

The President of the National Assembly of People's Power, Ricardo Alarcón de Quezada, focuses on one of the subjects that the enemy uses against Cuba

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Currently, in the world, what's considered to be democracy is really a fraud. Hegemonic countries, those with the financial power, the main beneficiaries of globalisation, use increasingly empty rhetoric. Absence of democracy predominates.

“The essential features of neo-liberalism as a ruler of society means letting capital advance without obstacles, which means reducing the role of the state, as well as its ruling function. It is then very difficult for democratic institutions to continue, even those who originated as part of the capitalist bourgeois system, because they have an increasingly lesser role. And this situation develops at the international level. There is news evidencing this every day.

“Not long ago it was announced in the US, as if they were announcing rain, that more than one thousand employees had been fired because of one of those mega-mergers happening there every day. The news did not point out at any time that there was any type of talk with the workers or the unions. You can read every day about decisions that are deeply affecting the people, and there is no reference that they have participated in the decision-making process. They were not even informed beforehand.

“There is also talk about free trade agreements between countries. Now they are talking about a Central American Free Trade Agreement. In those countries the issue has not been discussed, not even in parliaments. When those governments accept the agreements under US pressure, they will be approved and will become law.

“In the mid-nineties a treaty called the Multilateral Investment Agreement was almost approved. It was something savage, like a world's ALCA. According to the text, which was published later, investors have all the power. They did not have any obstacle. It was even possible to sue those governments trying to obstruct the flow of capital. That meant that democracy, as we have understood it for centuries, was turned around. Those negotiations were done in complete secrecy, until the French ONG found it and published it on the internet. Some members of parliaments around the world started complaining about it, and they opposed it.

“Everybody remembers in Cuba the Workers' Parliament at the beginning of the special period, when the crisis was at its worst. Discussions with the people about problems in Cuban society were opened up. That is supposed to be real democracy. What's happening around the world is the complete opposite.

“That’s why people are becoming more and more disenchanted with democratic institutions and political parties, besides abstentionist positions. People do not become involved, because they do not believe, they realise that it makes little sense.”

Is there any solution for this crisis of democracy in the whole world?

“The solution is to democratise international relations, and every country has to rescue its basic democratic principles, expressed in the practice of authority by the peoples. Nations must have decision-making power. They cannot be subjected to the will of a foreign power.”

Can you define the essential differences between the way the Cuban people elect their representatives and the way of—let’s say—the rest of the more classic representative democracies throughout the world?

“There are tendencies and differences among countries. In my opinion there are several essential problems; that’s why representative democracy has been criticised. One of them is reducing the democratic practice, people’s involvement, to just voting.

“A famous phrase by Rousseau, talking about the oldest parliamentary system in the world, the British one, sums it up: The English—he would ironically say—believe that they are free men, but they are free only on election day, when they vote for their representatives.

“All the US electoral propaganda talks only about elections. That is what democracy is for them. However, throughout history the concept of democracy is not only reduced to voting but the practice of authority, government by the people themselves, or through their representatives.

“The elections in Iraq, in Afghanistan—what were they all about? A macabre show. It does not matter that those countries were occupied, that there was torture, fraud, and lies. Some of them voted, and because of that they consider that a democracy.

“The second problem was defined by Rousseau as a farce, a fiction novel. It is delegating authority to someone, which is its essence, that’s why it is called representative democracy. The representative assumes power in the name of the others. But that can be done only with social justice. Rousseau said that if there is no equality among men there is no representation. The exploiter cannot represent the exploited. That’s why he believed that democracy was utopia. That was not discovered by Marxism, it is prior to the French Revolution.

“In the twentieth century already Hans Kelsen from Austria explained how the so-called modern ‘representative democracy’ is only a fiction. The representative is not obligated to act in the name of the people they represents. They cannot be their spokesperson. That’s why a social revolution is necessary. In lay terms that means that there cannot be democracy with massive unemployment, with most of the people under the poverty level, with illiteracy, with landowners. Justice comes first. We did that in Cuba. When we started the system of repre-

sentative democracy, in 1976, we had already done away with those scourges, because there were big social changes.

“But more was achieved. Neighbours proposed the candidates directly, and they elected whoever they wanted, and they decided with their vote who will be delegate. Candidates came from the people’s ranks; the elected person had to give an account to the people, and that person could be recalled at any time.

“Besides, the involvement of the electors is maintained, as happened in the Workers’ Parliament, in the discussions of the party’s Call to Congress, as is done during the electoral process. Everybody is involved in one way or another, from the manufacture of electors’ registers, or people at home preparing children to watch the polls or to be part of the electoral tables, or those who have been nominated as candidates. Hundreds of thousands of people participate.

“In the United States, for example, a detailed investigation not long ago discovered that thousands of people did not even know where they could go to vote. According to that country’s rhetoric, the low percentage of voters is something positive. They say that they have free elections, therefore they are free not to vote. This points out the falsity of that society, because if it were a true democracy people would feel motivated to participate in government.

“Greece was exactly the opposite. They would meet in a public square to make a decision. They felt motivated to that, because they were going to discuss issues they were interested in.

“In Cuba, people participate in the nomination process, in the accounting process, because that’s when neighbours examine the neighbourhood’s problems with the delegate. And of course our system is not perfect, and our delegates do not have a magic wand.”

Democracy is also measured with presidential or parliamentary elections.

“That’s right. But the most serious specialists have always questioned whether the presidential system is more democratic. England has classic democracy, and they never elect the king or the prime minister. The representatives are the ones who elect the president. For a really democratic presidential system the electors themselves should elect and recall. All the people would have to vote again. In some polls the president has a 90 per cent rejection, and they have to wait until his mandate is over, because there is no recall.

“In the parliamentary system, such as Cuba, that is possible. Besides, it creates mechanisms obliging the government to respond to representatives. When there is a dynamic relation with the electors, it is easier for them to govern through their representatives.

“That is, those who elect control those who are elected. In the presidential system, electors are eliminated from that process, reducing their function to just one day, voting for the president.

“In any Cuban community, people nominate and elect candidates and delegates, who

become part of the municipal government once they are elected. Those who have been elected have to give an account of their work. But also the people can recall them at any time. Up to 50 per cent of the People's Power and the National Assembly must be neighbourhood delegates.

"And the provincial presidents of the National Assembly and the chief of states must be elected by their organisations, by their own members. The Cabinet of the Government is also approved by those delegates and representatives in the name of the people who elected them, and they give an account of their functions."

The participation of the parties in the elections has also been the subject of argument and questioning.

"That is another problem of the current representative democracy: partydocracy. The party decides who the candidates are. Those represented do not make that decision but an institution. That never happened in Greece. Not even George Washington, who, in a farewell speech to the American people, warned them about the dangers of dividing the country into parties. He had been President and did not belong to any.

"In Cuba, the bankruptcy of partydocracy was total with the coup of 10 March 1952, when they were powerless in the face of Batista. The credibility of those parties then was lost for ever, who had no summons power. With the triumph of the Revolution, from that institutional loss of prestige another idea of republic is born, much more authentically democratic, with a party that, like Martí's, did not intervene in the elections, because its goals are not electoral. Cuban history is very rich in that sense."

Considering this electoral history, from the Assembly of Representatives of the patriots of the nineteenth century, what features of our current electoral model have been inherited from those Cubans?

"On each war stage, the mambises approved the constitutions, elected their representative bodies and governments, enacted laws; the Republic of Cuba in Arms existed—including in liberated land. It had democratic institutions and did not have electoral parties. Later, during Martí's time, we also had a non-electoral party. Its function was to unify the patriotic movement, but it was not responsible for electing the delegates in the representative assemblies and the government in the free territory. They even had to give account.

"Already at that time Cuba contributed. Nowhere in the so-called democratic world were civil and political rights for all recognised. Of course we are not even talking about women, who, even in the nineteenth century were not considered citizens. Even ex-slaves had those rights, when in the rest of the world there were income, education and age requirements restricting participation, so that whites and wealthy people were the ones with civil rights. At

that point the international struggle tried to open those possibilities. Even today these demands continue in some countries.

“In Cuba there were Blacks as leaders of the Freedom Army and in the Government of the Republic in 1868, something unusual. In the United States a century later, in 1965, a law was passed about the right of Blacks to vote.

“All Cubans are born with the right to vote, as well as the free, universal and automatic registration in the electoral registers, and that comes down from the times of the Republic of Arms. Those possibilities were lost with the US intervention, which imposed income, age and education requirements in order to vote. That explains why only 7 per cent of the population voted in those first elections of 1900. They built an elitist society.

“At the time of the mambises, everybody could participate. This is proved by the fact that Ana Betancourt spoke in the Assembly of Guáimaro defending women’s rights, when women were far from being considered equal to men.

“Now delegates are elected by the people, and continue relating to them. The people continue participating in several ways in the practice of power, beyond election day.”

Cuba is accused of selecting a democratic model comparable to the one in the Soviet Union and the rest of the countries in eastern Europe. What are the differences?

“Those countries had different electoral models, and none of them had anything to do with ours. Some of those countries had several parties, the Communist Party among them, and they did nominate candidates.”

Citizen participation and Cuban civil society and the political systems of the country have been targeted for years by the enemies of the Island. Can you explain the fundamental rights in that participation?

“A substantial aspect of our system is guaranteeing people’s involvement more and more.

“Fundamental decisions are discussed here at the social level. It is a norm that there is no law that is not discussed with those involved. The Law of Foreign Investment was discussed by all the workers, as well as the Co-operative Tax Law, which was discussed by the farm workers several times. Those legal bodies were changed on the grounds of proposals made.

“In Cuba the great majority of workers are organised in unions. Unions are always picking up their members’ opinions. That is, they participate, and not only during the electoral process, such as this one, where all social organisations support and sustain neighbourhood meetings so that neighbours nominate candidates, later in the elections in many electoral colleges where tens of thousands of citizens will work. Besides, there are other tens of thousands of candidates who are workers, housewives, farm workers, intellectuals, just

people. The Municipal Assembly of People's Power and the civil society are represented in their organisations, which nominate candidates for president and vice-president from the elected delegates.

"But there is a process of discussion about laws within all organisations. These organisations discuss, analyse and nominate pre-candidates for provincial delegates and representatives in the general elections. Those nominated are also tens of thousands, who will become candidates if the basic delegates' meeting in municipal assemblies so decides.

"What we have is not perfect, but compared with the fiction of bourgeois representative democracy our model is a shining sun."

In 1992 there were changes introduced to the Constitution of the Republic and of the electoral system, making possible the election of representatives for the National Assembly and People's Power directly by the people. Could you comment on the elements that sustained that reform?

"Knowing that all human work can be perfected, and that it can and must be adjusted to develop it and improve it, the objective at that time was to strengthen the representative system. The electoral system was changed. In my opinion, the system we had before was not less democratic.

"Our municipal assemblies are the most democratic organisations I have ever seen, because all their members came directly from the people, nominated by the voters, and not by a machine. And those delegates, electing in a second step the provincial delegates and representatives for that territory, seems to me to be perfectly acceptable.

"The new way means a step forward. From that date on, the Municipal Assembly elects its candidate and submits that candidate to the people. If we had stopped there it was a democratic system already. In some countries those are very indirect elections, which are not questioned. Generally, senates are elected like that. And in some countries, senators are appointed and are even hereditary.

"Since 1992 that decision about the Municipal Assembly has been approved by the voters. That is, the system and representations are strengthened. Receiving the approval of the people directly is, no doubt, strengthening."

What other aspects should be considered in order to perfect the Cuban electoral system and the People's Power?

"There is always room for improvement. When we talk about participation, about choosing candidates, about elections, each one of those words can be conjugated with more or less rigour, love, sense of dignity. and commitment.

"We must aspire to a nominating process with increasingly deeper foundations, where

people can express their opinions better about those who have been nominated, so that when the time comes to elect a one candidate or another they can well be distinguished. As long as this country becomes more educated, presumably those decisions will be made at a higher level, ending in better candidates. It will also be important that the meetings to give account are less formal and give room for collective reflection and a more educated and complete analysis.

“The key to everything is dissatisfaction. We must not rest on what we have accomplished. We must always propose more. Social development programmes would not make sense if we think we achieved the goal. The same thing with our political system. The conclusion we must make is like someone asking, What is the horizon good for if you can never reach it? It is good for going forward.”