

Cuba's Municipal Elections

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The results of Cuba's elections, whether the municipal partial elections taking place every two and a half years or the general elections which take place every five years (and which include municipal, provincial and national parliamentary elections), require serious and detailed analysis. This will be done in a further work. However, it is important for the moment to deal in the form of notes with some media disinformation regarding the municipal elections which are coming to an end.

In a Miami Herald article dated April 28, 2010 ["Dissidents: Voting Shows Frustration"] the author, Juan Tamayo, stated that the voting reflects "growing disgruntlement" inside the island.[1] He also provides some Statistical results and uses them to support his assertion.

In this piece I will address the statistical material first and then discuss whether the data supports Tamayo's thesis.

The Miami Herald indicates that voter turn-out fell, even though it admits that the decrease was small, while putting a lot of emphasis on the increase in the percentage of blank and nullified votes. To his credit, Tamayo provides basically correct information on voter turn-out, but this does not tell the whole story. Partial municipal elections are held every two and half years from 1976 to 2010, for a total of fourteen elections.[2] The 2010 final elections results, rounding off the figures, indicate that 95.9% of those eligible to vote did so. Tamayo insinuates that this is lower than every year since 1976 which registered a 95.2% voting rate. However, the statistics also show that aside from 1976, the first year of elections, this year's (2010) voter turn-out were not the lowest. There was one year, 2002, in which 95.8% of the electorate voted, a very small fraction lower than this year. The 2002 election results also showed that 2002 witnessed a drop from the previous elections in 2000.

However, did this decrease in 2002 reflect a tendency in the Cuban electoral mood? No, because in the following elections (both in 2005 and 2007) the voting rate actually increased. The point is that one cannot look at changes in the Cuban elections results (such as 2010) and read into them a tendency according to personal whims or desires. Anyone hoping that the next municipal elections to be held as part of the general elections in two and half years (2012-13) may show a further diminution in voting patterns, can very well be disappointed as was the case after the drop in 2002. Furthermore, the fourteen elections show regular up and down variations that cannot be considered that significant. The main feature is that all fourteen municipal elections from 1976 to 2010 indicate a very high voter turnout ranging from 95.2 % to 95.9%.

The Miami Herald article turns more openly negative when it deals with blank and null votes, indicating that "The 8.91 percent of null and blank votes in Sunday's balloting was higher than in three known previous elections - 7 percent in the 1993 national legislative elections,

7.2% in the 1997 municipal elections and 5.9 percent in the 2000 municipal elections, according to Jorge Domínguez, a Harvard University Cuba expert. Results for other elections were not available.”

With all due respect for Professor Domínguez, results are in fact available for other elections.[3] For example, in the 1995 partial municipal elections, 4.3% cast blank votes while no less than 7.0% spoiled their ballot, for a total of 11.3% blank and spoiled ballots. This was a higher non-valid vote rate than this year, 2010. In the municipal elections following the 2005 vote, held in 2007, the percentage of blank and spoiled ballots dipped to 3.23% and 3.98%, for a non-valid total of 7.21%.

The article mentions elections for the National Assembly held every five years. Professor Domínguez is correct when he indicated that the total blank and null votes amounted to about 7.0% in the 1993 general elections for the Parliament; however, he insinuated that the 2010 elections results represent a noticeable reduction in positive voting. However, what is significant about these 1993 results? Does the voting pattern in any way indicate a tendency departing from the general trend? Not quite. For example, in the next three national elections for the parliament following the 1993 elections, the 7% non-valid result in 1993 melted down to 5.02% (1998), to 3.86% (2003) and to 4.77% (2008).[4] One must be beware of jumping to premature conclusions. Like the municipal elections, national parliamentary elections consistently show a very high voter rate and a very low non valid voting rate, varying every five years, but only minimally.

In 2010, the final results in the first round show that 4.59% deposited blank votes and 4.30% spoiled ballots, the second highest in municipal elections since 1995. There is no evidence showing that all blank and spoiled ballots represent a rejection of the system or favour the dissident option for political change. Some voters do so by error. There might be other factors at work, for example, religion. For Jehovah Witnesses, their religious convictions prohibit them from casting a vote for an individual. Initial investigation indicates that that the number of Jehovah Witnesses is on the increase in Cuba.

However, the most glaring proof against the supposed homogeneity of non-valid votes lies in the spoiled ballots. I have directly observed on many occasions, especially in the 1997-98 elections and more recently the 2007-2008 elections the public counting of the votes by the electoral board members in the polling stations after the voting ended. With my own photos as a proof, quite a few ballots are spoiled by misplaced enthusiasm. For example, I have seen a ballot in a Plaza de la Revolución polling station where a voter wrote-in Raúl Castro. This was immediately declared by the electoral board to be a spoiled ballot because Raúl Castro was not a candidate in that constituency, and in any case write-ins are not recognized in Cuba. I have seen other ballots dutifully completed according to the law; however a sketch of Che Guevara was drawn by the elector on the ballot which was thus nullified. There are many other such examples as well as errors. On the matter of errors, at the municipal level, one has the right to vote for just one person among the candidates on the ballot as compared to the right to vote for several at the national level. Despite all the efforts, there is apparently some confusion when some voters enter the private voting stall, thus their vote could be inadvertently spoiled. For those who purposely spoil their ballot, it is very clear, they do so quite graphically as is their right.

And so it is true that one cannot affirm what proportion of blank and spoiled ballots does not represent rejection but rather errors or misplaced enthusiasm; however, one thing for sure,

it is safe to say that a certain amount of the total non-valid voting does not at all constitute a rejection of the prevailing political system.

Tamayo quotes dissidents who claim that these figures represent “frustration” and “disgruntlement” on the island.[5] So let us look into that assertion. This is presented as a major discovery which is obviously intended to drive a wedge between the citizens and the leadership at all levels, seeing as this conclusion regarding the elections results are attributed to “dissidents.” It is in fact true that there exists in Cuba at this time a lot of “frustration” and “disgruntlement,” if we make a concession for argument’s sake and use the terms employed by the Herald.

Some of those who analyze negatively the 2010 elections results compare them to the previous ones, especially the 2007-2008 elections which showed a lower blank and spoiled ballot rate. What has happened in 2008, 2009 and in the beginning of 2010? Firstly, Cuba like the rest of the world has felt the effects of the global economic and financial crisis. Secondly, combined with this, Cuba was the victim of three massive hurricanes in 2008 in a very short period of time: Gustav, Ike and Paloma caused over \$10 billion in damage and massive uprooting which is not even calculable in dollars. Thirdly, the Cuban government has been and is attempting to bring about changes, especially those concerned with perfecting economic activity such as production and distribution. The sincere talk and action related to change encourages expectations; however, given the complexity of the international and domestic situation this very prospective of striving to respond to frustration and disgruntlement with positive results can at times not come about as rapidly and massively as many Cubans would hope. This situation therefore results perhaps in more disenchantment and not less. These are questions that anyone seriously dealing with the current Cuban political process has to consider.

Taking all this into account, that is, the world economic crisis since the last elections, the three hurricanes in 2008 and the rising expectations of change within the limits of the international and domestic situation, one may have to say that the increase in the 2010 protest vote through blank and nullified votes is not very high.

The opponents of Cuba view the island, as Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano says, with a magnifying glass when it comes to what they perceive as a negative incident or tendency; it is only just therefore that all factors, even secondary ones, be taken into account while of course not exaggerating their relative importance such as potential voters being absent in international missions, a holiday coinciding with elections and what some citizens see as an increase in the number of Jehovah Witness adherents.

There have been previous efforts by journalists and/or academics at showing that elections in Cuba demonstrate opposition by the Cubans. Following the 1995 municipal elections US academic Miguel Centeno, a Cuba detractor, declared that the results showed “significant discontent.” However, according to the investigation carried out this was not supported by sources or statistics.[6] As indicated above, while the 1995 elections did indicate a decrease in positive voting, what happened in the next general elections at the national, provincial and municipal elections in 1997-98? The positive voting bounced back and increased. And here we are fifteen years later(after the 1995 misguided evaluation of “discontent”) and we still hear talk about discontent from basically the same sources.

Nor was the 1995 evaluation the last one to have proven to be wrong. For example, perhaps the “dissidents” were expecting a far lower voter turn-out and a far higher increase in blank

and spoiled ballots in the 1997-98 elections. Over ten years ago, in the 1998 general national elections for the parliament, there were major expectations from amongst the dissidents for a massive and noticeable rejection through the ballot box compared to the previous 1993 general elections. Cuban Parliamentary President Ricardo Alarcón indicated on January 13, 1998 that certain diplomatic sources in Havana sympathetic to the dissidents were anxiously expecting a sharp increase in blank and spoiled ballots.[7] All the conditions were present for such an outcome: the effects of the 1992 Torricelli Act and the 1996 Helms-Burton Act, the 1997 call by President Bill Clinton for a “democratic Transition Government” in Cuba with the accompanying funding of dissidents, all this in the context of the Special Period in Cuba caused by the collapse of the former USSR and the resulting major damage to the Cuban economy. At the same time, some of the worst effects of this situation began to improve albeit slightly, such as the decrease in black-outs caused by energy sources. However, despite the mainly unfavourable situation which vastly outweighed the minor improvements, the dissidents did not see their dream come true.[8] When their wishes did not come about, one of Cuba’s most noted dissidents, Elizardo Sánchez was obliged to admit “that the 1998 national elections ‘signified the renovation of the mandates and the legitimacy of the government.’” [9]

Above we have outlined only two examples, the 1995 partial municipal elections and the 1997-98 national general elections for the Parliament.

A few more notes on the municipal elections. The current Cuban municipal elections are almost terminated but not quite yet. They were initiated on January 4, 2010 when the Council of State according to the Cuban Constitution and the Electoral law convoked the elections. One of the first acts is to update the voters’ registration list based on the ongoing and permanent list of citizens, their age and addresses. Voter registration in Cuba is ex-officio: it is automatic for all those sixteen years and older; there is nothing to do in order to get on the registration list which is public.

From February 24 to March 24 thousands of local compact neighbourhood nomination meetings were held with only a couple of hundred voters eligible to participate in each one. Citizens have the right to nominate any neighbour in their constituency (district/riding) to run as a candidate. From two to eight neighbours can be nominated, those getting the most votes in a show of hands voting procedure are declared to be candidates. Secret, universal suffrage elections then took place on April 25 whereby voters can choose one of these nominated candidates. Since one has to receive at least 50% of the votes to be declared the winner, it is quite frequent that no candidate gets 50% the first time around. This year 14% of the 15,093 constituencies had to go into a second round whereby electors voted for one amongst the two who had gotten the most (but not 50%) votes or the two who were tied.

This second round took place on May 2, the day after May 1, a major day for Cubans all across the island. Normally voter turn-out is lower for second round election. For the 2010 second round, all of the emphasis in the week leading up to the second round was on the mobilization for May 1, virtually nothing on the elections. Surprisingly (including for this writer), 90% of the electorate voted despite all the emphasis on May 1. Normally the voting rate for the second round is between 89 and 93%, always lower than the first round; for example second round voting rate was 93.6% in 1986, 89% in 1995, 94.77%, in 1997, 93.5% in 2005.[10]

However, in three constituencies, seeing as that there was a tie between The two candidates, a third round was called. These elections were held on May 5. In all three

constituencies one candidate received more than the other, thus completing the elections as such.[11]

On May 19 the municipal assemblies' newly elected delegates will meet in the 169 municipalities across the country in order to constitute the assemblies. One of the main objectives of this first session is to elect the president and vice-president of the municipal assembly by secret vote from amongst those elected to the Assembly. This brings to an end the 2010 municipal elections, even though in the coming weeks, the permanent working commissions in the municipal assemblies and the People's Councils and their respective presidents and vice-presidents are updated taking into account the newly elected delegates. This is an important step in the elections seeing as that traditionally over the years slightly less than half of these elected had been delegates in the previous mandate. In the 2010 elections this tendency continued: only 49% of those elected were delegates in the previous mandate.[12] Therefore in establishing the new municipal assembly presidency and the permanent working commissions, the new municipal assemblies have to take into account the fact that on the national average slightly more than half of the delegates were not delegates in the previous mandate. The daily work of the elected delegates, with all its trials and tribulations, begins so that the electors can see the results and act upon them before the next elections.

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[This essay has been written for Cuba-L Direct]

Notes

[1] Juan Tamayo, "Dissidents: Voting shows frustration", Miami Herald, April 28, 2010, <http://www.miamiherald.com/2010/04/28/1601405/dissidents-voting-shows-frustration.html>

[2] Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas, Republica de Cuba, http://www.one.cu/aec2008/esp/22_tabla_cuadro.htm, Asamblea Nacional del Poder Popular, Cuba: Democracia y Elecciones, <http://www.parlamentocubano.cu/>, Granma, "Voto el 95.86% de los electores", 30 de abril 2010

[3] Granma, "Victoria de la democracia revolucionaria", 19 de abril, 2005, Peter Roman, "People's Power: Cuba's Experience with Representative Government", p. 122, Roman and Littlefield Publishers, Lanham MD, 2003, Granma, "Comisión Electoral Nacional, Proceso Elecciones Generales 2007-2008", Granma, 26 de octubre 2007.

[4] "Comisión Electoral Nacional, Resultados oficiales", Granma, 11 de marzo, 1993, Granma, 4 de febrero del 1998, Granma, 1 de febrero del 2003 and Granma, 30 de enero del 2008.

[5] Tamayo, op.cit

[6] Roman, op.cit, p 120.

[7] Arnold August, Democracy in Cuba and the 1997-98 Elections, pp 358-361, Editorial Jose Marti, La Habana, 1999, p 360.

[8] Arnold August, ibid, p. 358-359.

[9] Arnold August, "Socialism and Elections", in Cuban Socialism in a New Century:

Adversity, Survival, Renewal, edited by Max Azicri and Elsie Deal, University Press of Florida, Gainesville, FL, 2004, p. 233.

[10] Peter Roman, op.cit, pp120-122, and Granma, "Victoria de la democracia revolucionaria", 19 de abril, 2005.

[11] Susana Lee, Granma, "Más de 5 000 mujeres integrarán las Asambleas Municipales del Poder Popular", 11de mayo, 2010.

[12] Ibid.

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