

# Representative Government in Socialist Cuba

by  
*Peter Roman*

A study of representative government in socialist Cuba must be based on criteria that arise from and correspond to its particular socioeconomic system, taking into account the theoretical and historical background of socialist political development, the relations of production and the dominant class, and the economic development of the country. This means that many of the basic concepts of representative government under capitalism may not be applicable either in theory or in practice.

The literature published on the Cuban government lacks detailed analysis of how the system functions. Even writers who supposedly sympathize with the revolution have concluded that, in the best of cases, Cuban representative government has severe limitations because it does not fall within the historically defined limits of capitalist democracy. Thus it is said that without electoral campaigns and electoral propaganda the people have no significant political options; that the only level that has direct elections, the municipal level, is limited to local issues and therefore insignificant; and that, the majority of municipal and provincial delegates and National Assembly deputies being party militants, voting in these bodies is dictated by the party, which in any case dominates the parliamentary system through the candidacy commissions.

My study of the Cuban parliamentary system explores the roles of the municipal assembly, the provincial assembly, and the National Assembly and the role of the Communist party. Its empirical core consists of four municipal assemblies on which I did fieldwork: those of Playa, an urban municipality in City of Havana Province; Bauta, a municipality on the outskirts of the city of Havana in Havana Province, where agriculture and textile manufacturing are the main economic activities; Cienfuegos, an industrial city 200 miles southeast of Havana in Cienfuegos Province; and Palmira, a small, rural

Peter Roman is a professor at Hostos Community College of the City University of New York. He is a member of the editorial board of *Socialism and Democracy*. This research was supported in part by grants from the City University of New York PSC-CUNY Research Award Program and the CUNY-Caribbean Exchange Program of Hunter College of the City University of New York.

LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES, Issue 76, Vol. 20 No. 1, Winter 1993, 7-27  
© 1993 Latin American Perspectives

municipality, also in Cienfuegos Province, in which sugar is produced and processed. I shall also discuss the operation of the provincial assemblies of the provinces in which these municipalities are located—City of Havana, Havana, and Cienfuegos—and that of the National Assembly.

During my research visits to Cuba (October–November, December 1986, September 1987–June 1988, December 1988–January 1989, May 1989) I interviewed constituents, municipal delegates (some of whom were also provincial delegates and National Assembly deputies), members of municipal and provincial executive committees, directors of economic planning and budgets, government ministers and officials, and elements of the leadership of both the National Assembly and the Communist party. Among my other research activities I participated in meetings between delegates and constituents, observed seminars for delegates, took part in visits by delegates to constituents' homes, and attended sessions of municipal and provincial assemblies and meetings and activities of the permanent commissions at each of the three levels. In February 1992 I returned to Cuba to interview Juan Escalona, the new president of the National Assembly, regarding proposed changes in the system and to observe the newly formed neighborhood bodies called *consejos populares* (people's councils).

### THE ORGANS OF PEOPLE'S POWER

Representative government in Cuba, known as the Organos de Poder Popular (Organs of People's Power—OPP) has three levels—the municipal assembly, the provincial assembly, and the National Assembly. It is a system that identifies and responds to the needs of the people.

The municipal assembly is the most representative, responsive, and active level, and delegates to it are the only ones nominated and elected directly. Municipal delegates, who represent electoral districts of about 1,000 voters (fewer in rural areas), are nominated in neighborhood meetings and elected by secret ballot in competitive elections (there must be from two to eight candidates) for a term of 2½ years. In lieu of electoral campaigns, the biographies of the candidates are posted in the neighborhoods. The municipal assembly elects provincial assembly delegates every 2½ years and National Assembly deputies every five years, mainly from within itself.

The Cuban people closely identify and have personal contact with their municipal delegates, who are socially and economically indistinguishable from the electorate except that they tend to have achieved a higher level of education and a higher percentage of party membership (60 percent versus

10 percent for the population). Except for a few assembly leaders, delegates are for the most part not professional politicians; they receive no salary and continue to work and to be paid in their workplaces (the same is true of most provincial assembly delegates and National Assembly deputies). Municipal delegates control, investigate, inspect, pass judgment on, and oversee the economic and social activities within the jurisdiction of the municipality and have some input in running provincial and national enterprises located within the municipality. They approve local economic plans and budgets before they are sent to the provincial assembly and the central planning board.

The role of the vanguard party is essentially political in relation to the whole society, including the government, and consists of setting national priorities to direct and encourage the development of socialist consciousness and behavior. The party appoints or approves the appointment of personnel in key governmental and societal positions. Its role is one of guiding, monitoring, and assisting the Organs of People's Power (principally on the municipal and provincial levels) in carrying out their representative and government functions and approving those recommended for leadership roles at all levels. At the level of the National Assembly the party in effect chooses the leadership, but it has absolutely no role in the nomination of candidates for municipal assembly delegate.

Cuban President Fidel Castro commented on the municipal delegate election process in a speech celebrating the 30th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution (1989: 80-81):

Regarding our electoral system — and the institutions of the revolution are so often called into question — the way delegates are nominated in the electoral districts, which are the foundations for all the state's power, I believe our electoral system is also unique. This is so because the party does not nominate candidates to be delegates, there must be more than one candidate and not more than eight, and they are nominated by the people without any participation by the party. The party doesn't say we nominate this candidate or that one; it is the people who do the nominating. That doesn't exist in any other country. . . . If the people were counterrevolutionary, if the majority of the people were counted revolutionary, all they need do would be to nominate counterrevolutionaries and the majority of the delegates would be counterrevolutionaries opposed to the revolution and socialism.

It would be difficult to understand how the Cuban parliamentary system functions without taking into account the political consequences of governing in the context of a planned socialist economy with neither private property nor profound social class divisions or differences. Because of the absence of these factors, parliamentary debates and decisions in Cuba differ from those in capitalist representative systems. In the parliamentary bodies I studied, the

agreements, reports, evaluations, and laws that were debated and voted on were usually not characterized by favoring one sector of the population to the detriment of the other. Instead, the proceedings were usually applicable equally to the constituent population as a whole. An attempt was made to resolve concerns expressed by delegates prior to voting wherever possible and thus avoid a sharply divided vote. I witnessed only a few divided votes, and these only at the municipal assembly level. In the National Assembly, perhaps because of the prestige of the national leadership and because they have lacked a base of support among the electorate, deputies seem reluctant to oppose what is proposed in formal sessions or to attempt to set their own agenda. During meetings of National Assembly commissions, however, I observed more willingness to voice concerns and opposition.

In the socialist tradition of the Paris Commune of 1871 and of the Soviets of 1905 and 1917, most of the municipal delegates I interviewed, including those in leadership positions and those who were also provincial delegates and national deputies, came from worker or peasant backgrounds. One important reason for this relative class homogeneity, of course, was the emigration of almost all the wealthy of Cuba and a major portion of the middle class. Another reason was neighborhood-level nomination. A further one is that it is difficult for higher-level professionals to serve as municipal delegates because of the enormous amount of time this voluntary labor requires. Consequently, most delegates are not only workers or lower-level professionals but also persons well-known by and strongly representative of their constituencies. Given the absence of opportunity for financial gain or privileges and the sacrifices involved, citizens without a desire to serve the constituencies and without socialist consciousness rarely become delegates.

### THE MUNICIPAL ASSEMBLY

Municipal delegates are the access point and main link between the people and their government and, in large part, shape the electorate's attitudes toward the government. Among their most important tasks is to be directly accountable to the electorate—to try to resolve everyday problems, complaints, and suggestions (*planteamientos*) raised with them by their constituents either personally or at the biannual neighborhood meetings called accountability assemblies (*asambleas de rendición de cuenta*). This is a variant of the "instructed-delegate model" (*mandat impératif*) to which Marx pointed in his writings on the Paris Commune of 1871. At these meetings the delegates report on the municipal assembly's and their own activities during the previous six months, present crime reports, and explain how the com-

plaints and suggestions from the prior meeting have been handled. Those attending then offer new complaints and suggestions. Delegates have usually been able to resolve the majority of the concerns raised by constituents or at least to provide convincing explanations, but the severe economic shortages characterizing the “special period” since 1991 have made this increasingly difficult. There is intense competition among municipalities within a province to resolve the highest percentage of concerns.

People are aware of the amount of work delegates do without monetary remuneration or privileges. The personal style of the delegates’ work with the community is conducive to a comfortable, even familiar identification with the government and a positive attitude toward the political process. Ninety-five percent of those eligible vote, and 60-80 percent attend street meetings to nominate candidates and to meet with the delegates, all without coercion or legal obligation. Most people know who their delegates are and are personally acquainted with them on a first-name basis. Citizens may discuss problems, including personal ones, with their delegates at any time, whether in chance encounters in the street or in their homes or offices. My observations led me to conclude that this familiar political style is in large measure a consequence of the emphasis on equality in Cuban society, the open and public character of neighborhood life, and the neighborhood-level nomination of candidates for the office. It has also been influenced by the personal manner in which President Fidel Castro relates to the public.

Delegates (assisted by seminars held by the municipal assembly) organize and direct the accountability assemblies and transmit citizen concerns to the appropriate state agencies. They must submit monthly reports to the municipal assembly secretary concerning the status of citizen concerns. They meet twice a month with representatives of government enterprises and entities to receive and discuss written answers on these issues, and they visit the citizens involved at home to discuss the acceptability of those answers. When answers are deemed unacceptable, the specific concerns are raised again in the municipal assembly executive committee. Citizens can and do appeal all the way to the National Assembly if necessary, though they are encouraged to seek local solutions.

Delegates are also responsible for projects and problems that arise in their electoral districts. For example, they may coordinate volunteer work on Sundays to fix the roof on a local store or build a sidewalk or help to organize local microbrigades (special work brigades administered by the central government) to repair homes. Delegates also work closely with the mass organizations in the neighborhood, such as the *Comités de Defensa de la Revolución* (Committees for the Defense of the Revolution — CDRs) and the

Federación de Mujeres Cubanas (Federation of Cuban Women — FMC), the police, the local Communist party nucleus, local social workers, family doctors, and health clinics to help solve local social or medical problems.

In addition to attending the sessions of the municipal assembly, delegates participate in permanent commissions of the assembly that oversee specific areas, such as health, education, commerce, etc., making on-site inspections and writing reports. They attend meetings, for example, to discuss the economic planning process, to review municipal problems in preparation for the accountability assemblies, and to try to resolve constituents' concerns.

The municipal assembly meets in ordinary session twice a year and in special session about four times a year, each session lasting a day or less. The municipal assembly analyzes, discusses, supervises, monitors, inspects, and controls the social, economic, judicial, and political affairs of the municipality. It also selects administrators for local enterprises and entities (such as stores and polyclinics) and participates in formulating the municipal plan and budget, which it must approve. Another important role is monitoring the performance of the municipality's provincial- and national-level enterprises. The municipal assembly has no legislative powers: these lie solely with the National Assembly.

Delegates to these assemblies elect an executive committee, provincial assembly delegates, and National Assembly deputies from among candidates proposed by the municipal candidacy commission, presided over by a representative of the municipal branch of the Communist party and including representatives of the municipal branches of the Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas (Union of Communist Youth — UJC), the Central de Trabajadores de Cuba (Cuban Workers' Federation — CTC), the FMC, and the CDRs. There must be at least 25 percent more candidates than positions. Municipal delegates can and do add candidates to the lists. The fact that the candidacy commission is presided over by a party representative does not necessarily mean that the party dominates it. I attended a meeting of the candidacy commission in Playa to choose candidates to fill three vacancies for provincial delegate. The most influential person at the meeting was not the party representative but the municipal representative from the CDR, who had the most information, garnered from the local (block) CDRs, regarding the delegates. Party militancy was not a criterion discussed. Only one of the four candidates proposed by the commission and none of the three elected was a militant.

The executive committee has approximately 15 members, all municipal delegates. The president, vice-president, secretary, and others with responsibility for specific areas are professional members and receive a salary from the municipal assembly (approximately what they received on their regular

jobs). After the election of the executive committee, the candidacy commission recommends members to fill these professional positions, subject to ratification by the assembly. In Playa, weeks prior to the executive committee election the candidacy commission had already selected and informed those it planned to appoint, but sometimes the candidates recommended for professional positions fail to be elected to the executive committee.

The percentage of party members among members of executive committees, provincial delegates, and National Assembly deputies is usually higher than the percentage of municipal delegates who are party militants. The recommendation for municipal assembly president, made by the candidacy commission and ratified by the municipal assembly, is approved by the provincial party, and the recommendations for the other professional members are approved by the municipal party. The president, being a member of the municipal party political bureau, is certain to be a party militant. However, in Playa, for example, several nonparty delegates have been elected to professional positions.

The executive committee, meeting every other week, acts for the municipal assembly between sessions, and all actions taken and resolutions passed by it must be ratified by the assembly. In fact, the report of the activities of the executive committee is usually one of the most intensely debated items on the agenda. The executive committee sets the agenda for municipal assembly sessions and appoints local administrators, both subject to the approval of the assembly.

The municipal assembly's commissions report first to the executive committee and then to the assembly. Commission members and leadership are chosen by the executive committee, which also sets the agendas. The majority of commission members are delegates, but there are also volunteer members from the community chosen among citizens with expertise in a particular field. The president of each commission is always a delegate. Each commission is charged with investigating, inspecting, and writing commentaries and critiques on reports presented to the municipal assembly by state organs within its purview. It reviews the citizen proposals that fall within its area and visits the targets of complaints and the citizens who make them. During an inspection of restaurants in Playa, a delegate from the commerce and gastronomy commission checked the kitchen, food storage areas, and bathrooms for cleanliness, verified that the food listed on the menu was being offered, questioned the customers about the quality of the food and the service, and reviewed the restaurant's records with its administrator. During another inspection I observed, commission members toured a dental clinic in Bauta, questioned patients and dentists, and met with administrators to discuss some problems that had come to the commission's attention.

Throughout the representative system but especially at the municipal level, great importance is given to citizen complaints. The municipal assembly executive committee, aided by the provincial government, spends a great deal of effort preparing for and evaluating the biannual accountability assemblies. The municipal and provincial governments and the municipal party send representatives to these assemblies to appraise and to suggest improvements to the delegate, and representatives of state enterprises and any enterprises involved in citizen concerns attend to respond to citizens' questions. The municipal assembly secretary writes a monthly report to the executive committee regarding the resolution of concerns, listed according to category, arising from the prior assemblies and produces a biannual report evaluating the accountability process. Assembly commissions also evaluate this process. The citizen who raises an issue receives visits at his home from a representative of the enterprise or entity involved, (in some instances) a member of the corresponding assembly commission, and his local delegate to verify that he has received an answer and is satisfied. The level of resolution of such issues is 60-95 percent.

Citizen complaints (*quejas*), usually of a more individual nature, are delivered in person or by letter to the offices of the municipal assembly. The president reads all the letters and the reports of the personal interviews. The municipal government, by law, must respond to complaints within 60 days; compliance with this requirement is checked by the provincial assembly and also by the National Assembly. A quarterly report on complaints goes to the executive committee of the municipal assembly and an annual report to the municipal and provincial assemblies.

The municipal office of planning and budget is under the control of the municipal assembly and receives inputs mainly from the professional members of the executive committee (it is usually the vice-president who is in charge of economic affairs) and the administrators and unions of local entities. This office then draws up the municipal economic plan and budget, which must be approved, together with a report from the assembly's economic commission, by the municipal assembly delegates. Citizen proposals weigh heavily in investment decisions for the economic plan. Recommendations for the local plan and budget are sent to the provincial government and then, as part of the provincial plan and budget, to the central planning board. After the national economic plan and budget is approved by the National Assembly, the final figures, which include funds for investments to be decided on by the municipality, are sent back down to the municipality for approval and implementation. The commission and assembly debates I reviewed regarding plans and budgets on all three levels were minimal.



Relative absence of debate at this (and higher) levels of government may reflect insufficient knowledge of economic matters, a problem being dealt with through videotapes and seminars. At one assembly session in Playa, delegates asked the municipal director of the budget to write his report in a more accessible style.

The notion that the municipal assemblies lack power because the most important economic activities are not under their control is erroneous. Although the major branches of the Cuban economy and economic planning are under national and provincial control, the suggestions and needs expressed by municipalities are given serious consideration in the formulation of provincial and national plans. Municipalities can and do veto proposed locations for projects involved in these plans. Furthermore, the municipal directors of planning, professional executive committee members, and municipal assembly commissions monitor performance, plan fulfillment, the labor supply, and the profitability of national and provincial enterprises and entities located in their municipality and report periodically to the municipal assembly. One reason for the municipality's concern regarding the operations within its boundaries is that it shares in their profits. If problems are identified, the municipal vice-president informs both the local administrators and the provincial or national authorities. In Bauta, the only complete monitoring of the large Ariguanabo textile plant, which is run by the Ministry of Light Industry, is done by the municipality. In Palmira, the sugar refineries are run by the central government, but oversight and day-to-day management are mainly performed by the municipal assembly. In Playa, a director of the provincial fruit-and-vegetable-distributing entity was caught lying during questioning by delegates in a municipal assembly session, and as a result his report was rejected and the next day he was replaced. Later the Minister of Agriculture came to the municipal government's office to see how the distribution system could be improved.

For social services such as health, education, and transportation, policy is set at the national level, but the municipal assembly is responsible for personnel, performance, problem solving, and construction for units located in the municipality. During a campaign in City of Havana Province in 1987 and 1988 in which microbrigades built 104 new nursery schools, the construction was closely coordinated and monitored by professional members of the municipal executive committees.

In 1989, people's councils (*consejos populares*) were added to some municipalities in an effort to make the government more accessible and more responsive to those living far from the municipal assembly offices. Since then they have been extended to all municipalities in City of Havana Province and

are being introduced all over the country. They group approximately 15 electoral districts and include the municipal delegates and representatives of the mass organizations and state enterprises in the area. The council presidents and sometimes also vice-presidents, elected by the delegates on the council, must be delegates and work full-time for the councils.

The emphasis on the closeness of the state and the people places the people's council in the socialist theoretical context. A historical precedent for it can be found in the deputy groups of the former Soviet Union. Its primary purpose is to respond to local issues—corruption, inefficiency, citizen complaints and concerns—quickly at the local level, with the minimum of bureaucracy. Councils have been granted considerable authority, including the right to handle local economic crimes such as food hoarding and the bribing of store managers and to intervene in state enterprises under provincial or national control. I spent the day with a delegate from the Santa Fe section in Playa who was the president of the district's people's council. Santa Fe is physically set apart, which accentuates a feeling of community; councils lacking this historic sense of community have been less successful. It was clear that most people knew the president and that the council had brought benefits to the community. A few days prior to my arrival, a severe tropical low had caused flooding, some houses having been washed out to sea, and he was clearly in charge of the cleanup effort.

According to National Assembly President Juan Escalona, significant changes are being proposed for the municipal assemblies, with the role of the party reduced considerably. The candidacy commission is to be elected by municipal delegates and no longer to include a representative of the party; the party is no longer to have a say in selecting officers, and the president is no longer to be a member of the party's municipal bureau. Officers are to be elected by the delegates from among themselves. However, the rest of the executive committee is to be replaced by an administrative unit composed of experts in the field, who may or may not be delegates but will be ratified by the delegates. The aim here is to ensure more expertise for those in charge of health, education, commerce, etc., and to make the role of municipal delegate more one of oversight and control of these activities. Furthermore, the municipal assembly commissions are to be strengthened and made answerable to the assembly rather than to the executive committee. Finally, there is a commitment to strengthen the role of the municipal assembly, especially in relation to the provincial assembly and to entities and enterprises located in the municipality that are controlled by the province or a national ministry.

The municipal assemblies are the level of government that takes the most initiative in discovering and resolving problems and satisfying the needs expressed by the people. Because of the open nomination procedure, voters

tend to identify closely with their municipal delegates. Through direct, competitive election, delegates are directly responsible to their electors. The people's councils have strengthened municipal assemblies and brought them closer to the people. The majority of provincial assembly delegates and National Assembly deputies are also municipal delegates. The municipal delegate is the beginning of the chain by which national policy is formulated.

### THE PROVINCIAL ASSEMBLY

Provincial delegates are elected by the municipal assemblies from among candidates recommended by their candidacy commissions. The presidents of municipal assemblies are *ex officio* provincial delegates. The provincial assembly controls and directs the state economic enterprises and social and service entities under provincial control and helps monitor those under national control. It formulates and approves provincial economic plans and budgets and aids, inspects, monitors, and coordinates the work of the province's municipal assemblies. It holds two regular sessions and several extraordinary sessions per year.

The provincial assembly is similar in its organization and operating procedure to the municipal assembly. Provincial delegates elect an executive committee from candidates proposed by a provincial candidacy commission. The executive committee carries on the work of the assembly between sessions, and its actions and resolutions must subsequently be approved by the delegates. Executive committee members are usually not also municipal delegates, but most are not salaried by the provincial government.

The provincial assembly is much less likely than the municipality to take initiatives and more likely to work with the municipalities of the province, providing assistance when requested. It is the link between the municipalities and the national government. Because of the special urban characteristics of City of Havana Province, which is subdivided into several municipalities, its provincial assembly directly controls entities, such as transportation, films, and the aqueduct, that in other provinces are under municipal control and thus is necessarily also more a government of direct initiatives regarding these services and economic planning. Officers and functionaries of the provincial assembly periodically visit municipalities to inspect and to interview delegates and issue reports on the municipal governments' activities and needs, including those of the delegates and the organs under municipal control. The municipal executive committee also issues periodic reports to the provincial assembly executive committee and the municipal assembly to the provincial assembly.

Complaints at the provincial level are handled by a functionary who makes a biannual inspection of all the municipalities in the province and issues a quarterly report based on the information received from them. The report contains numbers of complaints by municipality and category and how many have been resolved. The person who handles citizen suggestions issues similar reports. The provincial assemblies help to prepare municipal delegates for their biannual accountability assemblies. The professional members of the provincial executive committee read all the suggestions received from the municipalities and the complaints that correspond to their areas of responsibility and, if necessary, work with the municipalities to resolve them. In City of Havana Province, given the large number of proposals (over 30,000 at each biannual assembly), the executive committee studies them according to the numbers compiled in each category and concentrates on resolving those that correspond to the greatest collective needs.

The commissions of the provincial assemblies work with provincial enterprises and entities and receive the proposals from the municipalities that correspond to their areas of responsibility to monitor their resolution and to visit the citizens involved. They also coordinate areas of municipal concern. For example, the education commission of City of Havana Province visited nursery schools (under municipal control) to check on enrollment and attendance with the goal of making full use of all the schools in the province. As is the case with the municipal commissions, some of the members are not delegates.

Development of provincial economic plans and budgets, done by departments under the provincial assembly, consists mainly of assembling, evaluating, and combining the municipal plans and budgets, which are then added to the investments and expenses related specifically to the province. Almost all the discretionary investments below the national level are at the municipal level. The provincial assembly participates in formulating and adjusting municipal plans and budgets and also provides input to the central planning department with regard to needs in the province.

### THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

National Assembly deputies are elected by municipal assemblies from among candidates selected by the candidacy commissions and approved by the central committee of the party. There are two separate candidate lists, one made up of municipal delegates and the other of more or less distinguished citizens, including those with important government and/or party posts, and

celebrities, for example, in sports and the arts. The majority of deputies (about 54 percent) elected are from the municipal delegate list, which gives significant representation in the highest organ of Cuban representative government to delegates who have very close ties to the people and who are also the most outspoken and active deputies). Most deputies receive no pay and regularly attend the sessions of the municipal assemblies that elected them, to which they must report periodically. Municipal assemblies have the power of recall over deputies they have elected. My observation is that most citizens (especially in urban areas), while aware of the National Assembly debates (which are thoroughly reported in the press and have been carried live on television), do not know who their National Assembly deputies are, since citizens do not directly elect deputies and thus deputies mainly report and respond to the municipal assemblies.

National Assembly deputies elect, from among the candidates selected by a candidacy commission made up of deputies, the officers of the National Assembly and the Council of State and also ratify the Council of Ministers and the leadership of both councils (including the combined position of President of the Council of State and Council of Ministers, currently held by Fidel Castro). In contrast to similar elections on the municipal and provincial levels, this one offers no choice among candidates, who are preselected by the party leadership.

The National Assembly's charge is to control, inspect, and monitor the national government ministries and state organs, including the judiciary and the attorney general's office, and to supervise the local Organs of People's Power, primarily on the provincial level. The National Assembly does not set long-range national policy goals (this is considered to be the role of the party), nor has it debated or discussed foreign policy.

Only the National Assembly has legislative powers. While individual deputies may propose laws, deputies have neither the time (they are not professional politicians) nor the staff or other necessary support to give them sufficient independence for this. Legislative initiatives or proposals have come mainly from ministries and nongovernmental entities such as the CTC (for labor legislation) or the FMC. The Communist party reviews all legislation prior to presentation to the National Assembly. Ministry officials then work with the corresponding assembly commission to draft a final version, and the commission drafts its commentary. During this process substantial changes are possible (as, for example, happened during the discussion of the new penal code in the constitutional affairs commission in 1988). Ministry officials then meet with deputies from each province to explain the proposals and answer questions.

National Assembly sessions last for two to three days and are held twice a year, extra sessions being convened if necessary (one was called several years ago). Deputies debate and vote on proposed laws, reports, and National Assembly commissions' commentaries and critiques made regarding these reports and proposed legislation. The assembly discusses and approves at each session the reports of a province, of a government ministry, and of the prosecutors and judiciary branches. It votes, usually without debate, on the national economic plan and budget and the reports of the Council of State (a body that represents the legislature between sessions) and the Council of Ministers. The lack of debate on the economic plan and budget is due to the complexity of the material and the fact that deputies are given only synopses, usually only on the day of the vote. The lack of debate on the reports of the Council of State and the Council of Ministers can be attributed in part to deputies' almost total lack of information; for example, the texts of the decrees listed for approval are not made available to them.

The duties of most deputies consist largely of work on National Assembly commissions. Here again the relative importance of deputies who are municipal delegates emerges; many of the deputies who are not also municipal delegates have high government positions and therefore rarely have time to participate in the commissions. This means that municipal delegates/deputies do the bulk of the work on the commissions, and this has left open for them important commission posts such as the presidency of the powerful constitutional affairs commission or the commission on local Organs of People's Power.

The commissions undertake investigations and report their findings to the National Assembly and prepare commentaries on reports and proposed laws to be debated during the National Assembly sessions. Annual commission agendas are set by the National Assembly presidency. The commission on global economic activities comments on the national economic plan and budget and has conducted surveys on the quality of production. The constitutional affairs commission issues commentaries on proposed legislation to verify that there is no conflict with the Cuban constitution or existing laws. It has produced a report suggesting new methods for dealing with proposed legislation that would strengthen the role of the commissions and of popular consultations. The commission on local organs of People's Power makes on-site inspections to prepare commentaries on the biannual reports of provincial assemblies to the National Assembly. Members of this commission, upon visiting mountainous regions of Las Tunas Province, discovered that those living in isolated areas were not receiving milk, and at their insistence local dairies were established.

Debates in the National Assembly are characterized by the pursuit of consensus, and votes are almost always unanimous. When it is evident that there is strong disagreement on an issue, it is usually withdrawn for further study (as happened, for example, with a debate on measures to ensure that divorced husbands paid alimony and child support). It is evident during debate that there is no fear of expressing differences and that these differences lead to compromises. For example, many deputies found certain aspects of the new penal code too lenient (fines for minor thefts) or too harsh (penalties for teenage girls who hide their pregnancy from their families and subsequently kill their newborns). It is also evident that there is pressure on deputies to conform in voting, especially during formal sessions. Dissent is more common in commission meetings (where most deputies are municipal delegates).

Escalona spoke at length of changes at this level to be presented to the National Assembly for approval. One major proposal was direct, competitive elections for provincial assembly delegates and National Assembly deputies. The nominations would be made by the municipal assemblies on the basis of the recommendations of their candidacy commissions, and candidates would no longer require the approval of the party. Escalona recognized that some sort of campaign would be needed for the voters to get to know the candidates, although he firmly rejected political campaigns based on attacks and false promises (*politiquería*). This approach would make deputies more closely identified with the municipalities from which they were elected and better known by the voters.

The National Assembly itself would undergo profound reform. Escalona spoke of the need to end meaningless formal practices, many borrowed from the former Soviet Union, such as the pressure for unanimous votes. He also spoke of the need to strengthen the role of the National Assembly. Its commissions would be restructured, and commission presidents would be professional and no longer linked (as has sometimes been the case) to the ministries that their commissions supposedly oversee. Furthermore, they would approve legislation before it was presented to the National Assembly. The National Assembly would play a greater role in economic planning. Escalona considers the whole system of planning in terms of specific time-frames (one-year plans, five-year plans, etc.) a disastrous inheritance from the earlier socialist countries that has made it impossible for the National Assembly to consider and debate economic matters. Finally, and perhaps most important, a need is recognized for the development of political structures and practices in preparation for the time when Fidel Castro is no longer the leader of the Cuban Revolution. His tremendous prestige and dominant

personality have resulted in national leadership selection procedures—for example, noncompetitive elections for the Council of State and its leadership—which for all practical purposes cannot be changed while he is still able to exercise leadership.

### **THE ORGANS OF PEOPLE'S POWER AND POPULAR RULE**

The will of the people is expressed through municipal delegates because of their close contact with their constituents, reinforced by the neighborhood nomination procedure and the accountability assemblies. The municipal assembly officers and the majority of the provincial delegates and national deputies come from the ranks of these municipal delegates. This means that at all levels of the system there are people who are best able to understand and express the needs and concerns of the people. With all their drawbacks, the indirect elections for provincial and national representatives do ensure that directly elected municipal delegates, who are usually unknown outside of their electoral districts, constitute the majority at the higher levels, at the same time strengthening the role of the municipal assemblies.

Importance is given to the people's voice through the responsibility of the Cuban government to respond to the suggestions and complaints of citizens not only on the individual level but collectively. A suggestion or complaint is an individual act or, at most, the collective act of those present at an accountability assembly, but taken together they influence Cuban politics and policy. From this it is clear why it is important that the officers of the municipal and provincial assemblies be familiar with the suggestions and complaints arising in their areas and that reports of them be distributed at all levels of government.

Information on the needs and opinions of the people is also funneled to the municipal assemblies by the municipal party organization through the *Estado de Opinión*, a monthly report compiled at the provincial and national levels by party members on anonymous opinions overheard on the street, in markets, and elsewhere. Public opinion polling is also done by the party and by the Cuban Institute for Consumer Research and Demand Guidance. The information from these various sources regarding citizens' problems and demands strongly influences municipal policy-making and economic planning. The executive committee professionals let the planning office know of the needs expressed by the electorate so that they can be taken into consideration. I was shown evidence of supermarkets, agromarkets, bakeries,



commercial centers, housing, and building repairs that had been included in local economic plans through this process. Proposals are sent to the level to which they correspond, and statistics on them are distributed at each level and thus also influence investments at the provincial and national levels. The new milk factory in Cienfuegos Province and the new hospital planned for Playa are examples of developments suggested by citizens.

### THE ROLE OF THE CUBAN COMMUNIST PARTY

Perhaps least understood is the role of the vanguard party in relation to the Organs of People's Power and to the possibility of representative government in a one-party state. It is said that the party is the antithesis of representative government and that the more it is involved the less representative the government necessarily will be. It is said that the higher the percentage of delegates who are party militants the less representative and responsive is the assembly. It is said that the party tells the representatives who are militants how to vote and what to do and, through the candidacy commissions and the nomenclature system, maintains total control over the leadership and the composition of assemblies. Since the party sets the long-range societal goals, it is said that it has so much power as to deprive the organs of People's Power of any importance. I believe that my research provides a challenge to these claims.

The principal role of the Communist party is meant to be political—to stimulate, guide, and promote the development of a socialist society and a populace with socialist consciousness. In socialist development, consciousness to a large extent replaces the capitalist market and the profit motive in the administration and coordination of production and in the management of labor. Socialist consciousness, while difficult to implant, implement, and spread, is one of the principal elements that makes socialist transition possible. In Cuba, it is clearly the party that is best able to create and encourage socialist consciousness; its militants are supposedly selected in part on the basis of their consciousness, and it encompasses all levels of societal and governmental structure.

One important role the party plays is helping the delegates and especially the leadership carry out their functions. Party officials work with the professional municipal and provincial executive committee members in solving problems, both local and national. In the municipality of Cienfuegos, for example, the first secretary of the municipal party promised at a session of the municipal assembly to help pressure the administrators of enterprises to

resolve the remaining citizen concerns. In Playa the professional executive committee member in charge of commerce and the president of the commerce commission worked with a special party commission set up as part of the rectification campaign to improve services. In Bauta the local party official assigned to a specific sphere such as education meets monthly with the corresponding municipal executive member and those in the municipality who run the office of education. Party representatives participate in seminars for delegates. The party neighborhood nuclei, composed mainly of housewives and retirees, help local delegates in tasks such as preparation for accountability assemblies. Municipal party representatives attend these meetings and evaluate how they were conducted. The party nuclei of the workplaces of the municipal government criticize professional executive committee members (most of whom are party members) for falling down on the job but do not instruct them how to vote or what to do.

The party, in fact, does not tell delegates or deputies who are party militants how to vote or what to do. As militants, of course, they are bound to the party program and agreements, but these consist mainly of general, long-term strategies and guidelines and have little relation to the everyday debates, votes, decisions, and work of delegates and deputies. When I asked municipal and provincial delegates who were party members about resolutions passed at recent local party assemblies, only the municipal assembly presidents, as members of the municipal party bureau, had ever even read them. National Assembly deputies, almost all of whom are party militants, were more aware of the published resolutions passed at the recent national party congress, but these resolutions had little applicability to their specific tasks or votes as deputies. The municipal and provincial delegates I interviewed, including those who were also professional executive committee members, National Assembly deputies, and presidents of National Assembly commissions, all told me that the party does not try to tell them what to do with regard to their governmental roles. The party does not act differently toward a delegate who is not a militant. I observed among delegates no measurable differences in attitude and behavior based solely upon party militancy.

Approximately 60 percent of the municipal delegates are party members, not through party manipulation but because they are nominated and elected by their constituents. In neighborhood nominating meetings that I attended, party membership was mentioned when applicable, along with the other merits of the nominee, by the person making the nomination and listed in the official biography of the candidate but not highlighted as the most important criterion. The percentage of party members may also be high because, given

the great amount of volunteer work involved in being a delegate, those with the strongest ideological commitment tend to be party members and are among the most likely to accept nomination. The percentage of party members elected to the municipal executive committees as provincial delegates and as National Assembly deputies is usually higher than the percentage of municipal delegates.

Although the party has no role in choosing candidates for municipal delegate, in a few cases in past elections, if the party had an interest in having someone serve as a professional member of the municipal executive committee it could try to have that person nominated. It would then still be necessary for that person to be elected in the electoral district and elected as well by the delegates to the executive committee—an eventuality by no means certain. Beginning with the elections of spring 1989, this type of party intervention has ceased.

Instead of antagonism between party and government, there seems to be a spirit of working together and reaching agreement. Especially on the local level, Jeffrey Hahn's (1988: 259) commentary on what had been the practice in the former Soviet Union holds true for Cuba: "for most issues resolved by local government the need for party authority simply does not arise. Only when there are jurisdictional disputes between governmental and nongovernmental agencies, or within the bureaucracy, would the party committee be likely to get directly involved." The municipal assembly leaders I met, most of whom were militants, were, however, firm with regard to their autonomy. When disagreements do occur that cannot be resolved at the municipal level, either the government prevails or the issue is raised at the provincial level. Speaking at a provincewide seminar for local assembly commission members, Jorge Lezcano, the first secretary of the Communist party for the City of Havana, criticized the work of the commissions. Many delegates disagreed with him and made their disagreement known, and at the following session of the provincial assembly Lezcano felt it necessary to clarify his remarks. Representatives of the party who are not delegates must be granted permission by the delegates to speak at an assembly session. Other practices regarding party participation vary among municipalities. In Bauta, the second secretary of the municipal party is invited, along with a representative of the municipal CTC, to the executive committee meetings.

The role of the party is greatest in the National Assembly. Here, in addition to approving proposed legislation before it is submitted, it has important influence in setting the agendas of the National Assembly, the Council of State, and the commissions and approves the candidates for National Assembly president, vice-president, and secretary, for the Council of State, and for

National Assembly deputy. It is at this level that the overlap between party and state leadership is the greatest and the separation between party and government least clear.

Escalona was adamant about the need to reduce the role of the party and emphasize its political role. To this end the party's bureaucracy has been cut in half. Clearly, its control over leadership selection has been limited. No longer will the municipal party unit have a parallel structure to the municipal assembly executive committee, and this will drastically reduce the possibility of its interfering in the latter.

### CONCLUSION

In seeking to understand representative government in Cuba, one must first take into account its principal objectives: transmitting voter demands and overseeing economic activity. Its strengths have been the quality and dedication of the municipal delegates and their close relation and identification with their electorate. Developing its potential further depends on strengthening the municipal assembly — the level closest to the voters — and making the National Assembly a more effective and independent legislative body. It also depends on the maturation of the political culture and capacity for leadership of the Cuban working class, whose experience in political leadership and control in Cuba began only with the 1959 revolution and was institutionalized only in 1976.

The changes proposed in 1991 by the fourth congress of the party and those anticipated by Escalona go a long way toward improving the Organs of People's Power at the municipal and national levels by building on their fundamental strengths and by further delimiting the roles of the government and the party. The people's councils now being organized nationally enhance the role of the municipal delegate while broadening and deepening the connection between citizens and their representatives. The municipal assembly commissions are to be given increased importance in order to serve as an effective counterpart to the newly structured executive committee, which is to become an administrative unit composed of experts. The linkage between the party and the municipal assembly has been considerably weakened, and the role of the municipal and provincial party in candidate and leadership selection for the municipal assembly has been eliminated. Similarly, with regard to the National Assembly, the party is no longer to approve candidates. Direct, competitive elections for deputy and a strengthening of the commissions open the way for making the National Assembly a more independent

and effective body for legislation, governmental monitoring and oversight, and economic planning.

A socialist parliamentary system can be effective and representative without oppositional politics and a multiparty system and without electoral campaigns of the type known in capitalist democracies. This ultimately depends on popular support for a socialist economic and social system and the perception that the representative system works to ensure its fair and effective implementation. It also depends on a vanguard party that has earned the respect of the people whose purpose is to help fulfill these goals.

### REFERENCES

Castro, Fidel

1989 "Thirty years of the Cuban Revolution," in Fidel Castro, *In Defense of Socialism: Four Speeches on the 30th Anniversary of the Cuban Revolution*. New York: Pathfinder Press.

Hahn, Jeffrey W.

1988 *Soviet Grassroots: Citizen Participation in Local Soviet Government*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.