

REVIEW ARTICLE

Notes on the socialist mayorship of José Ruiz in Yaguajay

Apuntes sobre la alcaldía socialista de José Ruiz en Yaguajay

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Abstract The neocolonial period in Cuba was characterized by widespread corruption, fraud, the dominance of economic and political elites, as well as repression and popular resistance. In this context, leftist parties and organizations emerged to fight against imperialism and promote the worker-peasant alliance. The Popular Socialist Party (PSP) was one of the most prominent, adopting a Marxist approach, supporting the struggle for social rights, and proposing the nationalization of key sectors of the economy, which contributed to its rise. The municipal mayorship led by José Ruiz in Yaguajay between 1946 and 1952 gained notable significance. His administration was marked by the implementation of policies focused on cleaning up government accounts and eliminating administrative deficiencies. His measures successfully organized tax collection, fought corruption, ensured salary payments, improved healthcare and education, and carried out public works. Despite the limitations imposed in the 1950s, José Ruiz's strong determination and character, combined with his relentless fight against corruption and well-executed social policies, enabled the municipality to achieve socio-economic development in a few years that surpassed that of the previous four decades. Many of the projects carried out during his administration influenced the development of the present-day Yaguajay region and constitute a lasting positive legacy of that time.

Keywords José Ruíz, neocolonial period, Popular Socialist Party, Yaguajay.

Resumen El período neocolonial en Cuba se caracterizó por la corrupción generalizada, fraude, dominio de las élites económicas y políticas, así como por represión y resistencia popular. En este contexto surgieron partidos y organizaciones de izquierda para luchar contra el imperialismo y promover la alianza obrero-campesina. El Partido Socialista Popular (PSP) fue uno de los más destacados, adoptó un enfoque marxista, apoyó la lucha por los derechos sociales y propuso la nacionalización de sectores clave de la economía, lo que favoreció su ascenso. La alcaldía municipal liderada por José Ruiz en Yaguajay entre 1946 - 1952 alcanzó una notable trascendencia. Su gestión estuvo signada por la implementación de una política centrada en sanear las cuentas gubernamentales y eliminar las deficiencias administrativas. Sus medidas lograron organizar el cobro de impuestos, atacar la corrupción, pagar salarios, propiciar la atención médica y la educación, y realizar obras públicas. Pese a limitaciones generadas en la década de 1950, la fuerte determinación y carácter de José Ruiz, sumado a la constante lucha contra la corrupción y sus acertadas políticas sociales, determinaron que, en pocos años, la municipalidad alcanzara un mayor desarrollo socio-económico, superior a las cuatro décadas anteriores. Muchos de los proyectos ejecutados en la época de esta alcaldía influyeron en el desarrollo de la actual región de Yaguajay y constituyen un legado positivo de la época.

Palabras clave José Ruíz, período neocolonial, Partido Socialista Popular, Yaguajay.

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Introduction

During the neocolonial period in Cuba, the country was characterized by widespread corruption, electoral fraud, the dominance of economic and political elites, repression, and popular resistance. In this complex context, and contrast to the traditional right-wing political parties, left-wing parties and organizations emerged, primarily influenced by the victory of the Great October Socialist Revolution in 1917. The Orthodox Party and the Cuban People's Party were among the most important of the period.

Another of the parties that emerged was the Popular Socialist Party (PSP). This was founded by Julio A. Mella and Carlos Baliño in 1925 under the name of the Communist Party (PC). Later, in 1944, the organization adopted the PSP, and Blas Roca Calderío took over as general secretary. This organization was characterized by following the principles of Marxism-Leninism, promoting the struggle against imperialism and the worker-peasant alliance, the struggle for social rights, and the nationalization of key sectors of the economy.

The popularity and support of this party were such that, in the face of attacks from traditionalists and the electoral fraud of the time, they were able to achieve power in two mayoralties in the country. Although the first mayor, Francisco Rosales, was elected in 1940 in Manzanillo, Granma, it is worth highlighting the second socialist mayorship, which came from the hand of José Manuel "Joseíto" Ruiz Rodríguez in Yaguajay in 1946.

This mayor's office in the municipality of Yaguajay, characterized by an agricultural economy, a primarily rural population, limited infrastructure, and a strong influence of the Authentic Party (opposition to the PSP), stood out for its achievements in the fight against corruption and the implementation of a successful social and economic policy. Thus, it achieved an important reelection in 1950, drastically interrupted by Batista's coup d'état in 1952 and the suspension of the 1940 Constitution. Nevertheless, the government of Joseíto Ruiz had a notable and indisputable historical significance in this period when the fight against communism was intensifying at an international level.

The purpose of this paper is to characterize the Mayorship of Joseíto Ruiz in Yaguajay, as well as to assess the figure of José Ruiz as leader of the PSP in Yaguajay and to demonstrate the validity of the results of the socialist program implemented during the period.

Methodology

Yaguajay was founded on January 1, 1879. It was one of Cuba's most significant municipalities of the neocolonial era, represented by the PSP. Its headquarters were in a wooden building until 1923 when it was burned to the ground

after a brawl between conservatives and liberals.

The municipality covers the entire northern area of Sancti Spíritus and owes its name to an Indian region chief in the 16th century. Conquest and colonization led to the exploitation of the area's timber resources, which would later become a livestock area until finally, sugar cane became the crop par excellence of the entire region (Government of Yaguajay, 2020).

During the neocolonial period, the workers' movement in Yaguajay demonstrated remarkable resilience and played a significant role in the fight against the occupation. The first protests, dating back to 1901, gained momentum in the 1920s. By 1930, the first cells of the Cuban Communist Party emerged, gradually gaining strength. In this context, the municipal policies of José Ruiz Rodríguez, who served as a representative of the PSP mayor's office, began to play an important role, inspiring hope and determination among the local population.

The leader, Joseíto Ruiz, came from a peasant family and worked from a very young age in the "Narcisa" sugar mill, always attentive to the interests of his fellow workers. In 1930, he began to be active in the PCC, which was clandestine then. In 1936, he held leadership positions in the first cell created in Yaguajay. As a member of the organization, he participated in the struggles against peasant evictions, common in the region, mainly in the town of Bamburanao, managing to emerge victorious and restoring families to their homes after a complex legal process in the courts of the province of Las Villas (Amor, 2023).

By 1940, following the democratization process. The period from late 1937 to 1940 was politically characterized by adopting measures that allowed the calling of elections to form and carry out the Constituent Assembly. Fulgencio Batista agreed to these democratizing measures because he was interested in establishing formulas that would allow him to remain at the center of political decisions, guaranteeing his power in the new national political order (Instituto de Historia de Cuba, 2020).

Carried out in Cuba, the PCC was legalized, determining that 1941 José Ruiz was elected as general secretary of that political body in his municipality. At that time, the governing mayor was affiliated with the Authentic Party, which exercised power on the Island. During these years, Joseíto served as a municipal councilor, promoting harsh criticism against the corruption prevalent in the current administration.

These factors led him to gain prominence as a candidate in the municipal elections of 1946, where he ended up being elected in the second round, beating the ruling party's candidates by a margin of 166 votes (Borrego, 2019). Before leaving office, the previous government members only left as an inheritance a treasure of 7 cents and 70,000 pesos of

debt, also taking charge of destroying all the electrical wiring, typewriters, and toilets in the government house.

Upon winning the elections, the new PSP mayor implemented a heavy-handed policy to clean up government accounts and eliminate administrative deficiencies. Under the slogan “no more bottle-holders, those who do not work do not get paid,” his first measures aimed to organize tax collection and eliminate corrupt officials who were part of the public administration. Fulfilling his electoral promises, he fired 18 municipal police officers involved in illegal acts and imposed payment on landowners and wealthy landlords who previously evaded their tax duties (Borrego, 2020).

Thus, in the first year of his administration, he collected 66 thousand pesos, cleaned up the accounts, and obtained a surplus of 20,000 pesos (Borrego, 2019). From this moment on, the resulting money was used to promote the realization of public and industrial works in the municipal territory.

In this way, the government collected contributions, paid back wages to workers and pensioners, and promoted a program of socially impactful work. In honor of the Apostle José Martí, an obelisk, accompanied by a playground, was erected in front of the City Hall. Likewise, the City Hall acquired a tank truck to alleviate the situation of the inhabitants of the municipal capital concerning access to water. This vehicle was also used to water the roads, contribute to sanitation, and act as a fire truck when necessary.

Likewise, he was in charge of exploiting the area’s industrial potential and financing the construction of roads connecting the central industrial regions with Yaguajay. As a result, roads were created to the Narcisa and Vitoria sugar mills, the two most significant in the municipality and among the largest in the province. It is worth noting that bridges were even created to achieve this road connection. This strengthened and facilitated the harvest process and the accessibility of workers to their jobs.

Following this policy, he built roads throughout the municipality, both in the main town and the more remote areas, with a quality that made some of them last until today. Among these, the roads stand out between Yaguajay and Seibabo, from Mayajigua to the Nela sugar mill, and from Yaguajay to Mayajigua (including the Centeno bridge). The latter was decisive for the development of Mayajigua since it enhanced its capabilities as a tourist destination by facilitating access to San José del Lago. On this natural hot springs site, a motel and a villa were built, and they are still preserved.

On the other hand, José Ruíz encouraged the creation of sewing academies to give women a role in the municipality’s economic development and a better social position. To this end, he opened workshops in Yaguajay, Meneses, Mayajigua, and smaller towns.

A program of rural doctors and teachers in the mountains

was also implemented to ensure that the most disadvantaged sectors could access essential services without traveling to the main urban centers. In collaboration with other party members, he fought from the beginning of his mandate to eliminate peasant evictions, an issue he had pursued since his period as a worker and party activist, managing to control the landowners.

On the other hand, Joséito also participated in the construction and inauguration of various public works for the benefit of the population. Thus, he created the Agramonte promenade in the town’s capital, where previously there was only a swamp. This distinctive construction still endures over time. Likewise, he built local cemeteries in isolated towns, such as Jarahueca, for which he received the gratitude of the population. In addition, he inaugurated the central park in Meneses.

He also surrounded himself with capable men who supported him in his work. He gave Raúl Ferrer, a prominent Cuban pedagogue from Yaguajay, the direction and administration of several social projects. During the inauguration of the central park in Meneses, he said, “The best way to honor the Cuban flag is as José Ruíz does, by delivering works (...), doing good for Cuba and its people.”

For his part, Joséito expressed that “the honest administration of public funds is transformed into progress and improvement of the population.” True to his words, from the beginning of his administration, he displayed, in front of the City Hall, a board with the government accounts to demonstrate the efficiency and honesty of his management. As a result of these and other methods, he gained the support of both the masses and the bourgeoisie, being “the only one who worked for the good of the municipality,” managing to raise the annual budget to 99,000 pesos, always presenting a surplus (Borrego, 2019).

Due to the results achieved and the overwhelming support of the population towards José Ruíz, the Municipal Assembly of the PSP decided to nominate him for a second term. The constant dialogue carried out during his governorship with property owners and landowners and his policies of “improvement is for everyone” allowed his candidacy also to be supported by the Liberal Party, the United Action Party, and the Democratic Party, achieving an undeniable majority in the face of the elections.

In early 1950, thanks to the success and fame achieved by his administration, the documentary “Yaguajay, a town mayor” was filmed and shown on national television. Although it has an electoral focus with the clear objective of José Ruíz’s reelection, it highlights and praises the work of the mayor’s office in the last four years. The film shows how, despite being in the middle of the Cold War, the socialist government benefited the people of Yaguajay.

Despite everything, the process was not easy. Support from the central government was very little or non-existent,

and the grants owed to the municipalities were often not received. During the reelection, some members of the Authentic Party planned his assassination at the beginning of 1950. Only chance and the complaint by one of the polling stations of disturbances in the area made Joseíto work late that day, avoiding the two hitmen waiting for him near his house (Amor, 2023).

In this sense, more excellent support was offered to candidates from opposition parties. The leading contender was José Ramón Valdesuso, a doctor from Mayajigua, who received a campaign visit from President Carlos Prío Socarrás. None of this prevented Joseíto's crushing victory in the 1950 elections, who defeated Valdesuso even in his town, with a margin of 2,796 votes (Amor, 2023).

Thus, José Manuel Ruíz Rodríguez became the first and only socialist mayor to be reelected before the triumph of the Revolution in 1959. Despite this, his second term would be marked by numerous difficulties. During his first term, anti-communist policies had not yet been implemented radically on the Island. President Ramón Grau San Martín even went so far as to allow certain union activities.

However, from 1948 onwards, actions were carried out throughout the nation to assassinate the prominent leaders of the labor movement in order to achieve its division. As a result, tactics similar to those of the fascists were implemented. The fact that he had won by a wide margin threatened his life.

Even so, the socialist administration continued its work, promoting social improvements in Yaguajay, until Batista's coup d'état on March 10, 1952. After this, the 1940 Constitution was suspended, and the Constitutional Statutes were imposed to give a certain "legitimacy" to the usurping side, which neither the mayor nor 11 of the 21 councilors of Yaguajay were willing to sign (Borrego, 2019).

After this refusal, the military forces forced him to resign from his post. Despite everything, Joseíto demanded that the power transfer be carried out publicly. Unlike in 1946, the government's treasury accounts perfectly aligned with what should have existed.

Several widespread protests took place in the face of these events and resulted from popular support for the mayor. In addition, the 32 mayors of Villa Clara signed a declaration condemning the dismissal of the PSP member. Despite these efforts, José Ruíz was forcibly expelled from the Yaguajay City Hall on April 4, 1952, after which he returned to work as a laborer at the Narcisa sugar mill, like his fellow communists, who also joined the fight against the dictatorship.

The results of the Joseíto administration and the PSP in the municipality of Yaguajay endure today, mainly in places such as Mayajigua and Jarahueca, which still enjoy the

initiatives and constructions encouraged at the time. This government's successes in economic and social matters determined that it generated a development more significant than that experienced in the previous four decades (Amor, 2023). It is impossible to deny this period's importance for local history and the region's future.

Results and discussion

According to Borrego (2019, 2020), José Ruíz's mayoralty in Yaguajay represents a prominent example of socialist municipal management in a context marked by corruption and political repression in Cuba. Compared to other municipal administrations of the neocolonial period, the success of the management is due to a fair fiscal policy based on adequate tax collection and investment in essential public services. This strategy contrasts with the administration of the Authentic Party in other regions, where clientelist practices and electoral fraud predominated (Borrego, 2020).

Amor (2023) highlights the transformative nature of José Ruíz's government, whose policies still resonate in the region. The development of infrastructure, such as roads, bridges, and drinking water systems, allowed for sustained economic growth in the Yaguajay region. In addition, the documentary *Yaguajay, un pueblo mayores*, directed by Tabío (1950), constitutes a visual source that shows the positive impact of this administration and its national reach in the Cuban imagination. The memory of Ruíz as "the honest mayor" remains alive, consolidating his figure as an ethical reference in public management.

According to the Cuban Institute of History (2020), the political context in which José Ruíz's mayoralty occurred was marked by pressure from the central government and local elites. The Cold War and the radicalization of anti-communist politics significantly limited his possibilities of continuing with social projects. Borrego (2019) mentions direct threats to Ruíz's life, including assassination attempts and economic pressures to sabotage his public policies, which shows the fragility of his power in the face of political opposition.

The Government of Yaguajay's analysis (2020, 2021) suggests that many of José Ruíz's implemented policies could inspire current local administrations, especially in rural and economically disadvantaged areas. Policies of social inclusion, health care, rural education, and the fight against corruption are applicable in the current context of Latin America.

Although the article mainly uses sources aligned with the Cuban official vision, a more balanced discussion would include alternative perspectives, such as independent studies or critical research on the management of the Popular Social-

ist Party. Considering the narrative approach of sources such as EcuRed (n.d.), a broader vision could be incorporated that analyzes the ideological and operational limitations of the socialist project in the region.

Conclusions

The Mayorship of Joseíto Ruíz in Yaguajay from 1946 to 1952 marked a turning point for the municipality. The mayor's role was decisive for the success and transparency of the Popular Socialist Party's management. His strong determination and character, added to the constant fight against corruption and his successful social policies, determined that the municipality achieved more excellent socio-economic development in just a few years than during the previous four decades. The Socialist Mayorship of Yaguajay allowed the Popular Socialist Party to gain greater credibility in the eyes of the people. His government, characterized by the fight against corruption, the promotion of social measures, attention to the most affected sectors of society, and the implementation of a general welfare system, served as an example and inspiration for the entire country, being the object of admiration and popularity. The positive mark of this administration is still in force today, especially in the towns of Mayajigua, Jarahueca, Bamburanao, and Yaguajay itself. The measures implemented during this period still support the local population's daily activities and the municipality's economic future.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Author contributions

Edwin C. García, Cristian L. Jiménez and Anna L. Beltrán: Conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, supervision, validation, visualization, drafting the original manuscript and writing, review, and editing.

Data availability statement

The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable

request.

Statement on the use of AI

The authors acknowledge the use of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies to improve the readability and clarity of the article.

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