

Cuba's Waning System of Block-Watchers

Raul Castro May Push to Revitalize a Legacy, and Enforcement Tool, of the Revolution

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CAMAGUEY, [Cuba](#) -- Children swarmed the table outside Blanca Peleaz's concrete home in this central Cuban city. There were cakes and cookies, gooey frosting and candy speckles, rare abundance in a place where food shortages are the norm.

The sweets came with a history lesson on a recent muggy evening during a celebration of the Cuban Revolution. Peleaz and other neighborhood adults told the youngsters about the Moncada Barracks raid that started it all. They told the little ones that the Communist Party would lead the nation to glory.

Then they sang.

"Marching, we move toward an ideal," the grown-ups blared, urging the youngsters to join in. "Onward, Cubans. [Cuba](#) will reward our heroism."

For decades, Peleaz and her mother before her have been keepers of [Fidel Castro's](#) communist message, using their position as the head of the neighborhood's Committee for the Defense of the Revolution, or CDR, as an ideological wedge into the minds of their neighbors. Now, in the twilight of Castro's reign, the fate of the CDRs could provide a clue about Cuba's future.

Once, in a bygone era when revolutionary fervor was at its apex, they were muscular entities, dominating street life and cementing Castro's hold on power. But over the years they have atrophied, becoming more creaking relic than shining showpiece, victim of the waning enthusiasms of a population weary of economic deprivation.

As Castro's brother, interim President Raul Castro, prepares to take full control after his brother's death, party officials take visiting dignitaries on tours of the committees, and there are signs that the younger Castro is trying to inject new life into a system that could be crucial to solidifying his hold on power.

Police call block leaders more often, pressing aggressively for information, according to interviews with current and former CDR leaders. Earlier this year, Cuba's state-run television network broadcast an exposé shaming several committees for failing to post obligatory round-the-clock sentries.

"We're working to lift up the committees," said Over DeLeon, a veteran of the Cuban Revolution who has been a block committee president in [Havana](#) for most of the past four

decades. "People have not been demonstrating the same spirit, faith and enthusiasm. The population is tired. It has been battling for many years. But we must be vigilant."

Restoring the CDRs to their former glory might be a monumental task. For every unabashed enthusiast such as DeLeon, it seems, there are other CDR leaders whose passion for the system has tapered off.

Putting Peer Pressure to Work

Cuba's block committees were born in 1960, shortly after Fidel Castro's revolutionary forces toppled the corrupt, U.S.-friendly government of Fulgencio Batista. Concerned about a U.S. invasion, Castro's government adopted a motto, still present on Cuban billboards: "In a fortress under siege, all dissent is treason."

The concept behind the CDRs was to create a citizen force that would reinforce the dictates of Cuba's government, establishing a kind of omnipresent peer pressure network among next-door neighbors. Leaders of CDRs could put Castro's every public thought directly and rapidly into the hands of every Cuban, so the government would not have to rely solely on mass media.

In 1961, after the U.S.-planned Bay of Pigs invasion, the CDRs delivered an awesome display of power. Within hours of the failed attack, thousands of suspected dissenters were arrested, many of them identified from CDR lists.

"The CDRs paralyzed the counterrevolution, and they did it quickly," Norberto Fuentes, an exiled Cuban author and onetime friend of the Castros, said in an interview from his [Miami](#) home.

In those days, the leadership ranks of the block committees were stacked with Castro loyalists. Over the years, many of Castro's former comrades died or fell out of favor, leaving more and more CDRs in the hands of the less zealous.

Even in their current state of decay, the CDRs remain one of the most enduring inventions of the Castro revolution, a one-of-a-kind system that serves as his eyes and ears on every block in Cuba. In a 1990 speech at the Karl Marx Theater in Havana to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the CDRs, Fidel Castro called them a key to Cuba's future.

"We want to always have a proud and independent homeland instead of a Yankee colony," Castro said. "We must save the Revolution. We must save socialism. This is the task we urge the 7.5 million CDR members to undertake."

Every Cuban is expected to join the local CDR and participate in committee activities whether or not they are Communist Party members. Each CDR has a popularly elected president and separate secretaries of security, volunteerism and education.

Some Cubans don't join or don't participate, but at great risk of being labeled an "enemy of the Revolution." CDR presidents can organize "acts of repudiation," in which neighbors stand outside the homes of those suspected of illegal activity and scream insults -- sometimes for days.

When a Cuban wants a job in the lucrative tourism industry -- where a worker can earn three or four times the usual state salary -- the CDR president's imprimatur is essential. Applicants labeled "anti-social," code for transgressions such as dissident activity or lack of interest in volunteer projects, are almost assured of being turned down.

If a child is born, active CDR presidents pay a visit to the parents.

"We start to attend to the political development of a child, in a gradual way, from the time they are born," said DeLeon, a veteran of the Revolution who has a photograph of Fidel Castro in his living room.

As the child grows, DeLeon is watching. He stops by to make sure children are attending classes, especially the courses on Cuban history that recount Castro's triumph.

"We're creating something," DeLeon said, "Something called a 'political conscience.' "

Keeping Tabs on Dissidents

Fifteen minutes outside central Havana, in the Vibora neighborhood, Rafael Garc a lives in a home with a bucket for a shower.

When he became CDR president 12 years ago, his monthly meetings were jammed with as many as 75 people. Now he sometimes convenes meetings before an empty room. He has to walk his block, pounding on doors, to get anyone to attend.

"They're trying to rescue this system," said Garc a, a 50-year-old mechanic. "But I don't think there's a chance of it flourishing. Every year people hear the same thing -- they'll get more money, their lives will improve -- and nothing changes."

Garc a's CDR is just down the street from DeLeon's. DeLeon is strict; Garc a, lax. But they agree about the decline of CDRs. Still hopeful for a CDR renaissance, DeLeon is a hawk who misses nothing on his block.

"We know who the dissidents are, where they work, who they meet with -- we know everything that happens on this block," DeLeon said. "Anyone who is not a revolutionary is an enemy of the Revolution."

For years, he watched a dissident whom he identified only as Miguel. When Miguel moved in across the street, DeLeon said he told him he would not tolerate demonstrations or speeches.

"He wasn't a stupid person," DeLeon said. "He listened to me and didn't give me any trouble."

Because Miguel followed the rules, he was allowed to continue living there. Others -- including dissidents who had written anti-Castro materials or run illegal libraries or schools -- have been imprisoned for treason.

DeLeon wrote down who Miguel met with, who picked him up, virtually everything about him, expanding the government's database of party opponents. Eventually, though, there was no more information to collect. Miguel had disappeared into exile in [Florida](#).

While DeLeon relishes the role of neighborhood enforcer as "fundamental to the Revolution," Garc a chafes at police pressure to gather tidbits about his neighbors.

"They tell me, 'You have to be doing this,' " he said as he slowly wiped oil from his calloused hands with a red rag. "They say, 'You have to be watching.' "

More often than not, though, Garc a has nothing for the police dossiers.

"If someone is making duros fr os and selling them," he said, describing homemade fruit popsicles, "what am I going to do, turn them in? They can't buy those at the state store because the state store doesn't sell them. It's hot. Why not have a popsicle?"

Under the Radar, for a While

Several months ago, a thickset man with a wide smile thought he had found urban nirvana.

The man, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he runs an illegal business, had moved to Havana because of a medical condition that required frequent visits to the capital's big hospitals. The government must approve address changes and some people find it impossible to navigate the bureaucracy. (Cubans can own homes, but cannot legally sell them commercially or rent out rooms.)

For a long time, the man recalled, he and his wife bounced from one illegally rented apartment to another. Once, they returned from a trip and found a new renter sleeping on their sheets and using their things.

Then they got lucky, finding a reasonably priced apartment in a nice neighborhood. They thought they were set. Yet each night when he came home, the man noticed the local CDR president stealing glances at him.

The man was unnerved, but conflicted. He had benefited greatly from the CDR system. The CDRs kept his neighborhood safe and made sure he got vaccinations as a child.

In a loose CDR, the couple might have been able to deal with the problem. A small bribe -- a bottle of rum or a bag of rice -- would have done it. But not here. The president was a stickler.

After several weeks, a policeman knocked. He told them they had to go.