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Watching Neighbors: The Cuban Model of Social Control

ABSTRACT

In contrast to the typical Soviet model of social control, based on the secret political police, the Cuban model is based on mutual citizens’ vigilance. Yet this appears to be very difficult to maintain in an authoritarian regime without the intervention of external agents. In this essay, a model of mutual vigilance between neighbors is developed and applied to the analysis of the relationship between citizens and members of the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR) in Cuba. The Cuban revolutionary system of social control induces citizens to report on illegal actions, including buying or selling on the black market, receiving unknown visitors, not complying with Communist orders, or participating in opposition movements. Yet the incentives structure shows very difficult conditions for an equilibrium in which the citizens don’t act illegally and the CDR members don’t report. There are strong incentives to produce perverse outcomes, such as “complicity” between neighbors or “cheating” of citizens by CDR members. These can only be avoided by introducing external vigilance. A detailed historical and empirical survey, using hitherto unexploited sources, shows an increasing role of the political police and the army, thus bringing the actual practice of the Cuban system closer to the typical Soviet model of bureaucratic control.

RESUMEN

En contraste con el típico modelo soviético de control social, basado en la policía política secreta, el modelo cubano está basado en la vigilancia mutua entre los ciudadanos. Pero resulta muy difícil mantener este sistema en un régimen autoritario sin la intervención de agentes externos. En este ensayo se desarrolla un modelo de vigilancia mutua entre vecinos y se aplica al análisis de la relación entre los ciudadanos y los miembros de los Comités para la Defensa de la Revolución (CDR) en Cuba. El sistema revolucionario cubano de control social induce a los ciudadanos a informar sobre todas las acciones ilegales de los vecinos, incluidas la compra-venta en el mercado negro, los visitantes desconocidos, la falta de cumplimiento de las órdenes comunistas o la participación en movimientos de oposición. Pero la estructura de incentivos muestra condiciones difíciles para alcanzar un equilibrio en el que los ciudadanos no actúan ilegalmente y los miembros del CDR no informen. Hay fuertes incentivos para que se produzcan resultados perversos, tales como la “complicidad” entre los vecinos o la “explotación” por los miembros del CDR de los ciudadanos. Estas situaciones sólo pueden evitarse con vigilancia externa. Una detallada revisión histórica y empírica, utilizando fuentes no exploradas anteriormente, muestra un aumento del papel de la policía política y del ejército, lo cual aproxima la práctica real del sistema cubano al típico modelo soviético de control burocrático.

Communist regimes have organized different control systems in order to identify the compliance behavior of their subjects and to prevent their dissident or opposition activity. All of them mete out severe punishments for deviant behavior, but they crucially differ in their monitoring mechanisms. The monitoring role can be allocated either to the police and other external agents, as in the Soviet Union, or to the citizens themselves, as in Cuba. Different systems give people different incentives to obey or not obey the Communist rulers, and the corresponding citizens’ strategies may help us explain their different degrees of effectiveness.

The typical Soviet system has given priority to control by the secret political police. Early during the civil war provoked by the October 1917 revolution and the resistance against it, the Russian Bolsheviks organized a new revolutionary political police, the Cheka (from its Russian initials for Pan-Russian Extraordinary Commission), which was replaced with the GPU in the 1920s, the NKVD in the 1940s, the KGB in the 1950s, and replicated by the Stasi in East Germany, the Securitate in Romania, and similar bodies in other Communist-dominated regimes in Eastern Europe since the late 1940s. The Soviet model of social control was based on the secret membership of party functionaries and paid informers, who maintained vigilance mainly through the workplace. While the professional political police might recruit a few thousand individuals, the total number of informers might reach up to 2 percent of the adult population, as for the Soviet Cheka and the German Stasi (Dallin and Breslauer 1970; Elon 1992).

The Cuban revolutionaries organized control by the army, the secret political police, and the militia very early after the 1959 Revolution. Yet they soon developed a new, parallel experience, the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR), which, in contrast to the Soviet model, is based on public membership of a large majority of the population, mobilized mainly through the neighborhoods. The Cuban leaders claimed that up to 85 percent of the adult population have been members of the CDRs in some periods. This system is devised to avoid frequent, unsavory repressive actions by the political police or the army, as well as the organizational costs of the corresponding bureaucracy, instilling instead a pervasive presence of revolutionary vigilance by the citizens themselves. In the Cuban model, everyone is watched and everyone is watching, and this is intended to persuade people that resistance to the Revolution is futile.

The Cuban model of social control partly coincides with the self-policing system established in Communist China. Yet citizens’ mutual vigilance in
China is organized through private meetings of small groups with a fixed membership of not more than fifteen people, mainly at schools or Party and government offices, while the Cuban CDRs, as will be detailed below, are mass organizations with a territorial basis. Thus, the Chinese experience of self-policing might be placed somewhere in between the Soviet model of bureaucratic control at the workplace and the Cuban model of watching neighbors (see Towsend 1969; Brehm and Nieu 1997).

Fidel Castro has proclaimed that the CDRs have not only been appropriate for the Cuban Revolution, but they have been “a contribution to the world revolutionary historical process” (1968, 21–22). In fact, the Cuban CDRs have been presented as a reference model for other innovative revolutionary experiments and have been replicated in a number of countries (sometimes with the direct contribution of Cuban agents). These include the Sandinista Defense Committees in Nicaragua, the People’s Vigilance Brigades in Angola, the People’s Defense Committees in Yemen, the kebeles in Ethiopia, and similar organizations in Benin, Burkina Faso, and Ghana (Acosta Cordeo 1985; Rodríguez González 1985–1986; Puddington 1988).

In contrast to regular systems of social control in other authoritarian regimes, all control systems in Communist regimes are conceived as instruments not only for preventing and repressing irregular political behavior but also for playing relevant economic and ideological roles. In the Soviet Union, not only “counterrevolutionary” individuals, but all members of certain social categories (landlords, bourgeois, the clergy, some ethnic groups) were persecuted in order to introduce revolutionary changes in the society. Bureaucratic vigilance regarded not only citizens’ opinions, travels, private communications, and guests, but also basic economic activities, such as their labor attendance and the fulfillment of forced work. Usually, persecution of the political opponents of the Communist regimes includes their ideological denunciation as “enemies of the people” or “imperialist agents,” which is intended to serve the aim of unifying the surviving population around unchallenged rulers, patriotic sentiments, and monolithic beliefs. The economic and ideological roles of repression feed each other; people’s union and faith might increase their readiness to accept sacrifices and hard work, since the citizens can trust in overcoming difficulties and obtaining better results by the enemy’s defeat.

The distinctiveness of the Cuban model of control, represented by the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, should thus not be found in the CDRs’ activity of ideological education and propaganda, in their organization of “voluntary” unpaid work, or in other social tasks, which were also included to some extent in many Soviet-type experiences of bureaucratic control and repression. Though the Cuban CDRs have been given certain social duties, such as urging parents to take their children for immunizations and connecting the dependent elderly with social services, these tasks partly replace an ineffec-

tive public bureaucracy. The most innovative feature of the CDRs lies rather in the incentive structure of their foremost activity of “revolutionary vigilance,” which submits every citizen to the dilemma of acting illegally or not, as well as that of reporting her or his neighbor’s illegal action or not. In contrast to the Soviet model based on the action of external agents, the Cuban model induces every citizen to become a police agent.

In order to analyze this model and its implications for the stability of the Communist regime, I will first review the origins and basic activities of the CDRs in revolutionary Cuba, including every citizen’s duty to perform “the guard,” a night vigilance patrol through the neighborhood. Second, I will identify the basic features of the strategic interaction between mutually watching neighbors. I will establish the formal conditions under which individual citizens can be expected to comply or not comply with the Communist discipline. Third, the game-theoretical analysis of this interaction will allow us to expect strong incentives for revolutionary abstention and illegal actions, which can only be prevented by means of several punishments on those not reporting their neighbors (and not only on those acting illegally) and, in the last instance, control by an external agent. Finally, according to these findings, a survey of the CDRs’ evolution from 1960 to the mid-1990s, using primary and previously unexploited sources, will show different phases paralleling the evolution of the Cuban regime in other aspects, as well as a steady process of decay in CDRs membership, mobilization, and effectiveness. Almost all significant control tasks initially performed by the CDRs have eventually failed and have been gradually transferred to other bodies, especially the political police and later the Revolutionary Armed Forces, thus bringing the Cuban experience closer to the more traditional Soviet model of bureaucratic control.

Revolutionary Vigilance

After the Cuban Revolution of January 1959, vigilance of the population was organized by the former guerrillas by means of the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR), the new Revolutionary National Police (PNR) of the Ministry of the Interior (MININT), and, from October 1959, also by the armed groups of the Revolutionary National Militia (MNR). However, social and political resistance to the new rulers was more daunting than expected. On September 28, 1960, Fidel Castro was giving a TV broadcast speech on his recent trip to the United States at a rally in front of the Presidential Palace when three bombs exploded in the neighborhood. In an apparently improvised response, Castro called on his followers to set up “a system of revolutionary collective vigilance so that everybody will know everybody else on his block, what they do, what relationship they had with the [Batista’s] tyranny, what they believe in, what people they meet, what activities they participate in” (1968, 17). Castro gave
were also instrumental in mobilizing people for mass rallies on the occasion of revolutionary festivities and political crises, as well as for voting in noncompetitive elections to the local, provincial, and national assemblies, which were introduced in 1976. As Fidel Castro summarized, “Who can make a move without the CDRs knowing about it? Not even an ant!” (1973, 160).

The economic activities of the CDRs included their active role in expropriating all banks and 382 companies in 1960 (two weeks after CDRs’ official creation). The CDRs were very active in the so-called revolutionary offensive, in March 1968, when they became local enforcers of the governmental policy aimed at wiping out what was left of private and small-scale capitalist economy: 58,012 small enterprises, including 9,176 one-person service businesses, were expropriated. The CDRs implemented the shutdown, for instance, of the neighborhood manicurist, repairman, or food vendor, by stripping her scissors or his hammer, dispersing their belongings, and taking 35,652 stores as “people’s administrators” (of which only 10,175 eventually survived).

The CDRs also organized participation in “voluntary” work, usually on Sundays (typically in agriculture in the 1960s and in construction in the 1970s, as well as cleaning the streets and sidewalks), which was considered the key “loyalty” test of Cuban citizens for many years. The CDRs have organized the rationing of all foods since 1962, distributing scarce foodstuffs, ration cards, and booklets. They persecuted illegal trade in currency and gambling, collected silver objects, recycled plastic boxes and bags, and tried to organize any assistance function that the administrative apparatus was unable to do.

In the ideological field, the CDRs were in charge of organizing weekly “political study circles” for the diffusion of Marxism and distribution of official propaganda materials. They were regularly warned to denounce every comment or rumor trying to discredit the Revolution, enhance the bourgeois way of life, or promote consumerism.²

This variety of activities has given certain exegesis of Cuban Communism the basis for presenting the CDRs as a new form of popular political participation. Very few of Fidel Castro’s statements can be used for this purpose, especially those in the 1967 CDR anniversary speech, in which he presented the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution as a “form of interlacing between the masses and the institutions of revolutionary power” that would prelude “genuinely new, efficient forms of democracy” (Castro 1968, 222, 227; for further elaboration, see Harnecker 1975, ch. 4). However, Fidel Castro himself has strongly and persistently remarked that the CDRs are a control system, holding that “revolutionary vigilance is and will always be the first and foremost task and the first duty of the CDR,” precisely because the counter-revolution has been weakened and thus it presumably tends to react more dangerously. The just-quoted literal statement became the CDR’s leitmotiv, usually accompanied by the warning not to “relax the guard,” which can be
found once again in virtually every one of Fidel Castro’s speeches at CDR anniversaries.  

The main task of revolutionary vigilance for every Cuban citizen is participating in “the guard,” a night patrol of the neighborhood. The guard was first established to cover twenty-four-hour vigilance of every block, as well as factories and other workplaces. Vigilance at the workplace included six four-hour turns of regular workers in support of the permanent, armed militia. Yet neighborhood patrols were soon reduced to two night shifts of three hours each, although the Cuban leadership warned that nevertheless every CDR member should act as a guardian of the Revolution the whole day. At the beginning, there were three shifts, from 9 P.M. to 12 P.M. (by one man and two women older than 45), from 12 P.M. to 2:30 A.M. (by three men and two women), and from 2:30 A.M. to 5 A.M. (by three men and others in a motorcycle with a sidecar moving in a larger zone). This was reduced in 1969 to two shifts from 11 P.M. to 2 A.M. and from 2 A.M. to 5 A.M. (later delayed to 12 P.M. to 3 A.M. and 3 A.M. to 6 A.M.). The first night shift is usually performed by one man and the second shift by a couple of men and a woman (or by two women).

Patrol members are identified by armbands with the inscription “CDR.” They can inspect establishments and demand documents from any person in the street, they must report any unusual event to the police, and, in spite of not bearing weapons, they are encouraged to make arrests. Reports are also given to the CDR secretary in charge of vigilance, who maintains records on all the residents in the area. CDR patrols first ran parallel to the police’s, but in more recent times they have been integrated into police patrols. In rural areas, peasant members of the CDRs perform the guard on horseback, together with members of the rural police.

Early plans established block-level shifts and one individual guard duty every two months. Apparently this would require about 600 individuals per block to be ready to perform the guard (ten individuals per night every sixty days), surely a large majority of neighbors in the average block. Official sources calculated that about 100,000 citizens would be mobilized in Cuba every night. At the rate of one individual guard every sixty days, the total would come to 6 million people, meaning that the entire adult Cuban population was initially expected to perform the guard. This unrealistic provision was modified in 1969 in favor of larger zone-level shifts requiring only about 35,000 mobilized citizens every night (and thus only about 2 million people were required to perform the guard).

Guard patrols were then instructed to watch only strategic points. Accordingly, they were provided with maps indicating public buildings, stores, taxi stands, and public phones, and with information on the license plates of all vehicles in the area. Yet further sources clearly show that even in the 1970s there were many absences and that in small groups some members bore the brunt of being constantly on guard. Typical reports in the 1980s point out that the second shift (from 3 A.M. to 6 A.M.) visibly weakened. The usual individual responsibility for those participating in the guard reached the frequency of one night every month, which would require only about one million people to perform the guard. This means that only about one-fifth of the official CDR membership probably participated in their guard duty (this proportion coincides with the number of CDR members usually considered “activists”). The basic tendency seems to have been decreasing numbers of people performing the guard with increasing frequency.

**Mutual Watching**

Three different levels of involvement can be distinguished in order to understand the functioning of the Cuban Committees for the Defense of the Revolution: members, leaders, and citizens.

Any Cuban citizen not known for being delinquent or (until the 1980s) effeminate, practicing Santería, or criticizing the Revolution can be a CDR regular member. There are negative and positive incentives to become a member of the CDR, as indicated by a CDR female member:

If a Cuban citizen doesn’t belong to any organization, people think he isn’t with the Revolution. Then if he has to go to the law for anything, the Committee investigates him, and if they find he doesn’t belong to it, nobody will back him up even if he hasn’t done anything wrong. If you belong to the Committee, it stands up for you, so to speak. I mean, it’s a kind of guarantee that you’re a revolutionary. And if the Committee speaks well of you, that’s the biggest recommendation you can get. It’s really of great value to a person to belong to the Committee. (Recollection from Leticia Manzanares, quoted in Lewis, Lewis, and Rigdon 1977, 3: 45–46)

From the point of view of a recruiter, if someone refused to be a CDR member:

We didn’t take any action against him or anyone like him. We simply wrote down their names and addresses. If there’s any trouble in the neighborhood, we know where to look first — among the individuals who are not integrated. . . . If you don’t belong to the block Committee, they won’t resolve any of your problems for you. And if anything happens, the people who aren’t integrated are the first to be picked up and taken to some faraway place until the crisis has passed. . . . Anybody who wasn’t in favor of the Revolution was against it. Nobody could straddle the fence or hide behind it or stay outside. (Salazar, quoted in Lewis, Lewis, and Rigdon 1977, 1: 394–95)

However, being a CDR member also brings with it some costs, mainly those of being urged to attend frequent and late evening meetings, to perform night guard, to participate in voluntary work every Sunday, and to be indoctrinated in courses of Marxism. Nevertheless, a CDR member can choose be-
tween being an activist or not: “People join everything, but when they’re called upon to work, they beg off” (quoted in Lewis, Lewis, and Rigdon 1977, 3: 386). A CDR member can watch his or her neighbors, report their activities, and denounce their illegal activities (including, for example, receiving visitors from outside the neighborhood, purchasing unrationed goods, attending church, having family quarrels, listening to Radio Martí, wearing blue jeans, or making inconvenient political comments) or not denounce them and perhaps even cover them up.

Between 5 and 10 percent of CDR members are considered “leaders” (dirigentes). These include the members of the committee of every block CDR, which is formed by its president, a secretary, a treasurer, secretaries of several branches like vigilance, voluntary work, and ideology who are elected annually by the block CDR members or appointed by the zone committee, as well as the members of zone, municipality, and province committees and the national directorate (including a number of full-time, salaried officers). The leaders are expected to attend all meetings, “orient” the block CDRs and their members, and exert control over them. On the one hand, not fulfilling leaders’ duties, like not denouncing criminal or deviant behavior, is considered a counterrevolutionary crime. Any negligent officer can be accused of “relaxing the guard” in the face of the enemies of the Revolution. Positive incentives include the possibility of deriving personal benefits from expropriations, seizing furniture from confiscated houses of emigrants, having access to illegal trade, receiving bribes for positive reports, and other opportunities that will be discussed below.

On the other hand, “it’s hard to be in charge of a Committee, spending your days out in the street, going to see people to ask them to do volunteer work. I had to leave my kids at home while I was out in the streets, and I had to keep after the ones who refused to volunteer” (quoted in Lewis, Lewis, and Rigdon 1977, 3: 386). The incentive structure for the CDR leaders is thus not very different from that for their members, even if it is at a different reward level.

Finally, all Cuban citizens, including the CDRs’ paid officers, active and passive members and nonmembers, can choose between acting illegally (including the above-mentioned activities, from buying or selling on the black market to participating in opposition movements) and complying with and obeying the Communist regime.

I will focus on the interaction between CDR members and citizens. I assume that, given the incentive structure, similar relationships are established at successive levels of the organizational hierarchy, between CDR members and leaders, between block committee members and zone committee members, and so on.

A large amount of evidence shows that the basic relationship between CDR members and citizens is one of conflict. Already in 1964 the CDR na-

ational coordinator José Matar spoke of a kind of “cold war” between certain committees and the neighborhoods in which they operated, as well as the “hatred” incurred by the CDRs among certain sectors of the population. Several early students of the control system found an environment dominated by “social hostilities, antagonisms, and vendettas . . . arbitrary, authoritarian, self-serving, and corrupt behavior,” “acts of revenge, personal feuds . . . constant struggle, either internal or external . . . fear, distrust and controversy” (Fagen 1969, 100–103; Salas 1979, 301–3). Bombs, attacks, and aggressions against CDR sites were not uncommon during the 1960s (CGA, 9/1970).

One committee leader’s point of view is transmitted by the mother-in-law of a town CDR president:

After they [sic] installed the CDR here, everybody turned their backs on us. Your closest neighbors are those who are the most remote. I believe that it’s because almost everyone here has something up his sleeve, so he doesn’t want to have friends or visitors. And the best way to hide what they’re up to is to withdraw and not allow visitors so they can’t see what’s going on. Everybody’s afraid, and since they don’t want to find out what’s going on, they turn their back on us. (Lucia Martínez, quoted in Butterworth 1980, 115)

As summarized by the CDR’s national secretary of revolutionary vigilance, Antonio Martínez Rodriguez, “The CDRs attained a decisive culture of confrontation” (CGA, 9/1976, 50–52).

The basic available options for the CDR members and the citizens can be simplified in the following way. Any citizen can choose between acting illegally or complying. By acting illegally, the citizen can obtain the personal advantages derived from exercising freedom and dealing on the black market, although at the risk of being persecuted. By not acting illegally he or she will renounce those benefits and avoid persecution.

Any CDR member can choose between reporting illegal acts and not reporting them (it is expected that a regular member can report on citizens, while a leader can also report on CDR members; this relationship is reproduced at each level of the hierarchy). By reporting an illegal act, the CDR member or leader can expect to be rewarded as a good “revolutionary” (or avoid the risk of being persecuted as a counterrevolutionary, which is the same thing). By not reporting illegal activity, he or she can expect certain positive external benefits derived from the illegal activities, such as having access to illegal trade, maintaining nonconflictive relationships with neighbors, or even getting their recognition. In so doing, he or she becomes an “accomplice” of citizens.

Yet the choice between reporting and not reporting is also available to CDR members even if the citizens don’t commit an illegal act. Opportunistic CDR members may report not only against people who are truly active “counterrevolutionaries,” but also indiscriminately against neighbors whom they regard as insufficiently loyal to the Revolution, or whom they simply dislike.
(they then become “cheaters,” exploiting defenseless citizens). As an indication of the prevalence of these activities, it is worth mentioning that as early as 1962 Fidel Castro promoted a purge of CDR members suspected of joining the organization for the “wrong reason,” which is to say, for their personal advantage and privilege, and similar campaigns have been carried out periodically since then. Publicly denounced abuses have included not only revenges or personal appropriation of neighbors’ belongings by CDR members, but self-aggrandizement and expansion of the CDR’s prerogatives. (Unauthorized CDR reports have been required, for example, for renting suits, repairing electrodomeics, or in divorce disputes for housing, usually as an exchange for bribes.) Corruption among high-level CDR officers has included dining at restaurants, using cars and taxis at the expense of the organization, as well as directly draining off the money from CDR finances (“Hago constar,” CGA, 3/1985, 26).

Corruption was so widespread that nobody was in a position to denounce anybody else. . . . The [corrupt] functionaries were just removed upstairs or placed under surveillanc. They received no other punishment . . . a year later they were back again as CDR functionaries. . . . By the end of 1965 or the beginning of 1966, it became obvious that some leaders at the national level were up to monkey business. Here the local leaders judge one another, then they judge the volunteers. . . . Thieves judge themselves. (Inocencia, quoted in Lewis, Lewis, and Rigdon 1977, 2: 385–87)

As shown in the formal analysis of the interaction between the citizens and the CDR members presented in the next section, conditions are very difficult for an equilibrium to exist in which the citizens don’t act illegally and the CDR members don’t report. There are, in contrast, strong incentives for both the “complicity” outcome, in which all act illegally, and the “cheating” outcome, in which the CDR members exploit the citizens. These perverse outcomes can only be avoided by externally changing the incentive structure, either by reinforcing high-level committees’ control over lower-level committees and regular CDR members, or by reinforcing control by the political police and the army. By any of these means, the Cuban experience of CDRs approaches the Soviet model of bureaucratic control.

The Neighbor’s Dilemma

The stylized interaction structure between two neighbors, the citizen \(i\) and the CDR member (or leader) \(j\), is shown in Figure 1. Available strategies to \(i\) are “Acting illegally” and “Complying,” while \(j\) can “Report” or “Not report” against the citizen. Pairs of strategies by the two actors produce four different outcomes: “revolution” (CDR members report citizens’ illegal activities), “complicity” (CDR members don’t report citizens’ illegal activities), “cheating” (CDR members falsely report against passive citizens), and “loyalty” (citizens abstain from acting illegally and CDR members don’t report).

Citizen \(i\)’s preference order on outcomes seems rather obvious: he prefers “complicity” with CDR members (obtaining illegal action benefits without being reported) to “loyalty” (no benefits or reprisals), to “cheating” (being falsely reported or exploited, if some probability \((-\alpha)\) exists to prove his innocence or to unmask the cheater), or to “revolution” (being reported for his illegal action).

CDR member \(j\)’s preferences are less obvious. Given \(i\)’s preference order presented above, the formal analysis of the interaction shows that the necessary and sufficient conditions for the “loyalty” outcome require the following order for \(j\)’s preferences:

1. \(L > C\)
2. \(L > A\)
3. \(R > A\)

In other words, to attain a stable equilibrium in which the citizen doesn’t act illegally and the CDR member doesn’t report (that is, both are “loyal”), the CDR member’s utility from being “loyal” (\(L\)) must be greater than his utility from being “cheater” (false accuser and exploiter, \(C\)) and from being “accomplice” (\(A\)) of citizens’ illegal action. In order to prevent relaxation of the vigilance, \(j\)’s utility from being “revolutionary” (reporting illegal actions, \(R\)) must also be greater than that from being “accomplice” (\(A\)).

Observe that in these conditions, \(j\)’s utility from being “cheater” is not greater than that from being “revolutionary,” and therefore some positive reward for CDR members to act according to their morals or some punishment for breaking the rules, reporting or exploiting innocent citizens, is presumed to exist. Likewise, as mentioned above, citizen \(i\)’s preference in favor of complying over acting illegally, in which case he can be falsely reported (i.e., preferring the “cheating” outcome rather than the “revolution” outcome) is based on
some probability of persecuting false reporters and exploiters. The hypothetical preferences of the two actors presented above imply that certain legal guarantees for the people involved in the interaction may exist. Of course, if this were not the case, incentives for leaving the “loyalty” outcome would be even greater than under the present assumptions.

There are several preference orders for \( j \) that would fit the just-presented conditions for a “loyalty” equilibrium, one in which the citizens comply and the CDR members don’t falsely report them. But all conditions are rarely fulfilled.

Assume that \( j \)'s utility from being a good “revolutionary” (R), depends on the government's rewards for reporting (r) minus benefits externally derived from \( i \)'s illegal action (\( b \)); or \( R = r - b \). J’s utility from being an “accomplice” of citizens’ illegal action (A) will depend on b minus the expected punishment from not reporting (p); or \( A = b - p \). J’s utility from being a “cheater” (C) equals \( r \) negatively weighed with the probability that the citizen can prove his innocence; or \( C = r (1 - q) \). Finally, \( j \)'s utility from being “loyal” (L) can be considered zero (he will obtain neither benefits from \( i \)'s action nor special reward or punishment from the government); \( L = 0 \).

We can now restate the necessary conditions for the “loyalty” equilibrium previously presented.

1. \( L > C = 0 > r (1 - q) \)
   This condition requires either a negative government reward (r) for good revolutionaries (which is unrealistic) or a very high probability (\( q \)) that the cheater will be punished.

2. \( L > A = 0 > b - p \)
   This means that the expected punishment from the government for not reporting (p) must be greater than the benefits that the CDR member can expect from being an “accomplice” of the citizen’s illegal action (b).

3. \( R > A = r - b > b - p \)
   There are two ways to fulfill this condition. If the rewards for good revolutionaries (r) are relatively low, the punishment for not reporting (p) must be relatively high. Alternatively, if the punishment for not reporting (p) is relatively low, the rewards for good revolutionaries (r) must be relatively high.

In short, these conditions may be fulfilled in any of two scenarios. The first requires very high rewards for good revolutionaries (r), usually implying strong mobilization of activists, permanent ideological campaigns, and revolutionary privileges, which tend to be found in the early years of new revolutionary regimes. The second is likely to correspond to more stable situations in which the initial revolutionary effervescence has been appeased to some extent, and it requires high punishments for not reporting and for cheating (p, q), which is to say, punishments on CDR members for not fulfilling their duties, and not just on citizens acting illegally. In other words, maintaining the effectiveness of the typical Cuban system of watching neighbors requires introducing significant external incentives on the structure of mutual citizens’ control, approaching the model of control by external agents.

Increasing External Control

Given the difficulties in fulfilling the conditions for a stable equilibrium in which the citizens comply with the Communist regime, as has been shown in the formal analysis, it should be expected that mechanisms of external control have been introduced on the system of neighbors’ mutual watching. In fact, these mechanisms have adopted the following forms, presented here in ascending order according to degree of coercions:

1) Emulation, a Communist euphemism for competition. Regular contests are organized every month among block committees in a zone, among zone committees in a municipality, among municipal committees in a province, and among the six province committees regarding their performance, including symbolic revolutionary awards for the “best” performance.

2) Reputation meetings. These are reprisals after prominent crimes or actions by dissident persons in the neighborhood. It is interesting that most of the blame is placed on CDR members for failing to prevent or report crimes. Usually, the police point out faults in the watch that contributed to the crime being undetected; “if a crime was committed, it was because some part of the watch plan was not carried out or was performed in a negligent manner” (“Actos de repudio,” CGA, 6/1975). Then the group repudiates the act and criticizes particular patrol members who have been negligent. People commit themselves to eliminate absences on guard duty, thus warning other CDR members as to possible deficiencies in their own operations. As the CDR national coordinator said, “This method, for being educative and mobilizing, is very useful and effective for the preventive aspect of the watch” (Lezcano 1977).

3) Checking. Regular controls from zone committees on the night guard were implemented as of the late 1960s (CGA, 4/1975). From early 1989 on, when absences appeared to be widespread and increasing, “surprise checks” were reinforced (CGA, 2/1990).

4) Purges. As mentioned, periodic purges and renewals of cadres and leaders have been instituted after corruption scandals or some visible relaxation of vigilance, as in 1962, 1966–1968, and 1974, usually after claiming that the CDR had been infiltrated by counterrevolutionaries and egoistic persons.

5) Secret informers. At least two individuals in every block work for the political police in secret. They control the CDR members, but they may not be members of the CDRs, and, if they are, they are prevented from being members of the block committee. Known as “sources,” these agents replicate the Soviet model of bureaucratic control (evoking particularly the way it was organized in...
East Germany), running parallel to the CDR structure. The agents of every block are controlled by the policemen in charge of the block, the Revolutionary Vigilantes (VRs). The VRs are in turn controlled by the M agents, who are in charge of four blocks, and the M agents are controlled by the MM, in charge of ten blocks. Finally, those receiving reports from several blocks of ten report to the coordinator of Vigilance of the CDR, thus tying the upper level of the CDRs to the root structures of the political police. This network depends on the General Department of Counter-Intelligence (also known as Department of State Security, Section 1, later Section 11 of the Special Department of the Ministry of the Interior), as revealed by Gen. Del Pino (1990). Every “source” must write a daily report, which is used, together with the CDR report, for hiring people at new jobs, for admitting students to the university, and for approving travel abroad. A secret informant explains her task in this way:

When I joined the Committee [CDR], I also started working as an investigator for the Department of State Security. Nobody knew I was an investigator. . . . I’m not supposed to tell anybody what I do for the Department. . . . I keep a diary where I write the history of everybody living on this block and their relatives. I write down everybody’s surname, place of work, age, and the license number of his car if he has one. . . . I have to be alert to every detail, to look at everybody who goes in, and write down their height, race, and so on. Sometimes three or four men from the Department will come here and I’ve got to sit down and talk to them. (Eulalia Fontanès, quoted in Lewis, Lewis, and Rigdon 1977, 5: 388)

An overview of the CDRs’ evolution over time shows increasing use of the more coercive forms of external control. Paralleling other aspects of the Cuban revolutionary regime, four periods can be distinguished, usually called Revolution (1960–1977), Institutionalization (1977–1986), Rectification (1986–1989), and the Special Period (from 1989 on).

In the first, revolutionary period (1960–1977), the Cuban leaders experimented with radical measures aimed at developing a new model of revolutionary socialism. Innovation included the creation of the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, which were organized according to the outline presented above. Yet, as mentioned, the initial, virtually universal participation in the twenty-four-hour guard was eventually reduced to three and then to two night shifts. In the late 1960s, of the 2 million apparently required to perform the (reduced) plans, about 1.5 million effectively did it (CGA, 9/1969).

The CDRs were also active in expropriations and in a variety of economic and social tasks. Yet it should be noted that they actively collaborated from the beginning with the police (the General Department of Public Order and the General Department of Investigative Technique of the Ministry of the Interior), the militia (Civil Defense), and the army (with which they organized People’s Defense, a branch of CDR-FAR, Looking at the Sea Detachments, and Support

Brigades) (Castro 1968, 34–35; CGA, 1/1968, 2/1971). In 1977, the CDRs’ official membership reached about 5 million people, nearly 75 percent of the adult Cuban population. During this period, the CDRs had a significant capacity for mobilizing people on their own, especially at the annual rallies on the anniversary day, which until 1977 included a TV-broadcasted speech by Fidel Castro.

The Institutionalization period started with the creation of the Cuban Communist Party in 1975 and the approval of a new Constitution in 1976. It was a time of increased Soviet influence and a more complex bureaucratic organization of the state. The CDRs held their first Congress in 1977. New orders were given to subordinates that made the CDR’s lower committees accountable to higher levels of the organization (Lezcano 1977). Social and assistance tasks were withdrawn from the CDRs and transferred to the new institutional organization People’s Power. Collaboration with the police was enlarged on the occasion of the Mariel crisis in 1980 with the formation of Special Brigades in support of the Ministry of the Interior units.7

Collaboration with the army after the second CDR Congress in 1981 included reactivating the CDR-FAR secretariat and creating a Society of Patriotic Military Education in which the CDRs were in charge of recruiting young people in the neighborhoods for compulsory military service. From 1985 on, there was also an annual celebration of a Week of National Homage of the CDR to the FAR. The CDRs’ official membership was still very high (5,376,000 members at the time of the second Congress in 1981), yet regular activities were visibly reduced. Regular CDR block meetings went from being weekly to being monthly. The massive anniversary rallies were only resumed at the pace of one every five years as of 1980 and were transferred from the street to the theater.

Rectification was introduced in 1986, moving in the opposite direction of the Soviet perestroika of the time, with the aim of preserving the control of political activity by the Communist Party and preventing liberalizing attempts. The official report to the third Congress of the CDR, in 1986, stated that “formalism and routine are characteristics of all their activities,” which included cessation of ideological circles, a performance of only about 25 percent in night-guard duties, scarce voluntary works, and problems in filling the position of CDR block president. Fraud in reporting participation in guard, voluntary work, and regular meetings was widespread, usually by way of inflating data in the committee’s report to the provincial office, a practice known as “el globo.”8

The corresponding new measures of external control included the following: the so-called process of characterization, aimed at identifying those who did not serve on the guard, did not work as volunteers, and so on; appointment of a new figure of “orientees,” paid functionaries in charge of control-
ling about 100–150 CDR blocks in about 20–30 zones each; and the above-mentioned “surprise checks” (CGA, 7, 8, 10, and 12/1988). After their first task of revolutionary vigilance, the CDRs’ second duty passed from being “ideological education” (still emphasized in their second Congress in 1981) to “defense” (as formalized in the third Congress, CGA, 11/1986, 64–65). Yet in the following years, mobilization and vigilance deteriorated dramatically. Regular CDR block meetings were phased out to only once every two months (CGA, 2/1987). Illegal alcohol trafficking, stealing, and the sale of stolen goods visibly increased. In general, the CDR leaders observed “people’s apathy, social indiscipline in public transportation, in lines, in the blocks, in the street” (CGA, 9/1988, 1/1989).

The crisis precipitated after the fall of the Communist bloc in Eastern Europe and the protective Soviet Union led to the Special Period, beginning in 1989. The night guard was found to be in a “dying situation,” not fully performed even in the priority zones of Havana (CGA, 10/1989, 11/1989). At the beginning of the Special Period, the CDRs’ night patrol was integrated into the police’s. The first shift was to be guaranteed by retired elderly and housewives, armed with whistles, sticks, and lanterns and wearing an armband with the inscription “PNR” (Revolutionary National Police), while the few survivors of the second shift (from 2 a.m. to 5 a.m.) directly joined the police patrol. The police and the CDRs were increasingly presented as “brothers in fight,” explicitly pointing out that “a cederista worker is a policeman” (CGA, 4/1989, 7/1989). In early 1990, the traditional professional body of night vigilantes, which had been known as “serenos,” was reborn, with 4,350 paid members (CGA, 2/1990).

However, the political crisis of the Ministry of the Interior in 1989–1991, which included the execution of Col. Antonio de la Guardia (together with Gen. Ochoa) and the imprisonment of the minister José Abrantes, provided the opportunity to replace police control of the CDRs with that of the army. In February 1990, for the first time a prominent member of the military, Gen. Sixto Batista, was appointed as national coordinator of the CDRs. At the fourth Congress of the CDRs, which was held in 1993 after a three-year delay, it was established that CDR members would be organized into bodies such as “Defense Zones” and “Rapid Response Brigades.” They were sent to construct refuges and bunkers to resist a hypothetical foreign invasion, and the CDRs were conceived as part of a “Single System of Vigilance and Protection” under the control of the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR) (Granma, 10/13/1993, and again on 10/27/1996). A branch of CDR-FAR was organized in every CDR. The CDRs’ anniversary celebrations were transferred to FAR sites and presided over by Vice President and FAR Minister Raúl Castro and other generals, with the full understanding that the CDRs had almost been absorbed by the FAR: “The uniformed cederistas are in the FAR as people’s members,” in Gen. Arnaldo Tamayo’s words (Granma, 9/27/1995).

In the late 1990s, the official membership of the Cuban Committees for the Defense of the Revolution was presumed to still be relatively high, especially because withdrawing was costly, as it was considered close to “treason to the Revolution.” Official data still claimed 7,600,000 members in 1996, which is about 88 percent of the adult Cuban population (Granma, 5/29/1996). However, the monthly practice of four days’ voluntary work was abandoned in 1991. All evidence shows that basic regular tasks, including bimonthly meetings and the night guard, were hardly attended or simply not performed anymore (Golden 1994; Granma, 9/28/1995).

As a consequence of the country’s economic failure, people had to spend increasing amounts of time waiting for buses or scavenging for food, and this made it even more costly to reserve additional time for CDRs’ and other official organizations’ activities. For CDR leaders, ideological rewards for maintaining their commitment eroded, while they found it increasingly appealing to join other citizens in illegal economic activities. “Counterrevolutionary” crimes like dealing on the black market and mundane dissent (in particular, listening to Radio Martí) visibly spread. Increasing crime rates showed the ineffectiveness of neighbors’ vigilance.

In terms of the previous formal analysis synthesized in Figure 1, citizens find increasing rewards in illegal activities in spite of the risk of being reported, which provisionally places the possible outcomes of their interaction with CDR members at the upper row of the matrix. CDR members experience even lower rewards than before from reporting their neighbors as good revolutionaries (r), while external benefits derived from the citizens’ illegal actions (b), such as use of the black market, increase. This makes a CDR member’s utility from being “revolutionary” lower than that from being an “accomplice” of their neighbors’ illegal actions (A > R), thus finally breaking one of the previously presented necessary conditions for a “loyalty” in which citizens would abstain from acting illegally and CDR members would not report.

This analysis may reflect the fact that in the 1990s many Cuban citizens, both members and nonmembers of the CDRs, could develop new relations of cooperation to their mutual benefit, in contrast to the hatred, fear, and distrust characterizing the initial relations between CDR members and citizens. Once the “accomplice” outcome is attained, reestablishing “loyalty” or “revolution” outcomes would require huge amounts of additional external control over CDR members and leaders in order to induce them to “report” and in this way make citizens’ illegal actions less rewarding. In the words of the national coordinator of the CDRs, Juan Cortino, “reviving the organization is not a one-day affair” (Granma, 9/27/1996). According to the directive given by Fidel
CASTRO on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the Revolutionary National Police, on January 5, 1999, about two hundred CDR leaders have been provided with portable telephones and direct communications with police stations and with motorized patrols. The CDRs have become routinely organized with the corresponding police patrols (Granma, 1/15/1999).

Conclusion

The Cuban revolutionary regime established in 1959 did not succeed in developing an effective system of social control based on mutual citizens' vigilance. The system organized through the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR), which was devised to avoid frequent repressive actions by the political police and the army, was based on public membership of the large majority of the population on a territorial basis. The CDRs were initially given relevant economic, social, and ideological functions, but their foremost task was providing information, citizens' control, and "revolutionary vigilance," including, in particular, the performance of night patrols in the neighborhood.

Empirical evidence shows decreases in levels of CDR membership, mobilization, and effectiveness. The incentive structure of CDR membership induced some perverse results, including false accusations or "cheating" of citizens by CDR members and "complicity" between neighbors to allow illegal acts and not to denounce each other. The organizational weakness of CDRs and the corresponding rulers' lack of confidence in CDRs' ability to maintain social control developed in a manner parallel to the evolution of the Cuban regime in other aspects. But the CDRs' failure was basically due to the institutional incentives they created for citizens to choose both mutual cooperation with other citizens and conflict with CDR members.

Maintaining social control required from the regime the introduction of sanctions not only on citizens acting illegally but also on those not reporting their neighbors. High-level committees' control on lower-level committees and regular CDR members was reinforced. Many tasks of vigilance were gradually transferred to the political police and later the Revolutionary Armed Forces. Gradually, the Cuban experience of social control approximated the more traditional Soviet model of bureaucratic control of citizens by external agents.

Notes

1. From statements by Fidel Castro in Granma, 5/19/1986, and by Juan Cortino, national coordinator of the CDRs, also in Granma, 9/27/1996.
2. See, for example, statements by Jorge Lezcano, national coordinator of the CDRs, in Granma, 9/26/1977, and by Fidel Castro, also in Granma, 10/12/1986.
3. For 1968, see Castro 1973, 45; for 1972, ibid., 159–60; 1st Congress of the CDR, Granma,

References


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The Resurrection of Cuban Statistics

ABSTRACT

After 1989, the publication of Cuba's statistical yearbook and economic report was halted, thus creating a significant data vacuum in the 1990s, a crucial period because of the economic crisis and reforms. The publication of such periodicals resumed in 1998, largely filling that gap and providing new data. This chapter reports on the new statistical series, cuts and changes in tables, problems in connecting the old and new series, and trends and highlights.

RESUMEN

Después de 1989, el anuario estadístico de Cuba y el informe económico anual dejaron de publicarse, lo cual creó un vacío estadístico serio en el decenio de los noventa, una época crucial debido a la crisis y las reformas económicas. Ambas publicaciones se reanudaron en 1998, llenando en buena parte el vacío existente y suministrando nueva información. Este capítulo analiza las nuevas series estadísticas, los cortes y cambios en los cuadros, los problemas para conectar las dos series, así como las tendencias y cifras más importantes.

Introduction

Between 1969 and 1988 I published several articles, research notes, and reviews informing on and analyzing Cuban statistics. The halting of publication of the statistical yearbook Anuario Estadístico de Cuba (hereafter AEC) after its 1989 edition, as well as of the annual economic report Informe Económico (hereafter IE), created a significant data gap—worse than that of 1967–1970—and led to a cessation of my reporting on that subject. In 1997, that hiatus was broken by the publication of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean study on the Cuban economy in the 1990s (hereafter ECLAC 1997). In 1998, Cuba's National Statistical Office resumed publication of the AEC with a 1996 issue that filled in the vacuum on the most important data series for 1990–1996, and a new edition of the AEC for 1997 appeared in 1999. The Cuban Central Bank restarted publication of its annual economic report in 1998, and issues are now available for the years 1997 and 1998. These four documents are tantamount to a resurrection of statistics in the island (after seven years of interruption) and merit a new article analyzing and commenting on their contents, continuities, and changes.