

AMERICAS

Cuba Puts Fidel Castro to Rest: ‘A Man So Large in a Box So Small’

By KIRK SEMPLE DEC. 4, 2016

SANTIAGO de CUBA — Bringing to an end nine days of national mourning, the ashes of Fidel Castro were buried on Sunday morning in a cemetery in this coastal city where, 63 years ago, he began his socialist revolution.

The Cuban government closely guarded the details of the funeral service, which was private and closed to the news media, but the brief ceremony followed a short cortege through the city and a 21-gun salute, and Mr. Castro’s remains were entombed near the burial site of José Martí, the 19th-century Cuban poet and independence fighter, perhaps the only other native son held in such great esteem by Cubans.

It made for a subdued ending to a busy week of remembrance marked by large, government-orchestrated tributes in the country’s public squares and nonstop television and radio coverage that provided a continual soundtrack in households and businesses across this nation of 11 million.

The mourning period was a time of reflection for the nation, as it considered Mr. Castro’s life and legacy, measuring the achievements of “Castroismo” against its undelivered promises.

“Nothing’s perfect — it’s taken a lot of work, that’s true,” said Liliam Dominguez, 60, a professor of psychology and pedagogy at the University of Havana, as students and faculty gathered for a memorial march at the university campus last week. “There are good things and bad things. But in the balance, for me, what we have had weighs more than what we haven’t had.”

Like many Cubans are quick to do, she extolled the virtues of the country’s free health care and education systems. Her father was from a poor family and became a manual laborer in the sugar industry at 15, before the revolution. But a generation later, Ms. Dominguez and her two siblings earned university degrees — thanks, she said, to Mr. Castro’s initiatives.

Many spoke of Mr. Castro this week in terms befitting a father figure. But Mr. Castro’s long illness, which compelled him to cede power to his brother Raúl Castro a decade ago, seemed to blunt the emotional impact of his death. The nation’s response was generally stoic, with public displays of unchecked emotion rare.

“For me, he’s going to be alive forever,” said Julia Piloto Cuellar, 53, who attended one of several public memorial gatherings last week in Havana, the capital. “He left physically, but he’s going to be with us forever.”

While analysts abroad speculated about the possible effects of Mr. Castro’s death on Cuba’s domestic and foreign policy, Cuban citizens appeared to keep expectations in check, perhaps because hopes for speedy improvements at other historic junctures, like the re-establishing of diplomatic relations with the United States in 2014, had gone unrealized for most people.

The government, meanwhile, harnessed Mr. Castro’s death to reaffirm its socialist program, urging people to honor his legacy by redoubling their commitment to the ideals he espoused and the country he built. The government even placed logbooks in schools and other locations throughout the country and invited Cubans to sign an oath of loyalty to the revolution’s ideals.

“This is undefeated Fidel, who summons us with his example and with the demonstration that, yes, we could; yes, we can; and yes, we will be able to overcome any obstacle, threat or turmoil in our firm commitment to build socialism in Cuba,”

President Raúl Castro said during an address to a large gathering here in Santiago on Saturday night.

The public events during the mourning period, as expected, drew vast, yet restrained, crowds. Perhaps the most dramatic homage was a three-day cortege that carried Mr. Castro's ashes hundreds of miles to Santiago from Havana, reversing the route that he and his guerrillas took after overthrowing the forces of Fulgencio Batista in 1959.

Hundreds of thousands of people lined the route, with some traveling long distances and many hours for a glimpse of the modest convoy and the small, flag-draped wooden box containing Mr. Castro's ashes, which sat in a glass case on a trailer hitched to a military jeep.

Esteban Caraballo, 63, a maintenance worker at an agricultural studies institute, rode in a caravan of 36 buses that had been provided by his town to carry spectators to the cortege route. They were waiting roadside at a spot east of Havana by 2 a.m. one morning last week, even though the cortege was not expected to arrive until after 8 a.m. People held small plastic Cuban flags on wooden sticks or clutched images of Mr. Castro to their chests.

"We're here to accompany our commander," Mr. Caraballo said. "Even though our commander has died, he will always accompany us."

The cortege came into view at about 8:30 a.m. and, as the crowd went quiet, the convoy passed and, a second later, disappeared from view. The bystanders walked in silence to their vehicles and drove away.

For those who could not make it to the cortege route, the entire trip was covered live on television and radio, which is how most Cubans saw it, including Maria Aleisy Hernandez Ruiz, 71, a retiree in the municipality of Santa Cruz del Norte, who kept her television on for much of the week.

"A man so large in a box so small — it really impacts you," she said. "He was such a big man, with his big chest."

The cross-country caravan was bookended by two large memorial events, one at Revolution Plaza in the capital on Tuesday night and the other at Revolution Plaza in Santiago on Saturday night. Both were attended by heads of state from around the world and other high-level representatives of foreign governments, many from developing countries that admired Mr. Castro's socialist idealism and pugnaciousness toward the United States.

The state's engineering of the week's homage included a nine-day ban on alcohol and a shutdown of Havana's nightclubs and music venues, as well as a near-total dedication of state-run newspapers, television and radio to tributes to Mr. Castro and often breathless coverage of the week's events.

"He is now absolutely tranquil," a broadcaster intoned as the cortege set off from Havana on Wednesday. "A sad nation, but a committed nation."

Dissent within Cuba was, unsurprisingly, muted.

At a gathering of students and faculty on the campus of the University of Havana to honor Mr. Castro, not everyone attended with an equal degree of conviction.

A professor allowed that she was not exactly in mourning, noting with a sardonic laugh that she was not wearing black. Indeed, she wasn't. She was wearing a blouse decorated with colorful flowers.

The professor, who requested anonymity because she was wary of repercussions from her colleagues and the authorities, said her view of Castroism was mitigated by the ordeals of scarcity and hardship, citing food rationing and low salaries.

But voices like this were overwhelmed by the outpouring of praise, often unbridled, for Mr. Castro and the country he built, however flawed.

In conversations across the country this week, many spoke about the country's free health care and educational systems, the high literacy rate, the low infant mortality rate and the government's efforts to combat racism.

But Mr. Castro's greatest legacy may well be the deep and unyielding national pride he cultivated, in part by unifying the Cuban people against a common nemesis of the United States government and its trade embargo.

"We aren't fearful," said José Manuel Perez, 64, a merchant mariner who was standing in a long line under a hot sun to view a shrine to Mr. Castro in Havana's Revolution Plaza last week. Earlier that day, President-elect Donald J. Trump had threatened on Twitter to reverse the rapprochement carefully brokered by Raúl Castro and President Obama.

The news elicited a shrug from Mr. Perez. "If we lived for 50 years with it," he said of the animosity between Washington and Havana, "we can live 50 years more."

"Another country couldn't do it," he added. "But we can. We're a nation that has always fought."