

ISC 13. Libraries in Cuba: Report of a visit to "independent," national and public libraries in Cuba, April 2000

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The Independent Libraries in Cuba Project (ILCP) was initiated in February 1998. All of the main people involved in the project belong to "independent press agencies" and "oppositional political parties". None of them are qualified librarians or members of the Cuban Library Association (ASCUBI). The ILCP has asserted that "States should ease the free flow of information and knowledge between people", but the ILCP has not opposed the illegal US blockade of Cuba.

Amnesty International has condemned the "detention and harassment of dissidents", including "independent librarians", in Cuba. ASCUBI has stated that independent librarians were never subject to arrest or imprisonment. Amnesty has called on Cuba to abide by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man, but Amnesty has not denounced the US blockade.

The International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) has described the "independent librarians" as "a dissident group, encouraged and probably also partly financed by foreign interests, which has established some amateur libraries to challenge the current government of Cuba". IFLA "strongly upholds intellectual freedom and the right of all peoples to free access to information and freedom of information", but IFLA has not opposed the US blockade.

In April 2000 I visited the "Biblioteca Independiente Juana Alonso" in Havana. This "library" is in the home of Rogelio Travieso Perez, who is Human Rights Secretary of the Democratic Solidarity Party. The "library" consisted of 80 books and 20 journals. Only 10 items were out on loan. The collection contained items that would be stocked in the local public library. I concluded that the "library" was a front for political activities. It does not meet the information needs of the people, which are well served by the Cuban library system.

My views on independent "libraries" were echoed by Larry Oberg of Willamette University who, together with 14 other US librarians, went on a two week research trip to Cuba in March 2000. In Santiago de Cuba, some of the group visited two "independent libraries". They spoke at length with the people who are responsible for these "libraries". They concluded that "these libraries are, on the one hand, a public face and a recruiting tool for a dissident movement within Cuba and, on the other, a means of 'jumping the queue' to get an immigration visa to the US."

I also visited the National Literacy Museum and the Jose Marti National Library in Havana, provincial public libraries in Havana, Villa Clara, Sancti Spiritus, Ciego de Avila, Camaguey, Las Tunas and Holguin and a municipal public library in Banes. What I found in every case were excellent libraries, staffed by dedicated librarians, offering relevant services to their communities. Larry Oberg reached a similar conclusion: "The Cuban librarians that I met were, with a few exceptions, highly professional, talented and capable. They are committed to professional excellence and are clearly abreast of current trends in North American and European librarianship".

The Cuban Library Support Group (CLSG) supports Cuban libraries, Cuban librarians and the Cuban Library Association. CLSG recognises the contribution that libraries have made to literacy and the education system in Cuba.

Independent Libraries in Cuba Project

According to Berta Mexidor, the ILCP was launched in response to Fidel Castro's statement at the Havana Book Fair in February 1998 that "In Cuba there are no prohibited books, only those we do not have the money to buy". Mexidor claims that "the project brings together sectors of the population traditionally not involved with opposition activities".

However, Mexidor recognises "the high socio-political repercussion of this project", and participants in the project include "independent press agencies" and "oppositional political parties" including : Agencia de Prensa Libertad ; Partido Solidaridad Democratica ; Partido Cubano de Renovacion Ortodoxa ; Agencia de Prensa Libre Oriental ; Buro de Prensa Independiente de Cuba ; Agencia de Noticias Cubapress.

Mexidor has claimed that "independent libraries" are "neutral spaces, without ideologies", and that they will operate "without ideological constraints".

But Mexidor talks about "the gradual development of a specialised sector within the internal dissidence", and many of the "independent librarians" are involved in political activities and independent journalism :

Berta Mexidor is Director of the press agency "Liberty" in Las Tunas province and an "activist for democracy in Cuba"

Ramon Colas is an active member of the opposition, founding member of the Los Pinos Nuevos Party and secretary of the Science, Health and Education of the Democratic Solidarity Party

Magdelivia Gonzalez is news correspondent of the Democratic Solidarity Party and Independent Press journalist of the Liberty press agency

Juan Tellez Rodriguez is a member of the Democratic Solidarity Party as well as its news correspondent and active within the dissidence movement.

Eva Gonzalez Ricardo is a delegate of the Democratic Solidarity Party

Maria Elena Riveron Guerrero is an independent journalist, public relations secretary of the Cuban Party of Orthodox Renovation, and a "pro democracy political activist"

Mirna Riveron Guerrero is an independent journalist in the Oriental Free Press Agency, and national executive member of the Cuban Orthodox Renovation Party.

Manuel de Rio Olivero is founder and Vice President of the Cuban Orthodox Renovation Party

Alfredo Dennis Camps is provincial coordinator of the Democratic Solidarity Party

Xiomara Evelia Blanco is a provincial delegate of the Democratic Solidarity Party

Rogelio Travieso Perez is Human Rights Secretary of the Democratic Solidarity Party

Fernando Sanchez Lopez is Vice President of the Democratic Solidarity Party

Adolfo Fernandez Sainz is International Relations Secretary of the Democratic Solidarity Party

Miguel Angel Garcia Pinales is Information Secretary of the Democratic Solidarity Party

According to the Cuban Library Association (ASCUBI), none of the above were members of ASCUBI and none of them had any "contact with ACUBI or the profession at large in Cuba."

Mexidor has made the following statements on behalf of the Independent Libraries Project :

"States should ease the free flow of information and knowledge between people. A truly democratic state needs highly knowledgeable and cultivated citizens".

Mexidor does not condemn the 40 year illegal US blockade of Cuba, which has severely hindered the free flow of information and knowledge in and out of Cuba.

"Send bibliographic materials, pens, pencils, writing paper etc. All these supplies are in extremely short supply in Cuba".

The US blockade started in 1960. The blockade was tightened by the misnamed Cuban Democracy Act of 1992, known as the Torricelli Law, which made it illegal for foreign subsidiaries of US companies to trade with Cuba. The Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity (Libertad) Act of 1996, also known as the Helms-Burton bill, codified all previous executive orders increasing the blockade.

"The lack of a sustainable cultural ethic has discouraged stimulation of reading for the younger generations of Cubans...[and]...has shied readers away from libraries."

In 1959 the population of Cuba was 6 million, 24.3% were illiterate and there were very few libraries ; in 1999 the population was 11 million, 4.3% were illiterate and there are libraries in all parts of the country "The recent increase in the cost of books and the few editions within the Cuban people's reach".

During the 1990s, after the fall of the USSR and tightening of the US blockade, book production went down and the import of books and journals for libraries almost ceased. Cuban book production is now picking up again.

"The economic crisis and the citizen insertion into the most varied means of survival is also a decisive factor in the absence of good reading habits".

In 1998 a National reading Program was launched to coordinate the efforts of all institutions, groups and persons interested in the promotion of the book and reading. Mexidor recognises "That government political directives are currently promoting a national program to stimulate reading habits. The participants in the Independent Libraries Project consider that the official promulgation by the state's cultural hierarchy is full of good intention".

"The influence of the tourism industry and the ease that many people have to travel abroad and establish links with foreigners".

These include Robert Kent, who has taken books and pamphlets to Cuba for US government agencies ; and Jorge Sanguinety, who works for Radio Marti

"To obtain funding or donations...[from]... people and institutions that may be interested in the donation of materials and funding for the purchase of books, periodicals, magazines and any other goods".

This includes organisations such as "The Friends of Cuban Libraries", which is funded by US government agencies. "The aims of the Independent Library Project are to :

1. Offer scientific, technical, cultural and general information
2. Offer libraries in all municipalities and provinces
3. Create inter library cooperation at home and abroad
4. Create an open forum for discussion among readers
5. Stimulate reading among youth and children
6. Promote literary research and development

All of these aims are being met by the Cuban library system.

"The most requested subjects include visual arts, music, theatre, sociology, astronomy, computers, architecture, and biology."

All of these can be found in the Cuban library system.

Amnesty International Report

According to an Amnesty International Report on "Short term detention and harrassment of dissidents" in Cuba :

"In August 1999, as well as being temporarily detained, opposition activist Ramon Colas was evicted from his home in Las Tunas province, along with his wife, Berta Mexidor, and their two children. Ramon Colas and Berta Mexidor, who were both founders of the first independent library in Cuba, had lived in their home for 13 years before being told they were illegal occupants. According to Berta Mexidor, the authorities removed all their belongings into lorries in spite of their protests and told them they were being moved to another area, some 60 kilometres from their home. They were later taken to a military camp where some 300 people were reportedly housed. According to reports, the family are currently staying with relatives."

ASCUBI, the Cuban Library Association, has asserted that "independent librarians" "were never subject to arrest or imprisonment".

"Independent libraries in Cuba have also been subjected to searches and the confiscation of books. The first independent library in Cuba, the Biblioteca Felix Valera, was established in April 1998 by Berta Mexidor and her husband, Ramon Colas. Since then several other independent libraries have emerged. However, most have reportedly been subjected to searches and the confiscation of books and magazines"

Amnesty International recommended to the Cuban government "that all Cuban citizens be guaranteed their legitimate rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly, in accordance with articles 19, 20 and 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and articles 4, 21 and 22 of the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man".

Amnesty International have not yet opposed the US blockade of Cuba which is in breach of both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man.

The International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA)

IFLA "recognises the considerable achievements in regard to libraries and literacy achieved in Cuba since 1959, which were demonstrated to participants in the 1994 IFLA conference in Havana". Several Cuban librarians hold positions in IFLA Standing Committees and Round Tables.

IFLA has described the independent librarians as "a dissident group, encouraged and probably also partly financed by foreign interests, which has established some amateur

libraries to challenge the current government of Cuba". Most information about the independent libraries has come through "The Friends of Cuban Libraries" and "CubaNet".

IFLA "recognises the present difficult political and economic circumstances of Cuba" and "strongly upholds intellectual freedom and the right of all peoples to free access to information and freedom of information", but IFLA has not yet opposed the US blockade.

The Biblioteca Independiente Juana Alonso

On 28 April 2000 I visited the "Biblioteca Independiente Juana Alonso" at Falguera # 324 Altos e/ San Pedro y Dominguez, Cerro, Ciudad de la Habana. The "library" is a short distance away from Havana's Plaza de la Revolucion, which contains the Biblioteca Nacional Jose Marti, Cuba's National Library.

I arrived in Calle Falguera, a residential district of Havana, at about 11am. I asked some young men in the street where number 324 was and they pointed out an end of terrace first floor apartment. I rang the bell but there was no reply. I was told by a woman in the street that the occupant, Rogelio Travieso Perez, was visiting his mother, who is ill. The woman offered to tell Rogelio that I had called and that I would return after 3pm.

When I came back in the afternoon Rogelio answered the door and lead me upstairs to his apartment. We sat in his lounge, which lead off the stair case, drinking a small cup of Cuban coffee, made by his female partner. The apartment - which was large and well kept - had a central corridor off which I could see a bedroom and kitchen. I explained that I had found his address in the IFLA report on Cuba's "independent libraries", and that I was interested in looking at his "library" collection.

He led me into a room - with a balcony overlooking the street - which contained a small table in the corner, on which sat the "Biblioteca Independiente Juana Alonso". I counted the collection and found that it included 80 books and 20 journals. I also noted, from the records Rogelio kept, that 10 items were on loan.

When I looked at the contents of the collection I found that it included several works by Fidel Castro, including the classic "History Will Absolve Me" - his speech to the court at his trial for attacking the Moncada Barracks in 1953. The collection also included works by Marx and Lenin, a history of North Korea, as well as a few journals on the subject of dissidence.

The collection contained nothing that would not be stocked by the Biblioteca Provincial "Ruben Martinez Villena" - Havana's Provincial Public Library. I was puzzled - why run a private library offering the same stock as a public library - A clue lay in the details given about Rogelio in the IFLA report : "He is currently the Human Rights Secretary of the Democratic Solidarity Party, and has broad record of participation as a claimant for civil rights in Cuba."

The "Biblioteca Independiente Juana Alonso" appears to be a front for political activities. It does not meet the information needs of the people, which are well served by the Cuban library system. Rogelio talked to me about police repression, but there was no police presence on his street. The young men and the woman I talked to outside his apartment did not seem fearful or afraid to talk to me.

When I showed Rogelio the IFLA report he stated that he knew several of the other people mentioned in the report, including Fernando Sanchez Lopez (Vice President of the Democratic Solidarity Party), Adolfo Fernandez Sainz (International Relations Secretary of the Deomocratic Solidarity Party) and Miguel Angel Garcia Pinales (Information Secretary of the Democratic Solidarity Party), who has now, according to Rogelio, gone to Spain. Rogelio indicated that, since the IFLA report was written, more "independent libraries" had been set up in Cuba.

Rogelio gave me a short story based on the memories of his mother of life in Cuba before the Revolution. According to this account, jobs were plentiful, living conditions were good, no one went hungry, the American sugar mill owners looked after their workers and the health service met the people's needs. The reality was far different, with mass unemployment, atrocious housing, poor nutrition, widespread exploitation and a health service available only to those who could afford to pay.

US librarians visit independent "libraries"

My views on independent "libraries" were echoed by Larry Oberg of Willamette University who, together with 14 other US librarians, went on a two week research trip to Cuba in March 2000. In Santiago de Cuba, some of the group visited two "independent libraries". They spoke at length with the people who are responsible for these "libraries". Larry reports :

"The first "independent library" we visited was located in a private home and consisted of two bookcases filled with books, one in the living room, another in a back bedroom. I would estimate that this collection might have included 200 volumes. The woman who tended the collection spoke freely and openly with us about herself and her "library". She insisted that the main objective of the library was to make materials available to children, but could produce no children's books. Many of the books in the "collection" were published in Cuba, although perhaps the bulk were published in the US, Mexico, Spain and other countries. She showed us a copy of a single issue of the Cuban periodical "Educacion" as an example of how she wishes to make books available to students. She told us that she was considering removing the back cover of the issue, however, because it includes a quote from Fidel Castro. She told us that most of her relatives live in Havana and that she regularly records and broadcasts anti Cuban government statements on Radio Marti and Radio Mambi, both of which beam anti-Cuban government programming to Cuba from the US.

The second "independent" library that we visited had no books or materials at all. The family that lived in the apartment said that they had distributed all of the materials they had to other sympathetic individuals in preparation for leaving for Miami. They have received exit visas from the US government and expected to depart Cuba in May. They explained that they had never collected books per se, but rather had relied upon deliveries of pamphlets, reprints of articles and other materials directly from the US Interests Section in Havana.

Larry Oberg reached a number of conclusions about independent "libraries":

"Marta Terry, the president of the Cuban Library Association, and other Cuban librarians pointed out to us that they have tried many times to contact and work with these 'librarians'.

"In neither of the two independent 'libraries' that I visited do the principals have degrees or training in librarianship, nor do they even appear to be what we might call book-oriented people.

"Neither of the two 'independent' libraries were marked or signed in any way as libraries. One had no collection whatsoever and the other had a modest collection of materials of a size that one might expect to find in any Cuban home. The one collection that I saw was not catalogued or even organised by subject. There was no circulation apparatus and this collection had no materials to support its primary collecting goals, children's literature.

"The independent 'librarians' that I met are all self-professed political dissidents, dedicated to the overthrow of the Cuban government. Several had been arrested by the Cuban authorities, but they emphasised that these arrests had nothing to do with their 'independent' library activities. The arrests, in all cases, were for subversive and clandestine activities carried out to undermine the Cuban government. It is my distinct impression that these libraries are, on the one hand, a public face and a recruiting tool for a dissident movement within Cuba and, on the other, a means of 'jumping the queue' to get an immigration visa to

the US".

National and Public Libraries

I also visited the National Literacy Museum and the Jose Marti National Library in Havana, provincial public libraries in Havana, Villa Clara, Sancti Spiritus, Ciego de Avila, Camaguey, Las Tunas and Holguin and a municipal public library in Banes. What I found in every case were excellent libraries, staffed by dedicated librarians, offering relevant services to their communities.

Larry Oberg and his group also visited the Jose Marti National Library, as well as provincial public libraries in Havana and Santiago de Cuba and municipal public libraries in Matanzas, Cardinas and Varadero. Here are Larry's views about these libraries :

"The Cuban librarians that I met were, with a few exceptions, highly professional, talented and capable. They are committed to professional excellence and are clearly abreast of current trends in North American and European librarianship.

"The Jose Marti National Library and the major provincial and city libraries are busily preparing for automation.

"Most of the libraries that we visited have clear collection development policies and standards. The national library collects materials on all topics and does not limit its collections to materials that support the ideology of the Cuban government. They actively solicit, for example, copies of materials published by dissident Cuban authors who reside abroad.

"Cuban librarians take their outreach obligations seriously and have invested heavily in bookmobiles and branch libraries in isolated rural locations. They are particularly committed to making library services available to rural Cuban children.

"School libraries are ubiquitous in Cuba. Almost all elementary and secondary schools have libraries and librarians (we might compare this to the situation in the US). We spoke at length with a group of second graders in a Matanzas elementary school who asked bright and intelligent questions of us."

For further information about Larry's trip, contact him at Mark O. Hatfield Library, Williamette University, Salem, Oregon, loberg @ williamette.edu.

Larry's findings echoed those of an earlier trip to Cuba by US librarians - the first of its kind - in September 1999. On that occasion Lynne Lysiak of Appalachian State University concluded that "This was a fascinating and interesting trip. Our Cuban colleagues were warm and welcoming and eager to tell us about their libraries, their collections, and services. We had many vitally interesting conversations. The delegation returned home even more committed to helping our peers in Cuba and is now working on various projects to that end. Other librarian delegations to Cuba are planned for this coming year, sponsored by different groups".

A number of photos of the delegation and our Cuban colleagues can be viewed at <http://www.angelfire.com/tn/librarians> . For further information contact Lynne Lysiak at [lysiakld @ appstate.edu](mailto:lysiakld@appstate.edu) .

The Cuban Library Support Group (CLSG) supports Cuban libraries, Cuban librarians and the Cuban Library Association (ASCUBI). CLSG recognises the contribution that Cuban libraries have made to the high literacy levels and excellent education system in Cuba. More

information can be found at <http://libr.org/CLSG/>.

APPENDIX 1

A Short Story

Rogelio Travieso Perez gave me a copy of a short story which he had written, dedicated to his mother, who had an operation for cancer of the colon in October 1999. The story is based on his mother's memories of life before the Revolution. The general tenor of the story is that life was better before the Revolution. Here are some extracts :

"There were bad times but also better times, but never like nowadays ! We didn't go hungry during the bad times".

"What is happening today, having two or three families living in one house did not happen in those days."

"The family became members of the Quinta de la Habana (Health Service) by paying \$2.50 per person per month. The treatment, the food, the hygiene everything was working wonderfully. In town there was only one doctor and you could call him at anytime you needed him ; he prescribed you medicines and it was all paid for by the Quinta." "We bought a house with land to grow produce. The cost of repairs and maintenance was paid by the mill. We had all modern electric conveniences, including an electric cooker. 45 years later we cook in a Picker cooker. Everything was beautiful and clean. Everything was so nice. But today that makes you cry".

"My two sons worked on a golf course at the mill and earned more than 20 dollars a month. Which one of you can earn that amount today."

The reality of life in Cuba before the Revolution was far different from Rogelio's fictional account. An article in "Granma International" (28 May 2000) gives an insight into what conditions were really like in Cuba before 1959 :

"Prudencio Echevarria saw his mother aged 58 die because she had been evicted and had no medical help. He saw his sister who was pregnant with twins die in the street. He saw a six year old girl die from an infestation of intestinal worms. He saw them con his father, an illiterate man, into signing a supposed contract for a farm, when in fact he signed away his rights to the small patch of land he cultivated. Scenes such as these were a common experience in Cuba's countryside, before the Revolution.

Jose Morales lived on land owned by United Fruit. In order to take a sick person to the little hospital, owned by Americans, in the town of Preston, one had to have a numbered badge, as if they were slaves. Two of Morale's close relatives died because they did not have that badge."

APPENDIX 2

National Literacy Museum

The Museo de la Alfabetizacion, which is housed in a school complex called Ciudad Libertad at the former Cuartel Columbia military airfield in Havana, describes the 1961 literacy campaign

The greatest successes of the revolution have been in the fields of education and public health. Prior to the revolution a quarter of adult Cubans were illiterate and another million were semi literate. Ten thousand teachers were unemployed and 70% of the rural population

had no schools. After 1959 all private schools were nationalised and education became free and universal. Former military garrisons were turned into schools.

In 1961 all schools were closed for eight months and some 250,000 students and teachers were sent to rural areas to teach reading and writing, resulting in Cuba's high literacy rate. This campaign brought tens of thousands of city youth into contact with the country people, breaking down racial barriers and instilling revolutionary spirit. The early literacy campaigns were followed up with continuing education programs to ensure that nearly every adult attained a sixth grade level. Today education up to the ninth grade is compulsory.

National Library

Biblioteca Nacional Jose Marti

Avenida de La Independencia
Plaza de La Revolucion
Havana

This 18 floor building, which includes a national children's library, is open to the public Monday to Saturday from 8 - 5.45.

In the aftermath of the Spanish American War, American General Leonard Wood served as governor of Cuba. He was responsible for reforming the educational system, and issued a military order to create the Cuban National Library in October 1901. The library occupied a number of homes over the years and in 1957, it moved to its present location on the Plaza de la Revolucion in Havana, funded by a sugar tax. The building was projected to accommodate 40 to 50 years growth, but was filled rapidly in the early years after the 1959 Revolution.

The National Library falls under the auspices of the Cuban Ministry of Culture. The current Director, Dr Eliades Acosta, was appointed in 1997. There has been some recent reorganisation, and the Library is now divided into six basic divisions : economic management, public services, promotions / development, public libraries, technical processes including automation and research.

As of September 1999, three distinct levels of service were identified and prioritised for the National Library to maximise access to the collections : professional researchers, professionals, and students.

The library contains three million holdings spanning six centuries. There is a circulating collection of 75,000 titles that has its own card catalogue. Items are loaned for 15 days and there is a two item limit. Holdings include 26,000 maps, over 200,000 photographs, and over 11,000 posters that were integral to communicating with the people during and immediately after the Revolution.

Inter Library Loans are available, and a union card catalogue is maintained of journal holdings throughout the country. The rare books collection contains over 2,000 items from the 15th to 17th centuries, including priceless world class treasures, such as hand-drawn Spanish navigator's maps from the 15th century.

The library has 375 staff and is being further automated. In addition to the 39 PCs used by staff, public access computers are being installed. The systems staff are moving forward with Web development, and the Library has a site available at <http://binanet.lib.cult.cu>. BINANET is the libraries' network used to communicate between the provincial public libraries and the National Library. Internet access is available. Email is a norm and the preferred method of communication, and most people at the Library had access to it.

The National Library is looking for collaborative efforts with sister libraries. The acquisition librarian is actively seeking journal exchanges, and book donations are very much appreciated. Reference books, bilingual dictionaries, and recent scientific and technical works in English or Spanish are always in demand.

Public Libraries

The network of public libraries in the country falls under the jurisdiction of one of the National Library's divisions and is further divided into 13 provincial libraries, and below, municipal and branch libraries employing over 3,600 librarians, technicians and other personnel.

According to UNESCO, Cuba enjoys the highest literacy rate in the hemisphere. After the Revolution in 1959, a concerted effort was made by the government to improve the literacy rate and maintain it. Public libraries play an important part in that effort and are expected to maintain programmes and activities to promote literacy in the society.

Biblioteca Provincial Ruben Martinez Villena

Plaza de Armas
La Habana Vieja
Havana

This modern public library, built with the help of the Spanish government in 1998, is open weekdays from 8.30-6. It has adult lending and reference collections, a children's library and games room and a delightful garden. The library has over 85,000 volumes, including a special braille collection.

Biblioteca Provincial Jose Marti

Parque Vidal
Santa Clara
Villa Clara

The Biblioteca Provincial Jose Marti, on the east side of Parque Vidal, is a nice place to take refuge when its raining. The library, and an art gallery, are in the neoclassical Palacio Provincial, built between 1902 and 1912. The building was a garrison during the Batista period. I also visited Santa Clara's best bookstore, Libreria Viet Nam.

Biblioteca Provincial Ruben Martinez Villena

Parque Serafin Sanchez
Sancti Spiritus

Housed in a two storey neo-classical building, this library serves a population of 80,000, in the historical heartland of central Cuba. Much of the province is a lowland dedicated to the cultivation of sugar cane or the raising of cattle.

Biblioteca Provincial Roberto Rivas Fragas

Calle Serafin Sanchez
Plaza Camilo Cienfuegos
Ciego de Avila

This library was being used as a polling station on the day on which I visited. 7,913,000 Cubans - 98% of those eligible to vote - went to the polls on Sunday, April 23, to elect their municipal and provincial government representatives. In this election 13,853 delegates were

elected from various neighbourhoods and electoral districts to the Municipal Assemblies of Popular Power, the highest authority at this level and which in turn elects the Provincial Assemblies and approves or rejects the candidates for National Assembly deputies.

The photographs and biographies of the more than 31,000 candidates (the only permitted form of publicity in Cuban elections) were exhibited for almost a month prior to the ballot in public places - including the library - within each neighbourhood or locality. Each of these candidates was nominated and approved in public meetings, free and open to every local resident. Nevertheless, a second round of voting was announced for the following weekend in the 833 constituencies where none of the candidates obtained the necessary majority.

Approximately 50% of those chosen this time were reelected in their posts as delegates. More than half a million people, none of whom received payment of any sort, participated in the various organisational structures of these elections and more than 300,000 children and young people helped to guard the ballot boxes throughout the length and breadth of the island.

Biblioteca Provincial Julio A Mella

Parque Agramonte
Camaguey

This two storey building, on the west side of Parque Agramont, is next to the Asamblea Municipal del Poder Popular (Municipal Assembly of People's Power). The library serves a population of 300,000 in Cuba's third largest city. The University de Camaguey, founded in 1975, is one of Cuba's five universities.

Biblioteca Provincial Jose Marti

Vicente Garcia No 4
Francisco Vega y Francisco Varona
Las Tunas

This single storey building, opposite the Parque Vicente Garcia, serves the city of Victoria de Las Tunas, which has a population of 120,000. Las Tunas, where the first "independent library" was opened in 1998, is the centre of the Independent Library Project.

Biblioteca Provincial Alex Urquiola

Maceo 178e
Fraxes y Marti
Holguin

This two storey library, on the west side of Parque Calixto Garcia, has a very pleasant modern reading room.

Biblioteca Municipal

Banes

This small municipal library serves a population of 35,000 in the sugar town of Banes which was founded in 1887. I also visited a bookshop in Banes with a good selection of titles in Spanish and English.

Biblioteca Independiente Juana Alonso, Havana

Rogelio Travieso Perez, Havana

Biblioteca Nacional Jose Marti, Havana

Biblioteca Provincial Ruben Martinez Villena, Havana

Biblioteca Provincial Jose Marti, Santa Clara

Biblioteca Provincial Ruben Martinez Villena, Sancti Spiritus

Biblioteca Provincial Roberto Rivas Fragas, Ciego de Avila

Biblioteca Provincial Julio A Mella, Camaguey

Biblioteca Provincial Jose Marti, Las Tunas

Biblioteca Provincial Alex Urquiola, Holguin

Biblioteca Municipal, Banes

Museo Nacional de la Campana de Alfabetizacion, Havana

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