

Dissidents in the Nomination Process as Part of U.S. Democracy Promotion

By Arnold August, April 2012

In Cuban municipal elections, any registered elector can be nominated for elections, without restrictions. Thus those who oppose the system can also be nominated. For many years now, there has been an open debate on this issue. For example, Fidel Castro said in 1989, “If the majority of the people were counter-revolutionary, all they have to do is to nominate counter-revolutionaries in their *circunscripciones* and, therefore, the majority of the delegates would be counter-revolutionaries, against the Revolution, against socialism.”¹ In 1993, he once again challenged them: “No one prohibits them from participating in [nomination] assemblies, to discuss and to propose.”² Later on the same year, Castro declared that, if the majority did not support the Revolution, “it would be very easy to do away with the Revolution: simply by presenting themselves at the grass roots, in the neighbourhood assemblies ... Who is stopping them from doing so?”³ ANPP President Ricardo Alarcón, in a radio interview in the context of the 2007 Latin American Studies Association (LASA) Congress in Montreal, Canada, responded directly to the interviewer. The latter named certain dissidents who openly oppose the system, asking if they had the right to be nominated. Alarcón asserted that, irrespective of who they are, they can be nominated, and “if they get the votes, they will be a candidate.”⁴

Investigation bears this out. Before this recent research, Peter Roman tracked down a 1989 *New York Times* story in support of a dissident nominee. His investigation indicates that not only was the dissident allowed to be nominated, but the local electoral commission — by following the law — facilitated his proposal for nomination. This took place after an initial legal technical issue arose. There were two nominees, the dissident and one other nominee. In the show-of-hands vote, 30 went to the dissident and 60 to the other nominee.⁵

These accounts repeat themselves from time to time on the fringes of the nomination assemblies. In a 2007 interview with me, the provincial electoral commission reported that a dissident complained to them that his nomination by the local electoral commission was not accepted. The reason provided was that he nominated himself. Self-nomination is technically legal because the electoral law does not specify anything on this option. The provincial electoral commission thus ordered a retake of the

assembly. This time the dissident had someone present to propose him. However, he lost the nomination.⁶

In another recent interview, an electoral commission member reported that, in the two nomination assemblies preceding the 2005 partial municipal elections, there were two cases of dissidents being nominated; in both instances, they each garnered only two votes.⁷ In the October 2007 nomination meetings for the municipal elections, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) reported, through its Havana-based correspondent, Fernando Ravsberg, that the brother of dissident Elizardo Sánchez, highly regarded by the anti-Castro exile community, got himself nominated. However, according to the dissident himself, “I got five votes out of about 100 people, 5% of the total.” He also is reported to have declared to the BBC that, when he is told that the dissident movement is important in one area, he then asks them if they can present a candidate. “If they say no, then I conclude that what they are telling me is not true.”⁸

After the 2010 partial municipal elections, I interviewed a recently elected delegate and others in Circunscripción No. 47 of the Punta Brava locality in the Municipality of La Lisa in Havana. The purpose was to clarify a situation with regard to an avowed dissident who was preparing to be nominated. This plan was reported by Fernando Ravsberg of the BBC, headlining “Cuban Dissidents in Electoral Campaign.” The dissident was quoted as saying that they are doing “door-to-door work like Jehovah witnesses” with the goal of “exposing the lies and the manipulation of the government.”⁹ This campaign was picked up from the BBC and echoed by the anti-Castro *Miami Herald* press and related dissident websites.¹⁰ The main dissident blogger, Yoani Sánchez, joined the BBC and the *Miami Herald* to campaign as well for the dissident. She qualified him as “the candidate of change.”¹¹

My interview in Punta Brava confirmed the foreign-press reports indicating that the dissident was campaigning for his nomination, “going from house to house.” Campaigning for nomination in this way is not only illegal but, most importantly, completely foreign to the Cuban political culture.

At the March 11, 2010, nomination meeting, according to the interviewees in Punta Brava, the dissident spoke, without denouncing the government’s “lies and manipulation.” However, he communicated in the name of Raúl Castro and the necessity to bring about changes. The dissident and the incumbent, Dr. Daysi Victores, were both proposed to be nominated. The official count shows that Daysi Victores got 71 votes, the dissident thirteen votes; there were, however, quite a few electors who did not vote. After the meeting and once voting had taken place, what had

happened became more evident. As a result, some citizens approached Juanita Mejías Carbonnell (one of the interviewees), stating that they regretted voting for the dissident because they did not see through his manipulation. According to Armando Nelson Padrón (another interviewee and a delegate from another *circunscripción* in that municipality), the dissident really “manipulated the notion of change to which we aspire and which Raúl Castro seeks. These changes are positive and seek to improve the economic life of the country, but for an improved socialism and more democracy.”¹²



*Dr. Daysi Victores,
participant in the
1961 Literacy Campaign*

The dissident had all the advantages on his side. First, he lives in the nomination area where he was proposed and therefore had the benefit of attending the assembly with his closest neighbours. As for Daysi Victores, she is domiciled in another nomination area and thus did not have the right to be present. Second, according to the dissident’s own admission, he was campaigning while, of course, Daysi Victores was not. Third, in general, the cards are stacked against the incumbent because there is a delegate turnover rate of approximately 50 percent. Half of the sitting delegates are not re-elected for various reasons, one being the difficulty of solving citizens’ problems.

Despite these advantages, the dissident still lost. In the other two nomination area meetings in the same *circunscripción*, on March 4, 2010, there was only one nominee. He was not a dissident. Among the neighbours present, 60 voted for him to be a candidate. On March 8, 2010, of the 170 participants in this area, in which Victores is a resident and the only nominee, she got all 170 votes, 100 percent.¹³ This public information is not provided by the BBC, the Miami press or dissident blogger Yoani Sánchez.

I followed up on this local investigation in Punta Bravo regarding the actual secret ballot voting allowing electors to

choose between the two nominees as to which one will be the elected delegate. Candidate Daysi Victores got 273 votes and the other candidate received 254. There were 22 blank (3.67 percent) and 60 spoiled (10 percent) ballots. The number of blank ballots was lower than the Havana and national average, while the number of spoiled ballots was significantly higher than both the Havana and national proportion (Figures furnished by the La Lisa Municipality Electoral Commission).

The disinformation regarding, on the one hand, the role of the Communist Party and, on the other hand, the dissidents in nomination assemblies, are two sides of the same coin. For example, in the Fernando Ravsberg BBC article, Daysi Victores is referred to as the “candidate of the Communist Party.”¹⁴ However, in both de jure and de facto terms, nomination procedures are not carried out this way. The disinformation is geared to fostering preconceived notions outside of Cuba against the Communist Party as an “authoritarian” or “dictatorial” instrument controlling everything in Cuba, with dissidents being the victims. The overall objective is to discredit the Cuban electoral process and political system. Hovering behind this false information is the prejudice derived from the U.S.-centric superiority of its electoral systems.

The BBC and its journalist Fernando Ravsberg regularly continue to diffuse this disinformation. They have since developed their network with the collaboration of *Havana Times*. This online bilingual daily (English and Spanish) claims to be “open-minded.” However, a close examination of the articles exhibits its marked preference for “left” dissidents. For example, during the first phase of the 2012–13 general elections, *Havana Times* translated into English and published (as it does weekly) the BBC Ravsberg article on democracy and elections in Cuba. The September 2012 article was published in the midst of the period when the nomination procedure by neighbours for candidates to be elected as delegates to the municipal assemblies was taking place.

The article is based on a September meeting in Havana sponsored by the Catholic Church. Ravsberg highlights, among other issues, the participation of the dissidents. While the dissidents attended, Ravsberg lamented, “They were only allowed to participate from the audience [and not on the panel].” The BBC correspondent then reported that “dissident journalist Reinaldo Escobar” attended. The latter is the husband and close collaborator of the U.S.’s main dissident stalwart, Yoani Sánchez. Ravsberg emphasized the view of Escobar, who “complained that the initial discussions didn’t invite political opponents who ‘aim not to modernize the system but to demolish it.’”¹⁵

As Ravensberg wrote during the 2010 municipal nominations and elections, noted above, in 2012 he once again zeroed in on the Communist Party. Ravensberg alleged that while elections are held regularly, “but the truth is that no government institution has the power of the Communist Party.”¹⁶ (For further information on the elections, the functioning of the state, the role of municipal delegates and national assembly deputies, as well as that of the Communist Party, see Chapters 6, 7 and 8 of my book.)

The Cuban Revolution finds itself in a complicated situation at this time with regard to disinformation on elections and democracy. It has to deal with dissident bloggers from the full spectrum of “left” to right. In addition, in my view, an accredited foreign correspondent in Cuba, Ravensberg, has taken on the role of adviser to the dissidents and acts as their spokesperson. Other foreign correspondents do this regularly as well. However, the difference is that Ravensberg lives in Cuba, as a resident. He takes advantage of this situation of “being Cuban” along with the occasional “positive” article about Cuba to maintain a certain amount of credibility. Nevertheless, overall his real main direction is opposition to the Cuban Revolution. Ravensberg had some success in attracting vacillating elements from the Revolution into the camp of dissidence, or at least in directing them away from the Revolution. This is his main goal.

¹ Castro Ruz, Fidel. 1989. “Speech delivered on January 4, 1989.” At <http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1989/esp/f040189e.html>.

² ———. 1993a. “Speech delivered on February 6, 1993.” At <http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1993/esp/f060293e.html>.

³ ———. 1993b. “Speech delivered on March 15, 1993.” At <http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1993/esp/f150393e.html>.

⁴ Alarcón de Quesada, Ricardo. 2007. “Radio Interview in the Context of the XXXVII Congress of the Latin American Association (LASA).” La Noche Se Mueve. (September 7), Montreal, Canada. At <http://www.lanochesemueve.us/Entrevista%20a%20Ricardo%20Alarcon%20de%20Quesada.pdf>.

⁵ Roman, Peter. 2003. *People’s Power: Cuba’s Experience With Representative Government*. Lanham, MD: Roman and Littlefield Publishers, p. 110.

⁶ Comisión Electoral Provincial. 2008. Interview with author (September 19), Havana.

⁷ Municipal Electoral Commission. 2007. Interview with author (September 18), Plaza de la Revolución, Havana.

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- ⁸ Ravensberg, Fernando. 2007. “Cuba: elecciones municipales.” BBC Mundo (October 20). At <http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/latin_america/newsid_7052000/7052517.stm>.
- ⁹ ———. 2010. “Disidentes cubanos en campaña electoral.” BBC Mundo (March 13). At <http://www.bbc.co.uk/mundo/america_latina/2010/03/100312_0021_cuba_disidentes_elecciones_gz.shtml>.
- ¹⁰ Tamayo, Juan O. 2010. “No Surprises Expected in Cuban Election Sunday.” Miami Herald (April 26). At <<http://www.cubalog.eu/index.php?id=19&news=1446>>.
- ¹¹ Sánchez, Yoani. 2010. “The Candidate for Change.” Generation Y (March 22). At <<http://www.desdecuba.com/generationy/?p=1595>>.
- ¹² Victores, Daysi, Armando Nelson Padrón and Juanita Mejías Carbonnell. 2010. Interview with author (April 30), Havana.
- ¹³ Comisión Electoral del Municipio La Lisa. Email, May 11, 2010.
- ¹⁴ Ravensberg, op. cit.
- ¹⁵ ———. 2012. “Cuba: Discussion on Democracy and Institutions.” Havana Times (September 11). At <<http://www.havanatimes.org/?p=78364>>.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.