

## **Patterns in Cuba's Presidency**

Attempts to portray anyone as “bad” involve claiming that the malfeasant has strayed far from a morally good “normal” state, and this is certainly true with Machado as well. In claiming he was a “tyrant” it is important to impress upon others the concept of a “non-tyrannical” normalcy which presumably involves respect for the Constitution and democracy. Yet as one reflects upon Cuban presidents before 1924, we can find that the “norm” for Cuban presidents really was not all that respectful of constitutional means or processes. In other words, Machado’s violations of democratic rules were not unusual practices by President’s before 1924 and were widely practiced by Cuba’s political elite. A few significant “non-democratic” activities between 1902 and 1924 include Presidents attempting their own fraudulent re-election by rigging the votes, Mario Menocal’s attempt at a third term in office despite clear signals of his unpopularity, and the manipulation of Cuban political parties by leaders who would not abide by a party’s decision to choose leaders other than themselves. When Machado himself attempted some of these things, it was clearly nothing unusual in Cuban politics. Though there is no need to justify these slights to democratic processes, it makes Machado’s decisions understandable and even reasonable; it’s tough to abide by the rules yourself when no one else seems to bother either. These notable features bear directly on Machado’s later decisions to thwart Menocal’s ambitions and the gross manipulation of Cuban party politics.

Naturally, Machado has been criticized for these moves, but they begin to make sense in light of Cuba's political history.

After Cuba adopted its constitution in 1902, Cubans elected Tomas Estrada Palma, a member of the Conservative Party, President of Cuba. At the end of his four year term, Estrada Palma sought re-election. The Liberal Party was upset and its leader, José Miguel Gomez, led an armed revolt in 1906. Invoking the Platt Amendment<sup>1</sup>, Estrada Palma requested and received US assistance in the form of armed intervention to quell the uprising, nicknamed the *Guerrita de Agosto*. The Americans, instead of leaving the island immediately after the intervention, re-enforced their military presence and assumed political control for three years. President Theodore Roosevelt appointed Charles E. Magoon provisional Governor of Cuba. Magoon served in Cuba from 1906 to 1909 as the effective head of government for the island of Cuba.

In 1909, the United States organized new elections, and José Miguel Gomez became president. Facing a revolt of disenfranchised blacks in 1912, he crushed the rebellion and executed its leaders. Gomez lost his bid for re-election in 1912, and allowed the Conservative Party to step back into power in 1913. This would be the only time in the early Republic when a Cuban president has not sought immediate re-election. Gomez would surface later in a military insurrection, to claim another term in office.

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<sup>1</sup> The "Platt Amendment" refers to a clause in the Cuban Constitution of 1901 that reserved to the United States the right of intervention should American interests be deemed

Conservative President Mario Garcia Menocal, elected legally in 1913, arranged his own questionable re-election in 1916. The Liberals revolted under the leadership of José Miguel Gomez and established military control of Oriente and Camaguey provinces. Menocal persuaded the Americans to denounce the rebels in 1917 despite the fraudulent 1916 elections,<sup>2</sup> and the US threatened to intervene again. Menocal crushed the rebellion, and its leaders either fled the island, or were pardoned. Gerardo Machado, one of the Army officers participating in the anti-Menocal rebellion, was captured while recovering from a fever in a hospital. Due to his prominent standing in his home province of Santa Clara (leader of the Liberal Party in Santa Clara, and a senior Army Officer), Machado was pardoned for his role in the rebellion.

Menocal sought a third term<sup>3</sup> as president in 1920. Although securing the full backing of the American government, Menocal, could not secure support from his own political party.

Within the Liberal Party, Gomez (seeking a second non-concurrent term as president) opposed Alfredo Zayas for the party's nomination. Gomez defeated Zayas in the internal party struggle, obtained the Liberal party nomination, and promptly ousted Zayas from the party. Zayas, capitalizing on Gomez's unpopularity, formed a new political party, the Popular Party (*Partido Popular Cubano*), with support from

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threatened. This occurred because of the preponderant influence American policymakers wielded when US forces assisted Cuba's liberation from Spain.

<sup>2</sup>Machado Collection, II-12, Special Collections, Otto Richter Library, University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida. Hereafter "Machado Collection."

other conservatives, and campaigned for President as the leader of this new party.

Meanwhile, Menocal could not convince his own Conservative Party or the public to trust him. His party refused to re-nominate him and the public undoubtedly would have rejected him. Menocal, resenting Gomez for rebelling against him in 1917, and lacking public support, endorsed Alfredo Zayas for president in 1920. Menocal used his waning influence to swing enough support from Conservative party members to Zayas under the banner of the Nationalists, another new party created by Menocal. Menocal could not find support within his own long established political party. In return, Zayas pledged to support Menocal in a bid for a third term in 1924!<sup>4</sup>

President Menocal used his influence (as he did in 1916) to promote Zayas' victory. The Liberal party, numerically superior and more popular than either the Conservatives or the Nationalists, lost the election when Zayas and Menocal combined their influences to defeat Gomez's bid for a second (though not contiguous) term as president. Amidst signs of fraud,<sup>5</sup> the election of 1920 ended without any clear winner. Pressure from the US forced new elections in the spring of 1921. Both Menocal and Zayas, rejected by their own respective parties, joined forces and agreed to support Zayas. As a result of their cooperation, Zayas won the election of 1921 and became the president of Cuba. The point is that Machado's political moves in the

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<sup>3</sup> Menocal was elected first in 1913, then re-elected (fraudulently, many claimed) in 1916, and sought a third concurrent term in 1920.

<sup>4</sup>Hernandez Rivera, *Cuba politica*, 1899-1955, pp 265, 273; as referenced in Louis Perez, *Intervention, Revolution and Politics in Cuba, 1913-1921*, (Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press).

<sup>5</sup> Enoch Crowder to Secretary of State, November 3, 1924, Havana, 837.00/2576 (M488 R16).

1920's only mimicked the activities of his predecessors (and opponents such as Menocal).

Because of the tenuous nature of the elections in 1920 and 1921 and the ongoing risk of instability, the United States sent a "special envoy," Enoch Crowder, to directly represent American authority on the island. Zaya's immediately accepted this otherwise intrusive representative because his own political hold was so slim: an American representative sent to his own administration would be a powerful *de facto* recognition of his legitimacy as president of Cuba. This price in sovereignty was paid as American suggestions seemed more like orders and American diplomatic representatives became accustomed to bypassing normal diplomatic channels and dealing directly with the President; this had the effect of placing the American representative on the scene as an equal to the president, a situation which Machado attempted to rectify.

Both Menocal and Zayas borrowed millions of dollars from United States banks and failed to produce significant internal improvement. As Machado later put it: "Menocal's government had paid enormous prices for miles of roads which had never been constructed and Zayas's government paid large sums for repairs of those non-existent roads."<sup>6</sup>

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>6</sup> Machado Collection, Otto Richter Library, University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida, Box 1, Folder 8, II-14; Hereafter "Machado Collection."

Machado stepped into the presidency<sup>7</sup> at the moment when presidential corruption, national bankruptcy, and American intervention prevented any meaningful development of the Cuban nation. Machado's own re-election in 1928 seemed to some a pre-emptive strike at Menocal machinations and Congress's later attempts to freeze party leadership no doubt were due to the direct effects of party manipulation since 1902. Instead of acting as a filtering mechanism and mediator for a wide range of groups they were devolving into strictly personal armies. It may be to Machado's credit that he never did attempt to create a mass political machine on his own behalf, even though it may have cost him the presidency in 1933. The US Chargé in Havana, C. Vanft Engbert, wrote to the US Secretary of State describing the condition of Cuban politics in 1924. He wondered "how utterly impossible it is to think of Cuban political "Parties" as functioning in anything like their counterparts in the United States or Great Britain. He said "there is no such thing as platform or principles or a program, only leaders (preferably known as "liberators") who may or may not be able to win sufficient adherents by their popularity or by promise of a reward from a party."<sup>8</sup> This phenomena of "*caudillismo*" or "*personalismo*," common in many Latin countries, has not re-enforced the construction of institutionalized democracies in the hemisphere. Ironically, Machado was neither a good democratic nor a successful "caudillo" – something later generations would have to reflect upon as they observed the success of Fidel Castro's vast personal propaganda machine portraying himself as the embodiment of Cuba itself.

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<sup>7</sup> See Chapter 4, "1924 Election"

<sup>8</sup> C. Vanft Engbert to Secretary of State, July 3, 1924, Havana, 837.00/2523; National Archives and Records Administration, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Cuba, 1910-1929.