



Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies

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Cuban Revolution 1956–59

Executive Summary

The Cuban Revolution resulted from rising opposition to the government of Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista. Batista assumed power in 1952 when he led a coup against President Carlos Prío Socarrás.¹ Once Batista forced his way into power, he voided the constitution and paved the way for an era of government corruption. This gave rise to a revolution that harnessed significant support from the Cuban population. Batista's dictatorship was a stark contrast from his prior experience as the leader of Cuba when he legitimately served as Cuban president from 1940 to 1944. During this period, Cuba witnessed economic growth and stability, and roads, schools, and hospitals were built.² Leading Cuba in 1952, however, he quickly turned to violence as a means of securing his power. Once in office the second time, he abandoned the constitution and suspended elections and opposition parties.³

Fidel Castro, who was running for office as a member of the Cuban People's Party prior to Batista's seizure of power, became the leader of the revolution. Known as the 26th of July Movement, in 1953, Castro led an armed raid against the Moncada army barracks in Santiago de Cuba. Most of the insurgents were killed by Batista's military forces. Castro managed to escape the battle but was subsequently arrested and imprisoned. This solidified Castro's position as a revolutionary leader. Freed from prison, he fled to Mexico, where he raised a small guerilla army of Cuban exiles. In November 1956, Castro and some 80 men sailed from Mexico to Cuba to attack Batista's regime. Within days of their arrival, Batista's forces attacked the guerillas, and only some 20 men, including Castro and Che Guevara, survived and made it into the Sierra Maestra mountains. From there, Castro was able to gather new members and begin a classic guerilla campaign.⁴ Castro took power on January 1, 1959. Two factors in particular accelerated the success of the 26th of July Movement. First, Cubans became increasingly aware of government corruption, making guerilla recruiting and popular support easier for the insurgents. Second, in the final stages of the rebellion, the United States ceased support to Batista's military.⁵

Assessing the Five Factors

1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?

Yes. At the start of the conflict Cuba was a nation. Most of the population identified themselves as "Cuban." The people shared a common language and culture, and around 90 percent of the population was Roman Catholic.⁶

2. Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?

No. The Cuban people held a strong distrust of their government that surged when Batista seized control. He took power through a coup, and his dictatorship was "widely resented," making it impossible

to govern with any sense of legitimacy.⁷ Batista’s inability to establish legitimacy enabled the eventual success of the insurgency, as more and more Cubans came to side with Castro and the revolution.⁸

3. Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country’s overall population?

No. There is not enough evidence to support that the Cuban government was able to do so. Batista kept over half of his security forces in Cuba’s cities. His widespread use of violence and torture fomented disloyalties in all ranks of the military, reducing its efficiency and commitment.⁹

4. Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?

No. Under the definitions used for the study, an island country with no neighboring countries on the island cannot have “cross-border sanctuary in a bordering country.” It should be noted, however, that Castro initially had refuge in Mexico. There he was able to organize the group of Cuban exiles, which became the 26th of July Movement, and from there, he launched his seaborne invasion of Cuba.¹⁰

5. Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?

Yes. Cuba had a powerful army when the revolution started. Around 20 percent of Cuba’s budget was allocated to the military. After he seized power in 1952, Batista initially rewarded his army with pay increases and other benefits.¹¹ At the outset, Cuba’s army was comparatively large, numbering approximately 30,000 soldiers.¹²

CUBA 1953–59	
NATIONAL IDENTITY	YES
GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY	NO
POPULATION SECURITY	NO
EXTERNAL SANCTUARY	NO
EXISTING SECURITY FORCES	YES

Outcome

Government loss. Castro seized power and quickly transitioned the Cuban government into a Communist regime. The United States was one of the first countries to recognize Castro’s government but broke off diplomatic relations with Cuba in 1961 as Cuba fostered closer ties to the Soviet Union amidst the Cold War. Following the Cuban Revolution, Castro remained in power until 2008.¹³ The Cuban Revolution supports the Five Factors theory.

Endnotes

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2. Siegfried Hildebrandt, *Cuba: The Successful Insurgency* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, April 1991), <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA236488.pdf>.
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5. Jason Beaubien and Guy Raz, “Cuba Marks 50 Years since ‘Triumphant Revolution’” (transcript), *All Things Considered*, NPR (website), January 1, 2009, <https://www.npr.org/2009/01/01/98937598/cuba-marks-50-years-since-triumphant-revolution>.
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