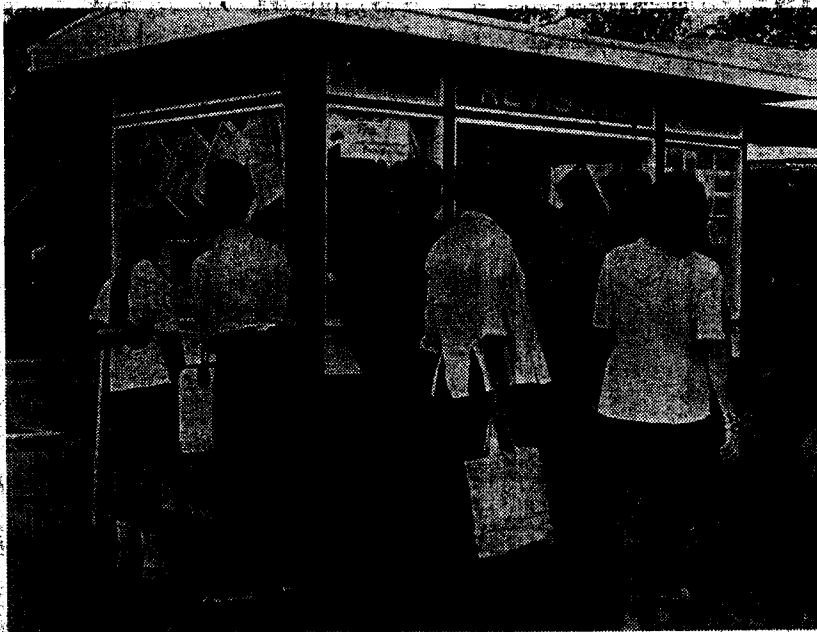


Cubans Prepare for 'Popular

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Power' Under Charter



Havana's only newsstand draws many customers for the limited state offerings.

By Terri Shaw

Washington Post Staff Writer

HAVANA—After more than 16 years of what Prime Minister Fidel Castro has called a "temporary government," Cuba is preparing to set up "popular power," a new political structure with grassroots participation.

Last June and July, the citizens of one of Cuba's six provinces chose local and provincial officials in the first governmental election since Castro took power.

"This year, the 10-year-old Communist Party of Cuba will hold its first party congress to consider, among other things, whether to hold similar elections throughout the country.

At the same time that party members are prepar-

ing for the congress, a commission of scholars and government officials is drafting a new constitution to be submitted to the voters in a referendum in 1976.

The goal of all this activity, according to Castro, is "the definitive institutionalization of the socialist state of Cuba."

In his annual 26th of July speech last year—a sort of Cuban state of the union—Castro emphasized that the Matanzas Province elections were not held to satisfy "bourgeois world opinion."

He and other officials took pains to distinguish the new type of election from the highly politicized, multi-party votes held in Cuba in the past.

The Matanzas elections, Castro said, were "the pur-

est in the history of our country—elections without deals, without frauds, without demagoguery, without petty politics."

Castro said that if this year's party congress approves, similar elections could be held throughout Cuba in 1976. The last nationwide vote was in 1958.

The Matanzas election was not contested on the basis of party alliances or issues. Candidates were nominated by their neighbors, and the only campaigning was the posting of each candidate's biography on a neighborhood bulletin board.

Of the 1,014 delegates elected on the neighborhood level, 46 per cent were members of the Communist Party, the "vanguard organization" that sets govern-

ment policy. Another 13 per cent were members of the Young Communist League. There are no other political parties in Cuba.

Voters in each electoral district chose delegates to serve on a municipal assembly. Each municipal assembly then elected delegates to serve on regional and provincial assemblies.

All of the assemblies elected executive committees to oversee the functioning of government agencies in their areas. Since everything is run by the government in Cuba, this means the committees will eventually supervise every restaurant, factory and store in Matanzas as well as the schools and sewer systems.

The experiment in Matanzas "is working much better than we thought it would," said Raul Ruiz, director of the Department of State Judicial Agencies of the Communist Party's Central Committee. "The experiment has shown us that when the problems of a locality are solved in the locality the solutions are quicker and better."

Ruiz, a member of the committee drafting the new constitution, said it would probably provide for elections of assemblies on the local, provincial and national level under a system similar to the one used in Matanzas. The national assembly would then name the Council of Ministers, now Cuba's highest administrative agency.

At 40, Ruiz is a Cuban-style self-made man. The son of a carpenter and a cleaning woman, he was a laborer until Castro won power in 1959. He then began to attend one of the many free night schools set up for workers, and received his law degree at the age of 35.

Ruiz has an air-conditioned but modest office in a well-guarded Miramar hotel while the huge Central Committee building in downtown Havana is being renovated.

Ruiz described the government's goals over the past two years to increase Cuban participation in decision-making, a process now highly centralized in the

large bureaucracy in Havana.

One of the first efforts to involve people in law-making at a grassroots level was the discussion of a proposed vagrancy law at union meetings throughout the country in 1971. The law, later approved by the Council of

Ministers, was designed to eliminate a serious absenteeism problem and provides for the arrest of people who fail to hold down a steady job.

Since then, other new legislation has been discussed at neighborhood and union meetings, including a re-

form of the court system, a law providing maternity benefits and a new family code covering marriage, divorce, custody and adoptions.

Ruiz said three million Cubans have participated in meetings at which they discussed and voted on the

family code, which has not yet been approved.

A 20-member committee, of which Ruiz is a member, is studying tabulations of the votes taken in the meetings that discussed the family code, he said.

"We also have access to the minutes of all the meetings and when we hear of an interesting opinion we read it and analyze it," he said.

Ruiz said no substantial changes were made in the draft family code after the discussions were held.

"It is logical that it should be that way," he said. "All legislation submitted to the people for approval obeys our social reality. It brings together the fundamental elements of our society."

The new court system, which went into effect early this year, after similar grassroots discussions, provides for ordinary citizens elected by local organizations to sit on tribunals along with professional judges.

The lay judges, usually workers, take a crash course in law, then serve from two to three months on the tribunals. Minor offenses are tried in neighborhood courts by lay judges alone.

"We are very satisfied with the work of the lay judges," said Humberto Hernandez, chief judge of Havana's provincial court. "They bring us a popular spirit, experience and knowledge. A professional judge is too isolated from the world. Before this we

just sat in our ivory towers and waited for our cases."

Another experiment in citizen participation is the discussion by workers of their factory's production plan for the year.

Before the revolution the worker had no voice. He wasn't told about anything," said Miguel Quincosa, a worker and Communist Party leader at a noodle factory outside Havana. "Now we have direct participation in the production plans."

Mario Diaz, head of the laboratory of the huge new sugar-loading port in Cienfuegos, explained how the system worked there.

"The Sugar Ministry sends us the yearly plan, saying how much sugar they will send us to unload from trains and trucks and load onto freighters," he said.

"A general assembly is held outside of working hours and 55 per cent of the workers must attend. Before the assembly, the workers in each section discuss the work levels that have been set for them. If they feel they can't fulfill the plan, we can ask for more workers or more equipment."

"If the figures are really unrealistic, the administration will tell the Sugar Ministry that certain figures are incorrect."

Workers elsewhere used the same system was used in their factories. Most said that the workers' assemblies had approved the central government's plan with few, if any changes.

Cubans stand in line for most amusements, in this case a free Sunday morning boat ride in Lenin Park outside Havana.

Photos by Toshi Shima - The Washington Post

