Cubans who lived through Castro's literacy program frustrated by Bernie Sanders' praise

By Jose A. Iglesias

HAVANA — There were moments when Fidel Castro seemed like a normal human being. The former president would often sit in the back row of a political meeting or a press conference, listening with rapt attention as others spoke. It was a rare sight, but it was a reminder that behind the towering figure of one of the 20th century’s most effective political leaders, there was a man who was also a man with his own perspective on the world.

But there were also moments when the Castro persona could be daunting. In the lead up to the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination, Fidel Castro was mentioned as a possible candidate for the Democratic primary. Many of those who had lived through Castro’s literacy program in Cuba during the late 1960s and early 1970s were not impressed. They saw the idea as a slap in the face to their own struggles.

“My own father was part of the literacy program,” said Carlos Perez, a 73-year-old Cuban who spent four years teaching adults how to read and write. “It was not easy for him, but he found it rewarding. When I see Sanders comparing himself to Fidel, it makes me feel like I’ve been forgotten.”

The literacy program was one of the most ambitious education reforms in the world’s history, with more than 10 million adults literate after just 18 months. The program was a testament to Cuba’s commitment to education and social justice, but it also exposed the limitations of centralized planning.

“I remember how long it took to get the materials to the remotest corners of the country,” said Perez. “There were times when I thought we’d never make it. But when we did, I felt like we’d accomplished something important.”

But the program also had its critics. Some saw it as a tool for social control, while others criticized the lack of attention to the needs of rural communities.

“I was a rural teacher,” said Perez. “I saw the program as a way to bring literacy to those who most needed it. But I also saw how it could be used against us. The government was not interested in what we were doing in the classroom.”

The program was also flawed. The curriculum was not designed for the skills people needed in their daily lives, and the teachers were often untrained and inexperienced. The results were mixed, with some communities showing significant gains in literacy rates while others struggled.

“I remember the time when we were told to teach people how to type on a typewriter,” said Perez. “It was impossible. There were no typewriters for miles around.”

The literacy program was a symbol of Fidel Castro’s commitment to his people, but it also exposed the limits of his own vision. The program was a testament to the power of education, but it also showed that even the most well-meaning leaders can fall short when it comes to the needs of the people they serve.