Democracy and Socialism in Cuba: Facing the 21st Century

Francisco T. Sobrino
Member of the Editorial Board of HERRAMIENTA,
a Journal of Marxist Debate and Critique
Buenos Aires, Argentina
fsobrino@herramienta.com.ar

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The inadmissible and long American embargo, as well as a number of hostile measures against Cuba from the United States (which ironically are one of the States with more crimes against humanity in the history) deserve the most absolute repudiation from Latin American peoples. This condemnation should not prevent nevertheless a necessary debate on the uncritical support to Castroite regime by a considerable segment of Latin American Left, which considers that American harassment to Cuba could explain and even justify the Cuban single party regime and domestic restrictions to the Cuban people’s democratic rights.

This paper seeks to contribute to a collective thinking on the issue of democracy in Cuba and on the more general problem of the seemingly conflictive relation between socialism and democracy.

The 1976 Constitution and Popular Power

The Cuban Revolutionary Constitution was approved at what is known as the "period of institutionalization" of the Revolution, which took place roughly between 1971 and 1986. The character of the Cuban Communist Party (CCP) as "the superior leading force of the society and the state, in charge of organizing the common effort towards the high goals of building socialism and advancing towards a communist society", was sanctioned in Article 5 of the Constitution. At the same time, Article 4 established that "all power resides on the working people and is to be exercised either through assemblies of Popular Power and other bodies of the state that derive from those assemblies, or directly."

According to Fidel Castro, the popular power assemblies would give to the masses "the power to make decisions over many problems at every level in the cities and in the countryside... This implies the development of a new society and of genuinely democratic principles to replace the administrative habits of the first years of the Revolution. We need to replace the administrative methods which might become bureaucratized, with democratic methods."

At the municipal level, delegates were elected by secret vote, among more than 2, and even up to 8, candidates. The candidates were nominated at neighborhood meetings organized by the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR). The CCP did not officially nominate the candidates; it was assumed that they would run on their personal capacity. However, the decentralization of power at the local level contrasted with the centralization in the upper echelons of the system. Members of the Provincial and National Assemblies were not directly elected by the rank and file members. Instead, they were elected by the delegates to the Municipal Assemblies based on the candidates chosen by committees formed by functionaries of the Party and the "Mass Organizations", also controlled by the CCP.

Thus, whereas 55% of the National Assembly deputies were supposed to be delegates of the Municipal Assemblies, the remaining 45% came from sources other than by popular election, and included Fidel and the whole central government. This ambiguous mechanism allowed to institutionalize the superimposition of the CCP and the new state structure. This was reflected in statistics showing that 75% of the municipal delegates being elected every 2-1/2 years were party
members. Almost 100% of the national deputies elected every 5 years were members of the Party and of the Communist Youth (UJC).

How was the relationship between "the superior leading force of society" and "the power that belonged to the working people which is to be exercised through Popular Power assemblies" articulated? Raul Castro explained this in detail in 1974:

In order to ensure that its directives and criteria are put into practice by the bodies of Popular Power, the Party must use as its main recourse the militants who are delegates or members of the executive committees. The Party's militants are obligated, wherever they work and regardless of the position they occupy, to carry out and apply the Party's decisions and to convince (but not to impose or force) the non-militants of the fairness of those decisions and the need to comply with them. If after having exhausted all methods and resources available to it and those of related institutions, the leading body of the Party at a given level (i.e. municipal) is unable to make the Popular Power's bodies at the same level follow an important directive, it must address itself to the next higher body of the Party (i.e. regional). The regional body of the Party shall then discuss the problem with the regional body of Popular Power. If the latter disagrees with the Party's regional body, this body shall take the matter to the Party's provincial body, provided that the matter is sufficiently important. The Party's provincial leadership shall then discuss the matter with the provincial organs of Popular Power. If there is no agreement (although, logically, this would be highly unlikely), the matter should be taken before the National Commission of the Constitution of the Bodies of Popular Power of Matanzas, and, as last resort, to the Political Bureau and the Council of Ministers.

"Logically, this would be highly unlikely" given the above mentioned statistics on the political composition of the municipal delegates and national deputies. Anyway, Raul Castro made it quite clear that the Party should have the last word in any controversy with the Popular Power.

The assemblies' functions include the obligation to carry out periodic meetings in which the delegates render accounts to their electorate and face the possibility of having their mandate revoked. According to Article 102 of the Constitution, the Popular Power assemblies are invested "with the highest authority to exercise state functions in their respective jurisdictions to exercise government and... direct the economic, production and service entities directly subordinated, and perform the activities necessary to satisfy (the) needs...of the collectivity within the territory under their jurisdiction."

However, when the popular power local assemblies attempted to alleviate the deep problems caused by the housing crisis, just to mention one of the worst problems experienced by the Cuban people in that decade, they were confronted by the absence of resources and lack of real control over the central state which had other priorities defined at other levels with no relationship whatsoever to the rank and file. Evidently, the "subordination" of the state to the authority of the Popular Power did not go beyond the well intentioned statements in the magna carta. Meanwhile, important issues, such as international and socio-economic politics, were excluded from the reach of Popular Power.

These failures of the "world's most democratic system" were eventually felt by all the Cuban people. According to a series of surveys published by the magazine Bohemia in July 1990, 40% of
the interviewees felt that they did not play any role in the country's government and had no confidence in their local delegates. Fifty percent affirmed that their delegates had no authority to resolve the problems they confronted and were little more than messengers between the people and a central government over which they had no effective control. Assistance to the assemblies for the rendering of the delegates' accounts, which was very high during the first years of the constitutional government, fell to 50-60% by the end of the 90s reflecting an increasing distrust in the institutions of Popular Power.

These problems became visible early on in the National Assembly, during its June 1978 sessions, two years after it began to function. Responding to criticisms for "lacking interest and initiative" the municipal delegates pointed to the lack of resources available to them to respond to the demands of the population, particularly those concerning housing. Fidel Castro responded to these demands by indicating that "the litany of complaints" was due to underdevelopment, that it was necessary to first build socialism, that the way towards it has already been planned and that neither the nature of those plans nor the leadership to implement them was a matter of debate:

"We cannot do things just on the basis of what the electorate decides is best, good and beautiful. There are many beautiful things in the world that will have to wait to be realized. There is a non-questionable annual work plan and the formulation of this plan cannot take into account the wishes of the electorate...The decision on where a hospital will be built will be based on statistics and concrete needs."

Fidel continued emphasizing that the delegates had to differentiate between what he called "subjective and objective problems". The objective problems were to be kept out of the realm of decisions made by Popular Power. They could only be solved through economic development and it was only the central organisms that were assigned the decisions regarding the investment of resources. Popular Power should concentrate in solving the "subjective" problems, namely, those related mainly to the nature and provision of services.

**The Constitutional Reform of 1992.**

The fall of the Wall of Berlin in 1989, the collapse of the Soviet Union that followed, and the dissolution of COMECON in 1991 along with the hardening of the US blockade brought Cuba to the brink of a catastrophe. The government was forced to implement its "special period in peace time" policy. This included urgent measures to find food supplies, the military mobilization of "voluntary work", general rationing, decentralizing the management of factories and state farms, drastic cuts in the consumption of oil and other sources of energy, stimulating tourism and biotechnology, promoting foreign investment in every sector of the economy, increased participation of the military in the economy and the legalization of the dollar economy.

Regarding the functioning of Popular Power which, as we have seen, was formally endowed with all the qualities recommended by the classics of Marxism as interpreted by the Cuban leadership - the fusion of the executive and legislative powers, the immediate recall of all elected officials, the delegates continuing on their jobs as workers and receiving workers' incomes - it did not realize its fundamental goal: to eradicate the bureaucracy in quantitative terms which was how the leadership defined bureaucracy. Fidel himself acknowledged that "in 1973 there were 90,000 administrative employees in the country and in 1984 their number increased to 250,000."
The call to the Third Congress of the CCP in March 1990 was accompanied by a critique of the "mistaken search of unanimity which is often false, mechanic and formal" and a call for "a democratic discussion inside the Party and the Revolution as a way to seek solutions". In spite of the welcome recognition that the previous practices (of the past 31 years after having taken over power and of the past 14 years of Popular Power) had been anti- democratic, it was significant that, in fact, every democratizing initiative continued to come from the top of the regime, that is, from Fidel Castro himself.

The breadth of the problem began to become evident in the course of the almost 90,000 discussion meetings held prior to the Party's Third Congress. Abundant complaints were voiced over ridiculous inefficiencies, bureaucratic procedures and the very institutions that were supposed to be the means of the people to participate in decision making over the circumstances that affected their lives were harshly criticized.

Reforms were adopted within certain limits: secret vote procedures were adopted for the election of party officials, the Central Committee was renewed (by 53%) with younger members, and atheism was eliminated as a requisite for party membership.

This move was reinforced by the changes to the Constitution proposed by the CCP and adopted by the National Assembly on July 1992. The new Constitution suppressed all references to an imaginary "dictatorship of the proletariat" and the no longer existing "socialist community". Nevertheless, Cuba continues to be a single party state. The National Defense Council was created to "lead the nation in conditions of war, general mobilization or in an emergency". The tendency to concentrate power in Fidel Castro became stronger: as President, he was head of the Council.

Substantive changes were made in the structures of Popular Power. First, the provincial and national delegates would be directly elected by the people. The Electoral Law of November 1992, however, considerably limited the democratic content of these elections: The candidates for delegates to the provincial and national assemblies would not be nominated by the rank and file as was the case of the municipal delegates. Instead, they would be nominated by the "commissions of candidacies" constituted by the "organizations of the masses" and under the leadership of the Cuban Workers’ Central.

As mentioned before, the organizations of the masses were led by the CCP. The municipal assemblies were supposed to select from the lists proposed by the commissions of candidacies the exact number of candidates required to fill each and every position. Consequently, the voter’s right to direct election was limited to vote only for all the candidates, some of them or none. In order to be elected, each candidate had to obtain more than 50 % of the votes.

In this way, the recommendations of the Fourth Congress of the CCP for direct elections of delegates and deputies to the Provincial and National Assemblies of Popular Power were manipulated into a system that channeled elections through controls that, in effect, negated the direct and democratic character of the electoral process. Consequently, the formal elimination of the Party from the process of nomination of candidates to the National and Provincial Assemblies did not eliminate the very real connection between the Party and Popular Power. This has been the main source of ambiguity and the principal issue undermining the legitimacy and authority of
Popular Power as a genuine democratic institution. The underlying cause of this ambiguity is the existing fusion between the State and the Party, which is reflected in the fact that the proportion of Party members in the Popular Power hierarchy has increased progressively to virtually 100% in the highest echelons.

The question of Democracy

The argument presented by certain unconditional “defenders of the Cuban Revolution” (which, to be more precise, will be called the Cuban post-revolutionary regime), according to which this political structure embodies democratic representation “at a much higher level than capitalism” is flawed in the same way in which the arguments of the defenders of “really existing socialism” (better called “really imaginary socialism”) were more than a decade ago.

The argument is based on a totally uncritical acceptance of the official rhetoric. In fact, the leaders of all the organizations of the masses are members of the CCP. Therefore the weight of the Party in the electoral commissions is overwhelming if not absolute. The established practice in daily life is that the Party’s “suggestions” are obeyed even if that is not “established by the constitution.” Thus, the candidates proposed by the Party are the ones who get elected. Party membership is an unavoidable requisite to get a responsible position. In the context of this daily customary practice, there is no repression, conspiracy or a formally prescribed role of the CCP. It is just an established practice that has been legitimated by forty years of domination and political control.

Regarding freedom of the press, we are well aware of who enjoys that right in the “democratic” capitalist countries. But in the main means of communication in Cuba there is practically no space to voice any criticism of the government. It appears that in the last few years there has been a certain opening in the university and academic milieu. However, communist intellectuals and revolutionaries continue being repressed when they deviate from the prevailing thinking in the high party circles. One example is the public attack and the subsequent dispersion of the researchers of the Center for the Studies of America (Centro de Estudios sobre América) in 1996, for having made the mistake of directing their critical studies to Cuba’s internal problems.

Another unconditional defense of the Cuban post-revolutionary regime presents a flawed argument that is widely used in the left: the distinction -often the counterposing- between formal democracy and substantive democracy. The first focuses on political rights; the second on material rights. This distinction can be useful to identify and criticize as "formally democratic" those regimes that pretend to be democratic because they use certain formal mechanisms which in fact lack democratic substance due to social inequality or to restrictions which end up vitiating democratic principles, as in the case of the bourgeois states.

However, there can be no substantive democracy (one with truly egalitarian features) without it also being a formal democracy. Thus, for example, the Paris Commune established a formal mechanism to elect and recall its delegates. Similarly, the Russian soviets, before they began to loose their democratic character due to the measures taken during the Civil War, established formal mechanisms of representation and of elections of delegates every three months. Proposing that formal democracy can be sacrificed on behalf of substantive democracy means that the people can somehow have "democratic" leaders in the absence of rights to vote for other leaders or of any protection for the opinions of minorities. According to this line of thought, Castro's
post-revolutionary regime can be substantively democratic even if it is not formally democratic. This would mean that even though the Cuban people were totally devoid of independent political power, somehow, due to the benevolence of their leadership, they enjoyed a much superior type of democracy than the one experienced by the exploited people in the capitalist countries.

The unconditional defenders would add another argument to justify the restriction of political rights in Cuba in order to impede the emergence of other parties or political currents and even to legally penalize those daring to publish opposition views. The argument hinges on the formidable pressure of Cuba's neighbor, the imperialist Yankee: the US government and its agents could easily take advantage of democratic freedoms to establish a political beachhead from which to attack the post-revolutionary regime. Those unconditional defenders pretend to forget Cuba's own history and its anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist revolution, with an unquestionable popular support to the regime, even nowadays. It is impossible to estimate the real magnitude of this support due to the government's control and manipulation of this information. However, if for the moment we accept at face value the official figures of the last election of the National Assembly of Popular Power, there was a 98% turnout; 95% approved the complete single slate of candidates in which Fidel and his brother Raul obtained over 99% of the votes. The overwhelming support of the population claimed by the government would serve as a strong counterbalance against any foreign pressure attempting to attack the regime by political means.

**The Question of Socialism**

The argument of the defense of the "socialist regime" was used to squash the Hungarian uprising in 1956, the Prague spring in 1968 and the Solidarnosc movement in Poland in 1981, among the most important milestones. However, as the decade of the 90s ensued, the "socialist regimes" came tumbling down like a house of cards and capitalist restoration was ushered in hand in hand with the vast sectors of the state nomenklatura, at the front of those regimes just the day before, transforming the old bureaucrats into the new bourgeoisie. This is not the situation in Cuba. What type of regime exists in Cuba?

We agree with sociologist Marifeli Perez-Stable's statement: "In spite of being convinced that the concept of revolution does not apply to present day Cuba, one cannot ignore three facts. First, the Cuban rulers are basically the revolutionaries of 1959. Second, the achievements of the revolution and socialism are the reason for the continuing emotional-psychological support of the "revolution" by a high proportion of the population. Third, revolution and nation are intimately related with each other." Although it is impossible to talk about exact dates, the end of the Cuban Revolution could be placed towards the end of the 60's. What followed was the consolidation of a post-revolutionary regime which in a previous paper we have defined as bonapartist. In fact, the realities that the above mentioned sociologist cannot ignore lead, in the case of Cuba, to the confusion between the concepts of revolution and socialism and we therefore disagree with her classification of the post-revolutionary regime as socialist. After the experiences of the last decade it is more important than ever to clarify what socialism means and whether the regimes that fell with the Berlin Wall and those that survived were or are socialist.

This requires that we go back to the Russian Revolution of 1917, the first and only case of a successful truly socialist workers' revolution. The events that followed – the exhaustion of the
urban working class and its vanguard during the civil war, a predominantly peasant population, the isolation of the USSR by a hostile international wall, the defeat of the European revolution, the emergence of relatively privileged strata, the bureaucratization of the Party and the pressure of the old governmental structures inherited from Tsarism--led to a post-revolutionary regime where the measures, initially taken as extraordinary, giving all control and power to the Bolshevik Party, became a permanent feature. Thus, the dictatorship of the proletariat, defined by Marx as "the proletariat acting as a dominant class" became the dictatorship of the single party which culminated, not without deep traumas and dramatic conflicts including the physical elimination of the Bolshevik leadership of the revolution, in Stalinism.

The first steps taken, such as nationalizing the land and the means of production and placing the monopoly of external commerce in the hands of the state, should have been followed by other measures aimed at truly socializing the productive structures and increasing the control of production and distribution by independent workers’ organizations. That never happened, however. What emerged instead was a state increasingly divorced from society with ever increasing totalitarian features. This evolution was permanently masked with the flags of a socialism devoid of its substance, ritualized and transformed into an ideology that justified the domination of a bureaucracy. This became consolidated into the "socialist state" formula, by which Marx himself would have been appalled, but which was nevertheless accepted (apart from a few thinkers in the Marxist tradition) as being in agreement with "Marxist doctrine."

In its most simplified version, this "doctrine" held that that state was only a juridical and political superstructure arising from society’s economic structure as per a cursory reading of a Marx’s celebrated text. Therefore, there could only be either a bourgeois state or a workers’ state. No allowance could be made for hybrids. The USSR and the states that resembled it were workers’ states. Some critical Marxists made only slight theoretic modifications to that doctrine by attributing differing degrees of degeneration or deformation of those states due to their being controlled by a bureaucracy.

As is well known, however, Marx had planned to write about the state in his Capital. Thus, in a draft of his research plan for Book II, the state was one of the six parts of that plan: "General concept of capital...After addressing capital we should concentrate on the property of the land. Afterwards, on wage work...Afterwards, on the state...The state turned towards the outside: colonies. International commerce....Lastly, the world market"

He was unable to complete his plan and could not systematically develop his ideas on the state. However, his writings abound with references to the state. In his theoretical work, before recurring to the allegory of the floor to refer to the infrastructure and the house and roof to refer to the superstructure (as in the above mentioned "doctrine"), he used the "circle metaphor: a point in the circumference determines another point but is itself in turn determined, even though each type of determination may be different." Had Marx been able to develop his ideas on this issue, we might have learned something about how state and capital determine each other, maybe even been able to understand how a state structure that emerged from an anti-capitalist revolution could produce, in certain conditions of autonomy from the society that generated it, certain unprecedented forms of exploitation and alienation. The Soviet road to socialism has reached a dead end, and this fact impels us to go back to basics.
In order to understand a special case of surviving "really imaginary socialism", namely, the state and society that emerged from the Cuban Revolution, we should break with the national approach that has shaped many of the political analyses and prognoses on it. We should take into account the so-called globalization instead of only attacking its ideology. Globalization is not merely an ideological construct, forged in order to roll back the economic and political gains of the working classes during the postwar years.

Globalization has become a fashionable subject the fall of the Wall of Berlin in 1989, but it is indeed the result of deep changes under way in global capitalism that became visible just in the 1980s, after two decades of crisis following the end of the long postwar boom (1945-1970).

The consequences of these changes became clear in the virtual disintegration of the three world’s main national economic models: welfare-state-Keynesianism in the advanced capitalist countries, post-colonial developmentalism in the Third World’s countries, and the really imaginary socialist countries. We think then that the collapse of the latter took place in a very particular international context. All these mentioned national economic models shared a view of the state as a distinct agency above or apart from or beyond capital, capable in some cases of regulating the capital to the benefit of one or other of the great classes, and in other cases of expropriating capital and “building a new society”.

This was probably a serious misleading view of both capitalism and state. In the case of capitalist countries, the creation of welfare systems, national economic management and other gains were demanded and forced by the working classes, not instituted by a naturally benevolent state. The reformist character of this welfare capitalism was well understood by ruling classes. So the subsequent neoliberal crusade was a thoroughly calculated response from the establishment. “Wild” capitalism is not an economic aberration, as Keynesians and reformists would have us believe.

And in the case of really imaginary socialist countries, once every post-revolutionary state consolidated itself after the ebbing of masses’ upsurges and mobilizations, the alleged autonomy of the “socialist world” was nothing but a mixture of a refraction of labor power on a world’s scale, and the outcome of capital’s pressures transmitted through international flows of money and goods.

Capital is a social relation, and the state too. An important lesson from 20th Century seems to be that there is no way out of capital if we try to do it through the state. What to do instead?

Francisco T. Sobrino

fsobrino@herramienta.com.ar