the sale of its sugar cane in the world market. The fund has been well managed to establish the best health and education systems in the World. Secondly, there is constant interaction and frank exchange of views between Cuban people, mass organisations and Cuban leaders. Thirdly, the role of Cuban Communist Party as a political organization that has consistently translated into concrete practice the aspirations of the vast majority of the Cuban people. These were admittedly the main secrets behind the success of the revolution.

THE REVOLUTION AND AFRICA

The impact of the revolution in Cuba was soon felt in Africa. Indeed after the success of the Cuban revolution, Castro expected that he would spread it to Latin America and other third world African countries. This objective is even more explicitly stated in Article 12 of the Cuban constitution. Accordingly, Cuba espouses the principles of proletarian internationalism and of the combative solidarity of the peoples⁸. Castro's disillusionment with the prospect for revolutionary changes on Latin America during the late 1960s and early 70s made him to turn his attention to Africa. According to Castro's own assessment, 'Africa is the weakest domination of imperialism today. Imperialist domination is not as strong here as in Latin America. Therefore, the possibility for fundamental changes on the African continent is real'⁹. This assertion of Castro of imperialism in African was wrong because imperialism has a very strong hold in Africa and today imperialist domination in African is till as strong as ever. But despite this Castro's faulty news on the strength of imperialism in the African continent, he went on to embark on his expansionist military programmes in Africa.

Consequently, within two years of his coming to power in 1961 Castro began his revolutionary adventure in Africa by

setting up a guerilla training base in Ghana, and that base stayed in operation until Kwame Nkrumah was overthrown by the military in February, 1966.¹⁰ Cuban combat troops were also deployed in Algeria in 1963 – 65 during that country's border conflict with Morocco. Also Che' Guevara led a contingent of Cuban guerillas into Zaire and then into Congo- Brazzaville in 1965-66, prior to taking up the struggle in Bolivia.¹¹

Furthermore, during 1965-66, Cuba established a large advisory military mission in Congo Brazzaville. It was this mission that quash a Congolese army revolt in June 1966. In 1966, Havana began to furnish military aid to the regime of late President Ahmed Seiko Toure in Guinea including personnel to man Sekou Toure's new military Guard. In 1972, Havana equally dispatched new military missions to Sierra Leone as well as Somalia in 1974 and Algerian in 1975.¹² In fact Cuba collaborated with Algeria in backing Polisario, the Liberation Movement fighting for the independence of mineral rich Western Saharawi now called Sahara Arab Democratic Republic.

But it was the Angola war of independence beginning from the middle of the 1970s in which Cuba successfully participated with the former Soviet Union that provided logistic

support for Angola that popularised Cuba as a factor to be reckoned within the history of 'Liberation Struggles' in Africa. Indeed, the heroic involvement of the Cubans in the Angola war of independence endeared Cubans to the heart of many Africans especially as the Cubans fought gallantly along side the Angolans for the attainment of Angola independence. The Angola undertaking and other Cuban activities in African according to Castro "represented the national result of our principles, our ideology, our conviction and our own blood."¹³

Hitherto, Angola along with Mozambique, Guinea Bissau, Cape Verde Island, Sao Tome and Principe has remained under Portuguese Colonialism for centuries. But with particular reference to Angola after the fall of Marcello Caetano's regime in Lisbon, Portugal, altered the situation in Angola, for it opened up the possibility of Angola's gaining independence in the foreseeable future. However, it was not until the fall of 1974 with the ouster of General Antonio de Spínola as head of the revolutionary military government in Portugal did it become certain that independence loomed nearer for the Angolans. The national liberation movement there, unlike those in the other Portuguese African territories, consisted of three rival sub-movements: the Frente

Nacional de Libertacao de Angola (National Front for the Liberation of Angola or FNLA), Union National Pro independence Total de Angola or UNITA) and Movement popular de Liberation of Angola or MPLA). The FNLA was established by Holden Roberto and it had concentrated base on the Bakongo which is one of the largest in the country and whose branches even spread over to Zaire, while Jonas Savimbi established UNITA in March 1966 comprising mainly of members of his own Ovimbundu tribe which also constitutes one of the largest ethnic groups in Angola. On the other hand, the MPLA was founded by Agostino Neto.¹⁴ Of all the three parties the MPLA found a massive and grassroots support in Angola. The rank and file members of the MPLA came from a variety of quarters—primarily from a mixed blood mulattoes in Luanda and other big cities and from the Kimbundu people in North central Angola¹⁵.

Fidel Castro had been a supporter of the MPLA and a close friend of Neto for a number of years. It was against this background of long years of friendship that made president Neto to request for military assistance from Cuba. Accordingly, Cuban forces started to arrive in Angola as from May 1975 and by late September and October a combination of Cuban and

Soviet ships began to carry thousands of Cuban soldiers to Angola. The similarity of the physical environment of Angola to that of Cuba and presence of a substantial number of black mullato soldiers in the Cuban armed forces enabled Cuban troops to get acclimatized quickly and function effectively with MPLA soldiers. The Cuban and Soviet support assisted the MPLA in defeating the combined forces of FNLA, UNITA and South African forces. Cuban soldiers enabled other African countries, in fact, the O.A.U. to back the MPLA government of Agostinho Neto. It was in this way that Cuba facilitated the independence of Angola that was attained on 12th December, 1976. The total casualties suffered by Cubans in the Angola debacle were great. In the issue of the prestigious *African Confidential Comment*, there was a report of the Angolan Government stating that about 3,400 Cubans were dead in three years (1986 – 1989).¹⁶ However, in the eleven years Cuba fought in Angola, it may have suffered close to 10,000 casualties¹⁷.

Since its Angolan exploits, Cuba has mounted its own diplomatic, economic and military offensive in Africa. For instance, Castro toured African countries for one month in the spring of 1977 and also visited North African in the late summer of 1978. Havana

received delegations led by late Neto, Mengistu, late Joshua Nkomo and Castro prepared technical training ground to Angola and other African school children. Cuba also stationed new economic and technical aid missions in several African states as a further demonstration of its commitment to assist African countries. It equally dispatched military advisers to Mozambique, Zambia and Angola to train guerrilla contingents for the armed struggles over Zimbabwe and Namibia independence respectively. Havana increased its military presence in Angola to an estimated 19,000 - 20,000 during 1977 after a partial pull out in order to shore up the late Neto government in the face of mounting internal resistance. By late March, 1978, Cuba had dispatched some 16,000 combat troops and other military personnel to Ethiopia to help the Mengistu regime repel the Somali invasion and consolidate, its hold on Ethiopia (excluding Eritrea)¹⁸. However, its assistance to liberation struggles' in other parts of Africa met with dismal failure.¹⁹

But by 1989 the presence of its troops in Angola was used by the former administration of United States President Ronald Reagan and former apartheid government of South Africa in obstructing the Namibian independence through the philosophy of 'constructive engagement'²⁰. The policy

of constructive engagement was initiated by Chester Crocker former U.S Assistant Secretary of State, for African affairs during the era of former U.S. president, Ronald Reagan (1981-1988) According to Crocker, 'Washington should work closely with former apartheid South Africa rather than ostracizing it'.²¹ By doing so, Crocker believed that the former apartheid South African government will be readily induced to reform apartheid and leave Namibia. Indeed, with reference to Namibia, Crocker stressed that the process of decolonisation could be hastened through a rapprochement with South African which was believed to hold the key to any settlement on the issue. Crocker also stated that the U.S would insist on linkage of the Namibia issue to the Cuba presence in Angola.

African leaders would have to basis for resisting the Namibian/Angola linkage once they are made to realize that they can only get a Namibian settlement through us.²²

This was the belief of Chester Crocker and his followers. But this belief that by embracing apartheid the U.S would make South Africa to reform apartheid and leave Namibian was erroneous. Not only did South Africa refuse to reform apartheid, she also failed to leave Namibia South Africa went further to institutionalize her stay in Namibia by

establishing an interim government that was condemned by the international community. South Africa's stay in Namibia was also delayed through the linkage of Namibia independence to the Cuban presence in Angola.²³ It however took the heroic stand of the Cuban soldiers who fought gallantly along side the Angolan MPLA forces to defeat the South Africa forces around Cuito Cuanavale in May 1988, before Namibia independence could be ensured through series of negotiations. The negotiation began in May 1988 with the U.S represented by Crocker as the mediating force. By August 1988, South Africa, Angola and Cuba merely signed an agreement to (i) implement resolution 435 opening the way for Namibian independence (ii) a time table for Cuban withdrawal linked to South African withdrawal from Namibia²⁴. It was on this may that Cuba again contributed great to the process of decolonization in Namibia. The involvement of the Cuba/Soviet forces on the Angolan and Namibian war of independence raises the fundamental question of why African liberation movements have had to depend on external assistance. According to Albright the trend towards externalization of African conflicts is symptomatic of the continuing weakness of the continent's own political system, in particular of the inability of the formal organisation of African country (OAU)

to resolve African disputes.²⁵ This gave rise to the issue of African high command in the 1980s and 1990s. This issue also gave credence to the need to review the former OAU charter as well as the novel idea of establishing an African military force.

Be that as it may, Cuba's concept of national integration which has affected its development and has also had an impact on Africa needs to be emphasized. Underlying process of integration is the strategic notion 'that a new integration by shared political intelligence and political analysis must take place across the population evoking out of people new creative energies and creative sacrifices'.²⁶ In order to do this, the old elitist format of sharing serious political, economic and cultural information only among permanent functionaries, members of parliament academic and professionals and the middle class in general must be replaced by a mass centered medium of political communication.²⁷ This obviously means the involvement of the masses in guerilla politics.²⁸

This phenomenon of mass participation in guerrilla politics as the basis of power and the defence of the revolution was also manifested in economic, educational, health and sport activities. The economic aspect of this integration has had to do with the involvement of

the Cubans in developing their own economy. This was clearly shown when for instance the U.S. imposed an economic blockade on Cuba, so as to prevent the entry of spare parts into the country. This strategy became the mother of inventions in Cuba. For example Jose Abdala Sanchez invented a piece for rectifying the tubing used in the electric power plant turbines, his design turning out to be an improvement on the U.S. original²⁹. As Fidel puts it 'the greatest thing the Revolution has done is the cultivation and deepening of the 'awareness and the spirit of our people''³⁰.

The health sector was also involved in national integration and development. Castro has developed advanced medical services that has also benefited African countries tremendously. Indeed, its advanced medical care is evidenced by the impressive manner it has tackled its health problems. In 1958 a total of 228 women (125.3 per 100,000 live births) women died in child birth. By 1978 the proportion had been reduced to 50.6 per 100,000. In 1958, the infant mortality rate was 60 – 80 per 1000 are births, by 1979 it was 24.6 per 1000, the lowest in Latin America! Polio which averaged 300 cases a year was eliminated in 1963. Malaria (which previously affected 3000 every year) was eliminated in 1965³¹. Before 1959 tetanus averaged 1000 cases but by

1979 there were less than 60 cases³². Today Cuba has a ratio of one medical doctor per 250 inhabitants, while life expectancy is set at 75 years of age. Indeed a commentator for the regime asserted thus³³

...the Revolution's most important achievement in the field of medical care in the course of the last two decade has been the creation of a nation wide state health system, which provides free services to the whole population and scientifically plans and puts into effect the entire systems activities in an integrated fashion, giving priority to prevention program...

The African countries that have benefited from its medical services include Niger where there are 29 Cuban doctors, Gambia 158 doctors with about 126 practitioners, five dentists, 25 nurses and two technicians.³⁴ The doctors in Africa have assisted in the training of paramedical staff and ancillary personnel especially in Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali and Gambia.

It should be stressed that this Cuban model of integration which provided an instrument for co-coordinating and mobilizing the local grassroots organizations behind an overall development plan was also copied by Mozambique and Ethiopia in the 1970s. In Mozambique, the FRELMO that

built itself on Marxist-Leninist model of integration emphasized that:

The creation of the New Man is not principally a subjective factor, but the change in objective conditions if it were it to the contrary, we would fall into idealism. We have to change the economic and social base, we have to change the infrastructure of society in order to create the New Man. If not, we would be like the priests and would fall for thesis of the internal transformation of the person and we would have a saint³⁵.

But a very important aspect of this process of transformation from which the new man will emerge is the emancipation of women and their full integration into society. The position of FRELIMO has long been that:

The emancipation of women is not an act of charity, it does not stem from a humanitarian act or from compassion. The liberation of women is a fundamental necessity of the revolution, a guarantee that it will continue, a condition for its triumph. The main goal of the revolution is the destruction of a system of exploitation, the building of a new society which frees the potentiality of human beings and which reconciles with work, with nature. The issue of the emancipation of women arises within this context.³⁶

Similarly in Ethiopia the integration that was based on Marxist-Leninist ideology centred on the involvement of the individual towards developmental of the activities. The Dergue or the ruling party that adopted the Marxist-Leninist ideology mobilized the people towards development projects.

But Cuban activities in Africa began to wane, following the acceptance of democratic rule by some African countries that were under military dictatorships. The acceptance of liberal democratic rule was occasioned by the collapse of the former Soviet Union and the decline of socialism in Eastern Europe, where all the states concerned embraced liberal democracy. Thus from Russia to Czechoslovakia and Hungary, the adoption of liberal democracy became a cardinal principle of faith. All the 13 former Soviet Republic embraced democracy and some Latin American countries imbibed the democratic values.

Following this wind of change, Marxist oriented regimes in Africa began to accept liberal democracy. For instance, in Ethiopia, on March 5th 1989, the president Mengistu, hitherto the most doctrinaire of the few Marxist-Leninist Heads of states in Africa in a televised speech

proposed that 'the ruling workers party be renamed the Democratic Party'³⁷. He added that opposition groups shall be given the chance to bring themselves under the umbrella of the democratic unity of the Ethiopian people³⁸.

Also in Mozambique, the ruling FRELIMO party stopped calling itself Marxist-Leninist as big constitutional changes were introduced. These included introduction of Bill of Rights and Voting by Secret Ballot. Again on December 20th 1990, Salome Moiane General Secretary of Mozambique's women's organization, referring to the demonstrations that led to the political changes in Eastern Europe in 1989 stated that "we will be confronted with the same sort of thing if we carry on like this..."³⁹.

It is significant to note that as the democratization process proceeded in Africa following the changes that were occurred in Eastern Europe as a result of the collapse of the former Soviet Union, Cuba remained unperturbed. In fact inside Cuba Fidel Castro was accused of violating Cuban sovereignty by organising mock elections that insult the people whose fundamental human rights are being denied, no less than the intelligence of the rest of the human race.⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

This paper has taken a retrospective look at the Cuban revolution and its impact in Africa. Against the background of the pre-revolutionary situation we have seen the sincerity, commitment and dedication of Castro and his team in carrying out positive and drastic measures that benefited the masses tremendously.

The greatest impact of the revolution in Africa was certainly in the assistance to 'liberation struggles' which eventually

led to the attainment of independence by Angola and Namibia. Apart from assisting 'liberation struggles' Cuba has also provided technical, medical and educational assistance to African countries. Lastly, its method and process of national integration which have contributed to its national development have also been embraced by some African countries. However, there is need for more countries in Africa to emulate its method of national integration if Africa is to move towards genuine development in the 21st century.

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