

The 1928 Election

Introduction

Machado's re-election in 1928 is the central historical act used by his opponents to justify their rebellion against the Cuban government. They claim Machado should not have run for re-election after campaigning against it. Outside of this re-election, there was very little they could challenge. By all accounts he was running the country as well as or better than any previous administration despite the collapsing sugar prices. Machado's re-election occurred peacefully because he had outstanding support among all sections of the Cuban populace and had equally strong multi-party support in Congress. His attempt to constitutionally forbid presidential re-election was postponed by the Constitutional Assembly until after he ran for re-election. Congress requested an additional two years for the current Presidential (Machado's) and Senatorial terms, with no re-election for the President.

Without his re-election, Machado's opponents could not justify their rebellion. Without a rebellion, Machado would not have repressed the rebels, and without state repression, Machado could not have earned a reputation as a tyrant. But his re-election was legal and hardly extraordinary given Cuba's history of presidents running for re-election.

There was no legal or constitutional mandate forbidding re-election in 1928. In 1928, there would be no alternatives to Machado except previous presidents, or men who had been rejected by their own parties. The historical acts of re-election or attempted re-election by earlier Cuban presidents (including the election of 1924), and a situation in 1928 wherein any significant political opponent would have been a

former president (such as Menocal) or someone (Mendieta) from Machado's own party who had clearly been rejected by the public and the party.

Machado's Justification for Re-Election

Although Machado was well aware of the revolutionary potential inherent in running for re-election, several factors contributed to his decision to extend his presidency. Machado's concern for the long term viability of his reforms outweighed the risk and trouble that might occur if he gained a second term. Although the Central Highway was complete and he had negotiated the first major overhaul of trade relations with the United States (both in 1927), Machado sought two more years in office to complete his other initiatives. Additionally, intra-party ambitions to succeed Machado had not produced a widely supported candidate. In this situation, all of the Liberal party candidates agreed to back Machado for re-election while they strengthened their own positions anticipating their next chance at winning the presidency.

The Conservative Party supported Machado's administration even though he had defeated them in the 1924 elections. The Conservative party remained internally divided and lacked a popular leader. Even the Conservatives loyal to Menocal supported Machado in the 1928 election, including Menocal himself.¹ So, with support from both major national parties, Congress proposed a constitutional reform to support an additional two years in office for Machado.²

Congress passed a two year extension for the current Presidential and Senatorial terms and banned presidential re-election. With the support of all parties this was then forwarded to the Constitutional Assembly (per the Constitution). The

¹ Machado Collection, IV-24.

² Ibid., IV-24.

Constitutional Assembly had the authority to implement the proposed constitutional changes: to extend the presidential term from four to six years, and banning presidential re-election.

As provided by the 1901 Constitution, six months after Congress approved the amendments, the Constitutional Assembly met, elected an assembly president,³ and began to weigh the merits of the proposal. However, instead of accepting the Congressional proposal exactly as submitted, the Assembly took the initiative to modify the proposed amendment. First, the Constitutional Assembly extended the presidential term to six years, and second, it banned presidential re-elections. However, the assembly postponed the effective date of the ban on re-elections until after Machado was able to run for re-election in 1928 so that he would effectively get not only a second term in office, but a six year term instead of a four year term. The ban on presidential re-elections would not prevent a second term for Machado.

This change forced Machado to run for re-election or step down at the height of his popularity and in the midst of the most progressive and complete reforms Cuba had experienced since independence. So with the support of all the significant political parties in Cuba -- Liberal, Popular, and Conservative -- Machado stood as the only candidate for president in 1928 -- and he ran unopposed on the ballot.

Very few people opposed the changes in the law. One Senator, Ricardo Dolz, resigned in protest, not of Machado directly, but of the laws that had been changed to allow Senators to remain in office for an additional two years. Congressional support for the constitutional changes was not surprising since it extended their own terms in office.

³ Dr. Antonio S. de Bustamante, a lawyer of repute.

Legal objections to the constitutional changes were raised but twice the Supreme Court upheld the legality of the changes and supported the legality of Machado's re-election. The point of contention was in a sense a technicality -- the constitution forbade the Assembly from modifying the requests submitted by Congress.⁴ Far from being illegal or unconstitutional -- Machado's second term was supported by Congress, endorsed by a re-election, and reaffirmed twice by the Supreme Court. Congressional Elections leading up to the fall presidential election yielded a healthy balance between Liberals, with thirty seats, Conservatives, with twenty, and Populists, with five seats.⁵

Support for Machado

Cubans had never had a president that tackled the island's problems as thoroughly, ambitiously, and courageously as Machado did. His vast program of internal development,⁶ stability, and his nationalist and populist leanings created and enhanced his stature in Cuban society. Congressional support reflected Machado's popular support. Cubans noticed the "excellently organized economic structure" which was emerging under his administration and how favorably it contrasted with

⁴ Ibid., IV-25.

⁵ Havana Post, March 10, 1928, Havana.

⁶ While traveling in the interior, Machado again mentioned the need for higher tariffs to protect nascent Cuban industry and the need to pursue development of smaller crops in order to diversify the agricultural base and lessen its reliance on imports. From the Havana Post, October 7, 1928.

the near chaos that marked the administration of Zayas.⁷ The success of Machado's first term was rewarded with overwhelming support for his reelection in 1928.

The recent constitutional changes had extended the Congressional terms of office for two years, and delayed the bi-annual political contests. As a result, it became difficult to dislodge the leadership of any of the political parties, or to initiate any new major political initiatives from outside the government. Also, Republican and Nationalist Parties were excluded from the register of political parties because they "failed to present candidates in the last election and were left without the necessary percentage of electors."⁸ This scenario could have either reinforced the advantage of incumbents, or, the intervening years could produce a popular backlash against the politicians who had benefited from these changes. While certainly reinforcing the incumbents, it produced no broad based backlash.

The Nationalist Union emerged as an alliance among all the disgruntled out of office politicians as an alternative political organization through which they could pursue government offices. They faced enormous difficulties in achieving power. These ex-politicians had been rejected by their own respective parties (Conservative and Liberal) and rejected by the voting public. Mendieta led this new union. He had been Machado's Liberal party opponent in 1924 and resented Machado's upstart campaign and subsequent capture of Liberal party support for the general election. Other key leaders of this union included Cosme de la Torriente (who resented Machado because the president chose not to allow him a coveted diplomatic post),

⁷ Havana Post, October 10, 1928, p. 1.

Hevia (who played a key part in depriving the Liberal party of its victory in 1916), Aurelio Alvarez (a supporter of General Menocal), and Mendez Penate (whom Machado had snubbed when Penate sought the president's support in running for re-election as a provincial governor).⁹

Election Day

On November 1, 1928, over eighty percent of Cuba's citizens turned out to vote in the presidential election. Only one candidate -- Machado -- was listed. Neither the Conservative Party nor the Popular Party fielded a candidate. The headline on the Havana Post read "Cuba to Vote For President Machado Today: First Time in Latin American History All Parties Agree."¹⁰ From one perspective, Machado had at least dealt with his campaign promise against re-election by constitutionally forbidding it. On the other hand, his critics charged he was in fact re-electing himself.

Genuine multi-party agreement and popular support for Machado was unprecedented. From July 1 through the end of 1928, only one incident of opposition is recorded in the Havana Post or other Cuban newspapers tracked by the Post.¹¹ Bohemia and Social, two prominent Havana weeklies, remained silent. Diario de la Marina, El Mundo, Heraldo de Cuba and the Havana Post all noted a full participation in elections, spirited by entirely peaceful participation by all parties, and widespread

⁸ Crowder to Secretary of State, October 21, 1925, Havana, 837.00/2600.

⁹ Machado Collection, IV-25.

¹⁰ Havana Post, November 1, 1928, p. 1.

¹¹ The Havana Post has a daily section of extracts from other newspapers published in Cuba.

support for Machado and his proposals.¹² The Havana Post recorded no discontent aside from the resignation of Senator Dolz, and not a word of news or editorials was noted from any major Cuban newspaper in 1928.¹³ No other political movement, politician, former politician, ex-president, newspaper, or political party voiced any opposition to this change in Cuban politics throughout the summer of 1928 and to the end of the year. The lack of any opposition to the constitutional changes in the months preceding and following the 1928 election was profound. The published documents of the State Department provide no hint of discord within Cuba for all of 1928 or 1929. This political maneuvering was not done in secret -- Cuba knew of the constitutional changes. Cubans approved of the constitutional changes implicitly by the overwhelming silence and lack of any noted opposition to this occurrence. Newspapers reported "complete peace and order throughout the island without a single disagreeable incident."¹⁴ Machado won another term, to expire in May 1935, with the explicit endorsement of the island's voters and full support of all three major political parties.

Conclusions

The New York Times applauded Cuba's progress under Machado calling his programs the "most ambitious program ever undertaken by any Cuban government since 1902."¹⁵ Even after the constitutional manipulations and election of 1928, Machado received the political approbation of his people,¹⁶ Congress, and all three

¹² Havana Post, March 7, 1928, Havana. (M 488 R 21).

¹³ Note: Per the extracts of significant articles reprinted daily by the Havana Post.

¹⁴ Havana Post, November 2, 1928, p. 1.

¹⁵ Anonymous, "To Give Credit to Cuba," New York Times, January 1, 1927, p. 44. As quoted in Roberto O. Hernandez, "The Second Administration of President Machado," p 46.

¹⁶ Roberto O. Hernandez, "The Second Administration of President Machado, p.

political parties because he proved in the first four years the sincerity of his program and the genuineness of his national improvements. Most histories of Cuba fail to note that Machado was widely supported for a second term in office with broad political and popular support in 1928. It was not free of corruption or an idealized democracy, but it was probably the most effective and popular administration Cuba had seen since independence. The cooperation of Congress, the lack of any significant protest, and even the relative silence of his foes in 1928 illustrate the widespread support Machado had for another term in office.