

# Do the Cuban People Have the Right to Choose Their Leaders?

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*In the context of developing Cuba-US relations, on March 2, 2016 in Geneva, the Deputy secretary of State of the US State Department, Antony J. Blinken, issued the National Statement at the Human Rights Council of the United Nations. In this statement he indicated that Obama during his visit to Cuba in March “will emphasize that the Cuban people are best served by an environment where people are free to choose their political parties and their leaders...”*

*Let us concentrate for the moment on the theme of “choosing their leaders.”*

## **The election of the Council of State and its president: one step**

The National Assembly of People’s Power (Asamblea Nacional del Poder Popular- ANPP, or Parliament) has a five-year mandate. As a first step before initiating the new sessions, it meets to elect from among its members its officials (president, vice-president and secretary) and then the Council of State.



From among the deputies, the ANPP then elects the Council of State. It consists of the Council of State president and first vice-president, other vice-presidents, a secretary and 23 other members, totalling 31 members. The president of the Council of State is also the head of state and head of government (Council of Ministers). (The current president of these two bodies is Raúl Castro.) Finally, the Constitution states, “The Council of State is accountable for its action to the National Assembly of People’s Power, to which it must render accounts of all its activities.”

Cuba does not have a “presidential system” nor does it pretend to have one. The president of the Council of State is elected from among the deputies, who are elected by the citizens.

## **Raúl Castro: how was he elected to the parliament?**



Let us take the example of Raúl Castro based on a very summary description of some of the steps leading to his election as President of the Councils of State and Ministers. In the last 2013 general elections, he was elected as Deputy to the Cuban ANPP (Parliament) from a municipality in his home province of Santiago de Cuba. While there is only one candidate per seat, a candidate needs at least 50% of the popular vote. In the 2013 general elections, Raúl Castro garnered 98.04% of the vote. This was one of the highest among the 612 Deputies elected.

The Comisión de Candidaturas Nacional (CCN — National Candidacies Commission) is responsible for organizing the nomination and elections of the ANPP's officials and the Council of State. It initiates consultations with the deputies as soon as they are elected.

In 2013 the elections took place on February 3rd. The electoral process is completed by February 24 when the newly mandated ANPP meets to constitute itself. Each deputy has the right to propose any deputy to any post among the ANPP's officials and Council of State.

### **The nomination of deputies to the Council of State**

Prior to the February 24 constitution of the new ANPP mandate, the CCN provides each deputy with a tabloid containing the biographies of the 614 elected deputies, as well as those of the outgoing Council of State members (Interview, María Ester Reus González).

This procedure was further explained in a separate interview with the CCN, which, at the time was initiating the process. When the deputy arrives at the CCN office, after having had ample time to review the tabloid, he or she is provided with two blank sheets — one for the Council of State proposals and one for the ANPP's officials. The person can then elaborate a personal list of suggestions, also including the preferences for specific posts, such as presidents and vice-presidents of the Council of State and officials of the ANPP. The list is unsigned and is deposited in secret (Interview, Pérez Santana, Marchante Fuentes and Fajardo Marin).

Deputy Daniel Rafuls Pineda (at the time) elaborated on this procedure. He reported that the CCN personally provided him with the list of 614 biographies several days before his February 7 appointment at the CCN headquarters. He thereby had “the total freedom to make [his] decision in private” (Daniel Rafuls Pineda, email message to the author, March 15, 2008).

### **Deputy Jorge Gómez's opinion regarding this nomination**

Deputy Jorge Gómez (director of the musical band Moncada) related his experience on this process. It also provided an interesting inside account of the period from January to

February 2008. At that time, Fidel Castro had already temporarily relinquished his presidency position to first vice-president Raúl Castro, in 2006. On February 19, 2008, Fidel Castro publicly released his announcement of the previous day: “I will neither aspire to nor accept the positions of President of the State Council and Commander in Chief”.

According to Jorge Gómez, in his private session at the CCN headquarters, this took place before the above-mentioned announcement by the Cuban leader, thus the deputy had proposed Fidel Castro for president of the Council of State. He also listed the name of Raúl Castro as first vice-president and José Machado Ventura as the next-in-line vice-president, along with his other choices for that body. Jorge Gómez also indicated his choice for the ANPP’s officials on the other sheet handed to him.

Following a question to Jorge Gómez on continuity of the Revolution’s leadership, the non-Communist Party deputy, was of the opinion that, in the absence of Fidel Castro having a formal position in the Council of State, it was necessary to “reinforce the historical leadership of the Revolution.”

On another query as to a February 2008 Granma article reporting that Fidel Castro suggested to the CCN that Machado Ventura be nominated as first vice-president, Gómez responded that this was Fidel’s logical preoccupation. His goal has been to make sure at all times that the essence of the Revolution is not lost. Gómez was of the opinion that Machado Ventura, as one of the historical leaders of the Revolution, with long-standing experience, should be nominated (Interview, Jorge Gómez Barranco).

### **The role of the National Candidacies Commission**

Once all the deputies had gone through this process of proposing candidates for the ANPP’s officials and the Council of State, the CCN then tabulated the ballots on sheets of paper. According to the number of votes, it elaborated the list of 31 Council of State members, including its leading positions. The CCN formulated another list of the three ANPP officials (Interview, Pérez Santana, Marchante Fuentes and Fajardo Marin).

Based on the author’s attendance at the 1998 constitution of the new ANPP mandate at that time and the interviews regarding the 2008 mandate, the final steps of the elections took place in the following manner. On the day of the constitution of the ANPP mandate (February 24, 2008), the President of the Comisión Electoral Nacional (CEN, National Electoral Commission) María Esther Reus González presided over the ANPP until its officials were elected. The list of the three proposed officials was presented to the deputies: Ricardo Alarcón for president, Jaime Alberto Crombet Hernández-Baquero for vice-president and Miriam Brito Sarroca for secretary.

### **The vote of the deputies**

A show-of-hands vote followed to determine whether the deputies agreed with these three nominations or whether they had any other proposals. There were no other proposals. Therefore, the list of three nominees became official. The ANPP session was then adjourned for a secret-ballot vote in the lobby, outside the main meeting hall. Once the three nominees were elected and announced as such by the CEN, the new officials took over the presidency of the ANPP.

The same procedure ensued for the 31 members of the Council of State. Raúl Castro was

elected president of the Council of State and ipso facto president of the Council of Ministers, therefore head of state and head of the government (according to Article 74 of the Constitution) (Interview, Balseiro Gutiérrez and Amarón Díaz; Interview, Pérez Santana).

With this, the general elections — which had begun in July 2007 with the municipal first-phase elections — ended on February 24, 2008. The 2012–13 general elections followed the same beginning in July 2012 and ending in February 2013.

### **The role of the revolution's leadership**

The nominations and elections of the ANPP's officials and the Council of State may seem quite formal. This is in fact true, especially when compared with the elections to the municipal assemblies and the ANPP itself. It would be naive, however, to believe that the Revolution's leadership is not involved in choosing the leaders of this highest level of state.

Regarding the roles and positions of Fidel Castro and Raúl Castro themselves, it is also a question of quality and not — as often charged by the U.S. and their dissident spokespersons — a question of nepotism.

### **Nepotism? No. The example of Raúl Castro**

Raúl Castro assumed the leadership on a temporary basis in 2006 when Fidel Castro fell ill. He took up this position, according to the Constitution, as first vice-president of the Council of State. On February 24, 2008, Raúl Castro was elected president of the Council of State and Council of Ministers. Several factors should be taken into account. First, he has been involved in the struggle without let-up since the Moncada attack in 1953. He has made his own innovative contributions, even before the 1959 victory. One such breakthrough was organizing the liberated territories in the II Frente Oriental “Frank País” (Frank País Second Eastern Front). This amounted to a virtual state within the state. It served as a precedent, to a certain extent, for the new revolutionary government established in January 1959.

There have been many other examples of Raúl Castro's role since that time, such as the institutionalization of the People's Power system of government in 1974–76. The enterprise improvement system in the 1990s was inaugurated under his leadership through the ministry of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (FAR — Revolutionary Armed Forces), of which he was the minister until 2008. Since his 2008 election as president of the Council of State and Council of Ministers, and while retaining his position as General of the FAR, he has been further institutionalizing the collegial leadership. He is doing so by holding regular expanded sessions (including other people aside from the official members) of either or both the Council of State and Council of Ministers.

Raúl Castro is also at the forefront in the attempt to put a stop to bureaucracy and high-level, white-collar corruption. At the same time, he is leading, along with others, innovations to preserve and improve socialism.

### **Against US-centric views**

The Cuban political system allows for legal and formal channels so that the people can vote for its leaders. One has to insist that this procedure does not try to conform to the US-centric presidential system that exists in the US and other countries.

The objective of this article is not to offer more details and analysis regarding these general

elections. However, this is how Raúl Castro was elected President of the Council of State (and thus, Council of Ministers).

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