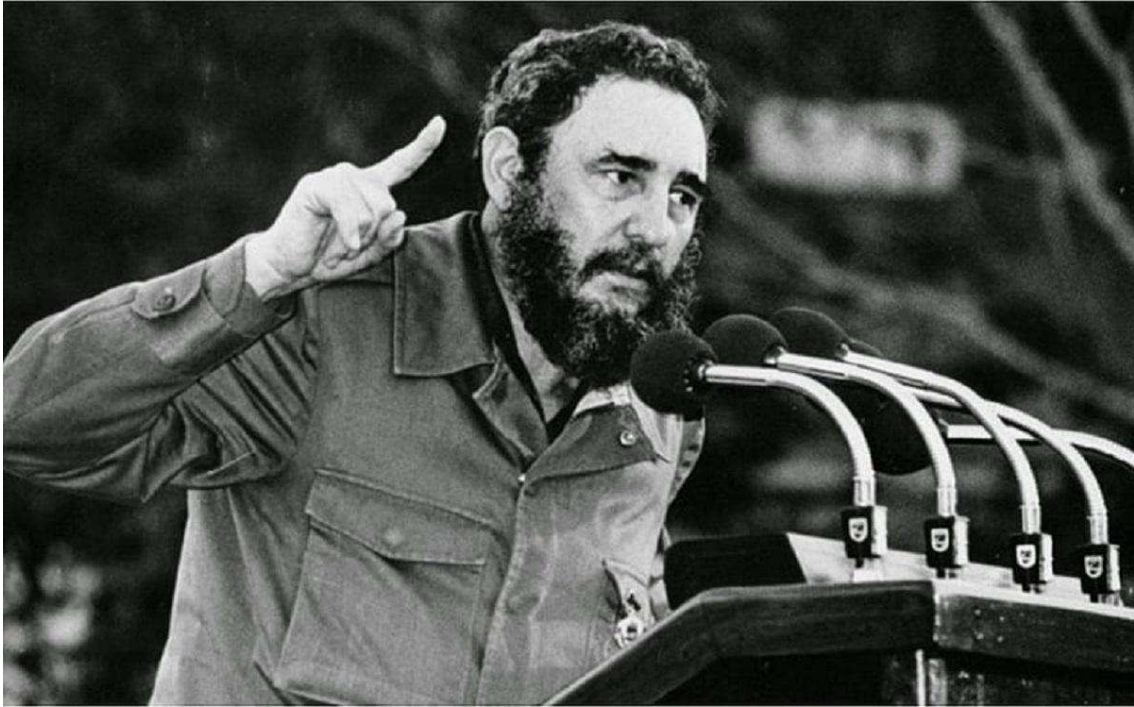


70 years of Fidel's historic court speech

'History will absolve me'



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Fidel Castro's historically famous speech that ends, "Condemn me. It does not matter. History will absolve me," completes 70 years today (October 16, 2023).

The assault, mounted by the young revolutionary army under the leadership of Fidel Castro on the Moncada Barracks in Cuba, has gone down in history as the 26th of July Movement. Their endeavour, though, ended in a fiasco owing to certain hiccups in planning. However, the history of revolution was far from over.

The background of attack

Ahead of the Presidential election scheduled in Cuba for June 1, 1952, an opinion poll was conducted on March 1, which revealed that one of the three main contestants, Fulgencio Batista, stood in the third place. Hence, after 10 days, around 2.43 am on a day, Batista, assisted by the Constitutional Army, stormed into the country's largest army base at Colombia and staged a coup d'état. After a few weeks, a 25-year-old lawyer argued in the Havana court for emergency matters that Batista and his accomplices had violated six provisions of the social security law. He said, "If there is court in Cuba, Batista should be punished for this crime."

Who was this young lawyer who single-handedly challenged the fraudulent man for having established a military dictatorship in a second conspiratorial attempt? It was none other than Fidel Castro. Armed with a doctorate in law, he knocked at the doors of the judiciary only with a plea that the country's laws be enforced. But his case was dismissed forthright. It was only after this development that Fidel was convinced that revolution alone was the only way-out. It took him one year to mobilise those ready to face persecution, torture and even death in an endeavour that had more likelihood of failure and to train them in use of arms. There were 200 men and two women in his revolutionary army which also had 26-year-old Fidel and his younger brother Raul Castro.

In their aborted attack on Moncada Barracks, some of them were killed, some imprisoned and persecuted. Some of them were finally killed in the prison itself. Meanwhile, some rebels including Fidel and Raul went into hiding in the Santiago mountain range. The military and police hounded them, going on a killing spree. All

this triggered a tension among the people. Sensing the tense situation, an Archbishop made the army general agree to his condition that if the rebels came forward to surrender, they should not be killed and should rather be tried in court.

Revolution caught on among people

However, there was a secret order from the military higher-ups that Fidel should never be spared alive. In the army battalion that went in search of Fidel and other revolutionaries in the Sierra Maestra mountain range, there was a lieutenant, who had known Fidel pretty well during their university days. As the soldiers had not seen Fidel in person, the lieutenant had clandestinely warned Fidel against revealing his name because he would be shot dead if he did so. So, accordingly, the revolutionaries surrendered, hiding their real identities.

Though the revolutionary forces' assault attempts had failed, Fidel Castro and the 26th of July Movement caught the people's attention and spread among them a strong feeling against Batista's dictatorship.

Strong arguments by Castro

Now the court became the next battlefield against Batista. Like George Dimitro, who turned upside down Hitler's Nazi court 20 years ago, Fidel too changed the court into his propaganda platform. Several of the 122 accused produced in the Santiago court on Sept. 21, 1953 had nothing to do with the Moncada barracks attack.

When the judges asked at the first sitting, “Why did you not adopt fair means to achieve your ends?” Fidel reminded them that the court had not been fair and just when he himself had argued for the emergency matters. During the second sitting, Fidel got permission as a lawyer to sit along with his own lawyers. In his arguments, he exposed how Batista and his officials conducted through radio a smear campaign against the revolutionaries and how they arrested and killed 70 rebels without a tinge of mercy. But during the third sitting, Fidel was not present in the court. The prison authorities informed the court that as he was not well, he needed complete rest. Later, on the court’s instruction, two doctors examined the prisoner and said, “He was not in a position to take part in the court trial.” The government produced a certificate to this effect in the court.

When the Chief Justice announced that the trial would go on in spite of Fidel’s absence, a voice resounded, saying, “He was in the pink of health.” The voice was that of Dr. Melba Hernandez, one of the two women revolutionaries, who also produced Fidel’s own handwritten letter. The judges sent two doctors on Sept. 27 to examine Fidel and got a certificate affirming that he was in good health. So, the court ordered production of Fidel. But Batista’s dictatorial government did not comply with the court order.

Yet on a persistent demand from the judges, Fidel was produced on October 16, not in the court, but in the retiring room of the nurses at the government hospital, which had been converted into a make-shift trial room. Fidel faced the temporary courtroom which had the presence of three judges, two government lawyers, six journalists (allowed on the condition of not publishing the proceedings) and around 100 army personnel. This arrangement had been made by the dictatorial government with the intention of preventing the people of Cuba from hearing Fidel’s speech.

Without prompts and prior preparations, Fidel spoke impromptu for five hours, explaining the rationale behind the revolution. His speech did not beseech the government's mercy; on the contrary, it felt like a charge-sheet against the government. Fidel had completed his 27 years of birth during the 76 days he was imprisoned in the solitary cell, totally cut off from others. The very famous sentence with which he completed his oration, "History will absolve me," has stuck as truth in the pages of history, vindicating him.

October 16 marks completion of 70 years of Fidel Castro's historic speech 'History will absolve me.'

Translated by V. Mariappan.