

Second, if Cuba's new leadership were to wish to enact significant changes, the simple-majority rule that governs the National Assembly, without outside vetoes on the political efficacy or the constitutionality of its actions, would indeed permit a peaceful and significant overhaul of political institutions and practices. Will the National Assembly ever do what it has never done, namely, act boldly to enact change?

There are little hints of change. Cuba's 2013 National Assembly election was the first when the officially-sponsored institutions did not go all out to secure *el voto unido*, that is, to persuade or intimidate most voters to support every candidate on the ballot. Of course, candidates on the ballot do not tremble; the number of candidates continues to equal the number of seats. But symbolically, official entities have looked for voter approval of such a foregone conclusion. Alas, in 2013, almost a quarter of the voters felt free to vote blank or void the ballot or vote for some but not all of the candidates on the ballot. The selective voting is feasible because of a quirk in the electoral law. In any given district, there are two to five seats to be filled, and two to five candidates on the ballot, respectively. Voters may vote for all, some, or none, and in 2013 the selective vote increased significantly. The state newspaper *Granma*, that fountain of transparency, this time published the vote shares for all the candidates. If Cuba's electoral law were to specify that the person who received the fewest votes per district would lose the Deputy election, then in 2013 one-third of the members of the Communist Party's Political Bureau would have been defeated.

The National Assembly has typically met only twice per year and each time it has met for just a few days. It just met in July 2015, and the whiff in the air implied a different tone. Media reporting of the discussions was more extensive, and thus it is difficult to discern whether the discussion or the reporting was better. The Assembly's plenary sessions remained a good remedy against insomnia but the discussions in several of the Assembly committees were telling. Attentive *Granmaphiliacs* learned about:

- the development of marihuana cultivation, with 45 percent of the instances discovered taking place in Santiago province (the crop was destroyed, the land was seized, and court penalties were applied);
- a group of Deputies who diligently checked output in all municipalities and graded 48 as performing badly and only 60 as performing well;
- the allocation of funds for elderly housing (one-fifth of Cubans are age 60 and over, with this proportion growing) but with variable cross-provincial implementation — Villa Clara province, with the country's oldest profile, had spent just 29 percent of its allocation;

- 6000 of 9380 recently imported garbage containers in Havana that have already been decommissioned for repair because of poor use and maintenance;
- the wide gap between plan and performance in 2014 — 87 large state enterprises, for which a surplus had been planned, closed the year in deficit.

There is zest in the National Assembly committees. Suppose, then, that we are still limited by the framework of Cuba's current Constitution and political system. Could we take note of these behavioral changes to imagine a more effective parliament? Consider three ideas.

1. National Assembly committees could meet more frequently and for more than just a handful of days at a time. This would permit more probing discussions, follow up activities, the development of expertise, and the growth of a network of well-informed Deputies who can rely on each other for information and analysis. If official Cuba wants to ferret out what could be done better and hold officials accountable, try it, and accord a more prominent role to those who claim to be the people's representatives.
2. Designate a "devil's advocate." Committee presidents now appear before the Assembly plenary to endorse the Minister's report. Suppose during committee discussion, a Deputy or a team of Deputies were appointed explicitly to investigate the work of a Ministry or an entity, demand documents, statistics, and testimony, and grill the officials. The result is likely to be better accountability, exposure of ineptitude, and the discovery of information that otherwise never appears.
3. Apply the rules of Cuba's municipal elections to Cuba's National Assembly elections. Cuba's Electoral Law already requires two candidates per post for municipal assembly elections. Let the National Assembly, in its sovereign majesty, require as well two candidates per National Assembly Deputy post. That is perfectly feasible within Cuba's current political system. It is already the electoral law in Vietnam, a country to which official Cuba has long had special ties. Let voters hold Deputy candidates accountable.

The National Assembly, dear Reader, has been very boring, yes. But now Cuba's future may be significantly shaped by its Deputies. While in Havana, walk to John Lennon's park. Think about the National Assembly, and sing *Let It Be*.

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