

Analyzing 2010 Municipal Blank and Spoiled Ballots: Hope for Democracy Promotion Advocates?

By Arnold August, November 2012

Municipal elections took place in 2010. The results show that the municipal ballots, including both spoiled and blank ones, represent 8.89 percent of the voters. Abstentions were at slightly more than 4 percent, even though not all abstentions are a reflection of rejection. Some people are simply not able to make it to the polls on that day for unexpected personal reasons. Adding together the abstentions, blank and spoiled rates, the sum is 12.9 percent. For argument's sake, if one takes into account some non-antagonistic abstention, some non-intentional blank or spoiled votes, one can arrive at an approximate 10 percent vote that includes abstentions, blank and spoiled ballots. This 10 percent can be seen to reflect anything from opposition to disenchantment, dissatisfaction or a general desire for change. This is not a huge number given the situation in Cuba. The Cuban leadership and the grass-roots level have never claimed that the Revolution is supported by 100 percent of the population, but rather by the vast majority.

With regard to the increase in negative voting from 2007 to 2010, what had taken place in 2008, 2009 and the beginning of 2010? First, Cuba in 2008, like just about every other country, felt the sting of the economic crisis, especially since the majority of its food consumption is still imported at increasingly higher prices. Second, in 2008, Cuba was hit with three major hurricanes, causing \$10 billion in damages and major uprooting of families and villages. Third, only three weeks before the elections, Raúl Castro publicly estimated that the bloated state payroll amounting to one million jobs would have to be downsized in order to improve the economy.¹ In the first part of 2010, Cuba was therefore in a shaky and uncertain situation. One can compare this to the situation during the 1995 municipal elections. They took place in the very aftermath of the worst years following the fall of the U.S.S.R. (1993–95). Cuba was still in this precarious situation when the 1995 elections took place. In those municipal elections, the results recorded a total of blank and spoiled ballots amounting to 11.3 percent; this was 2 percent higher than the 2010 rate. However, since the 1995 elections, the number of negative votes dropped consistently in four successive elections.

Nevertheless, in analyzing election results in Cuba, the most important point, as mentioned in Chapters 7 and 8, is not to lose sight of the fact that the main feature of Cuba's political system is its revolutionary state — and not elections as such. Furthermore,

while the Partido Comunista de Cuba (PCC — Communist Party of Cuba) does not participate in the elections as an electoral party, it does strive to lead the people in a revolutionary manner to renew the outdated socialist model. The PCC attempts to enhance the economy toward a new type of socialism that is consistent with the times, rather than straitjacketed by old dogmas that are no longer applicable. While the 2010 elections were taking place, Cuba had been, according to the analysis of Duharte Díaz (cited in Chapter 6), in “a permanent debate” at the grass-roots level since 2007. Side by side with this is the vast increase in self-employment possibilities. There is also the leasing of fallow land rent-free in usufruct (usufruct is a right of land use enabling the holder to derive profit or benefit from the property that is titled to the state). This and other agrarian programs are designed to provide more flexible food distribution and sales directly to the public. New openings were made to allow the purchase, sell and renovation of housing, one of Cuba’s most important problems.

The debates held prior to the 2011 PCC Congress involved *more* people than the elections the previous year. In the 2010 elections, 8,207,946 citizens voted.² In the three-month debates at the grass-roots level, prior to the 2011 PCC Congress, 8,913,838 participants were involved.³ The reference is, of course, to two different processes in terms of extension in time (three months of debate prior to the PCC Congress compared to one day of voting) as well as in content. However, that is exactly the point. Democratization in Cuba is an ongoing process with all its imperfections. It is *multiform* in its varieties. The election process represents only one aspect.

This is not to say that the electoral process (e.g., the municipal nomination assemblies and the elections themselves resulting in the municipal assemblies) is not in need of development, as some Asamblea Nacional del Poder Popular (ANPP — National Assembly of People’s Power, or Parliament) leaders and social scientists have expressed. The drastic current upgrade of the socialist economic system requires advancement in local municipal governments, which are inheriting much of the decentralization. Local governments are also responsible for overseeing the burgeoning sectors of self-employment and related functions, such as taxes and licenses.

The most dramatic problem is that of bureaucracy and corruption. It is not new, but its wide scope and confrontation against the Revolution have never been greater. According to a report on the December 21, 2011, Third Plenum of the Central Committee of the PCC, Raúl Castro said regarding corruption, “We must move from words to deeds ... the battle against crime and

corruption does not support further thought.” Recalling the 2005 warning by Fidel Castro that the Revolution can self-destruct because of these problems, Raúl Castro reiterated, “Corruption is now equal to counter-revolution.” He is quoted as saying that the “issue is to think and rethink what we can do in each place to avoid them [violations of the law], and to act.”⁴

Two days later, in the December 23, 2011, closing session of the ANPP, Raúl Castro related the activities of “white collar,” corrupt bureaucrats and revealed that a documentary of their interrogation will be shown to ANPP deputies. He proclaimed being “convinced that corruption is currently one of the principal enemies of the Revolution,” warning that, “within the legal framework, we shall be implacable.” He pledged, “We are going to do away with that parasitical plague.”⁵ The question for our focus is the role of the state at all levels — including the municipalities — and of those elected to them in combating what is a life-and-death struggle for the survival of the Revolution.

¹ Castro Ruz, Raúl. 2010. “Key Address Delivered on April 4, 2010.” At <<http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/rauldiscursos/2010/ing/r030410i.html>>.

² Comisión Electoral Nacional. 2010. “Resultados finales de la primera vuelta de los comicios.” *Granma* (April 25 and April 30).

³ *VI Congreso del Partido Comunista de Cuba*. 2011. “Información Sobre el Resultado del Debate de los Lineamientos de la Política Económica y Social del Partido y la Revolución.” (May), Havana.

⁴ Barredo Medina, Lázaro, and Yaima Puig Meneses. 2011. “Sesionó el tercero Pleno del Comité Central del Partido.” *Granma* (December 23), 47:306.

⁵ Castro Ruz. 2011. “All of Us in Leadership Roles Must Act Firmly in the Face of Indiscipline and Lack of Control of Receipts and Payments.” Speech (December 23). *Granma*. At <<http://www.granma.cu/ingles/cuba-i/26dic-01r-discur.html>>.