

# Fidel Castro laid to rest in private, closed-door funeral

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By **Nick Miroff** December 4 at 12:25 PM

SANTIAGO DE CUBA— The details of Fidel Castro’s private life were a state secret for most of the 47 years that he ruled Cuba, and his closed-door funeral Sunday morning was no different.

The ceremony was not carried live on television, leaving Cubans without a parting image of the figure whose one-party socialist system has determined virtually every aspect of their lives.

The government said Castro’s ashes were interred in a simple ceremony at the Santa Ifigenia cemetery in this city, the country’s second largest, alongside the tombs of Cuba’s most exalted national heroes.

Hours later, Cuban state media published photographs showing Raul Castro pushing his brother’s casket into a tomb fashioned from a 2.6-ton granite boulder, and sealed with an emerald-green plaque that simply reads “FIDEL.”

The tomb’s symbolism-- Castro as an enduring, immovable, geological force-- is not subtle.

A military caravan carrying his ashes in a small, flag-draped cedar casket was seen entering the cemetery Sunday morning at around 7, after hundreds of thousands of Cubans staged an all-night vigil in the nearby Plaza of the Revolution.

Castro’s funeral Sunday ends the nine-day period of national mourning ordered by the government after his death Nov. 25 at age 90. He ruled Cuba from 1959 to 2006, when illness forced him to step aside and transfer power to his younger brother Raul.

Castro’s ashes arrived in Santiago on Saturday after a four-day journey across the island, as Cubans lined the highway waving flags in the hot sun, chanting, “I am Fidel! I am Fidel!”

The government said 500,000 attended a final tribute to Castro on Saturday night, where Raul Castro, 85, said the government would not erect statues or monuments in his brother’s honor, or rename parks and streets after him.

“He never wanted any kind of personality cult, and that was his wish up until his final moments,” Castro said of his brother.

“He insisted that he didn’t want his name or his image used as the title of institutions, plazas, parks, avenues, streets or other

public places, nor the construction of monuments, busts, statues and others forms of tribute.”

Castro added he would propose laws to make sure his brother’s wishes were honored.

It was meant perhaps as a final, posthumous retort to the criticisms of Castro’s enemies, who depicted him as a power-hungry megalomaniac obsessed with his own public image.

Though Cubans saw Castro on television nearly every day for a half-century, little was known about his family life, and his long-time companion, Dalia Soto del Valle, is not a public figure and rarely appears in state media images. The government has not revealed Castro's cause of death, but his healthy had steadily declined in recent years, and his final public appearances were in a wheelchair.

During his speech, Raul Castro also assured Cubans them that his brother “never lost faith in victory” and that the country's socialist system would endure.

“Few in the world believed in our ability to resist and overcome,” said Castro, recalling the worst years of Cuba’s post-Soviet economic crisis, when the country suffered food shortages and chronic blackouts. “Fidel showed us that it was possible,” he said.

Former Brazilian president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and his recently impeached successor, Dilma Rousseff, joined Castro on the dais along with other Latin American leftist leaders. Several of the Fidel Castro’s celebrity friends, including Argentine soccer star Diego Maradona and U.S. actor Danny Glover, also made the trip to Santiago.

The public displays of emotion and sorrow seemed to intensify over the course of the week, as Cuban state media broadcast round-the-clock tributes.

The initial reaction to his death had been somewhat muted in the capital, Havana, with few spontaneous displays of grief. But here in Santiago mourners gave tearful interviews to state television, hoisting poster-sized photos of Castro as a child, as a guerrilla commander in the mountains and later a dour-looking commander in chief.

Silverio Maldonado, 54, a cook at a pizzeria and veteran of Castro’s military intervention in Angola, stood outside the cemetery with a crowd of several hundred others. A phalanx of plainclothes Cuban security agents blocked access to the site.

“Fidel had a way of penetrating the hearts of all Cubans,” Maldonado said. “When my parents died two years ago, I felt like I still had a father because he was there.”

He waved off the idea that Cuba might change more without Castro as a living symbol of his one-party socialist state. “What we need now is unity,” said Maldonado. “We need to be just like ants, carrying out the wishes of our commander.”

The Santa Ifigenia cemetery that is Castro's final resting place includes the tombs of Cuban national hero Jose Martí and Carlos Manuel de Cespedes, who launched Cuba's first war of independence against Spanish colonial rule.

Santiago de Cuba is considered the "birthplace" of Castro's Cuban Revolution. The prosperous Castro family estate was 60 miles to the north, and starting at age 7 Fidel Castro spent much of his childhood at Jesuit boarding schools.

In 1953 he led a bloody, botched assault on the city's military garrison, his first attempt to overthrow the military government of Gen. Fulgencio Batista. A trained lawyer, he used his own defense to deliver a four-hour indictment of Batista's rule, famously telling the court: "Condemn Me! It doesn't matter. History will absolve me!"

Castro's 1956 to 1959 guerrilla campaign in the mountains outside the city finally drove Batista from power on Dec. 31, 1958, and he arrived in Santiago the next day to declare victory in the central square.

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