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New Dissident Coalition Competes for Opposition Lead

by LADB Staff

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The international press began reporting in late October on the emergence of a new dissident umbrella organization in Cuba. The Associated Press called it "a kind of opposition parliament." It not only opposes the government, but also opposes rival organizations it considers too moderate. Organizers held a news conference in Havana to announce that the new Asamblea para Promover la Sociedad Civil en Cuba comprised 321 dissident organizations, but they declined to say how many people belonged to those organizations.

Among the groups said to make up the Asamblea are independent press, human rights, and library organizations. The Asamblea is, in Cuban terms, conservative and opposes what it considers futile leftist reformism. Its emergence underscores the factionalism among dissident groups competing for international approval. The Asamblea leaders are three prominent dissidents who recently served prison terms for their activities: Marta Beatriz Roque, Rene Gomez Manzano, and Felix Antonio Bonne Carcasses.

Coalition tries to marginalize reformers

The dissident movement is divided on how radical the changes should be in the post-Castro era. Although Roque said the Asamblea was open to anyone, it soon became clear that those considered too moderate were not welcome. The Asamblea opposes Oswaldo Paya, leader of the Varela Project referendum movement (see NotiCen, 2002-05-23), and neither he nor other leaders of the project have been asked to join. Asamblea leaders believe no meaningful change can come about by adjusting the constitutional structures as the referendum proposes and in that sense are closer to the Miami-exile and Washington strategy expressed by President George W. Bush in a May speech demanding Cuba take steps to follow the US transition program.

Roque, Manzano, and Bonne wrote to the more moderate umbrella organization Todos Unidos in October urging the group to abandon its reform efforts and adhere to the Asamblea's program. The letter was an attempt to force the Asamblea's program on other dissident groups and to forge a majority under its umbrella. Todos Unidos, a Varela Project supporter, claims to have as affiliates 95% of all independent press, library, health care, education, trade union, human rights, and democracy groups in Cuba. The Asamblea claims it represents 80% of the dissident organizations.

Failing to form a united front, both have petitioned the Ibero-American countries to back them during the forthcoming summit in the Dominican Republic. A favorable report on the Varela Project by the Netherlands Helsinki Committee says Paya's group regards the forces associated with Roque as playing into the government's hands by drawing attention away from the project's reform efforts.

Independent Cuban journalist Manuel David Orrio of the Cooperativa de Periodistas Independientes (CPI) wrote in October that neither the project nor the Asamblea addresses US

policy in their appeals to the Ibero-American governments. "Not mentioning the United States embargo could be interpreted as a step backward from earlier positions," Orrio wrote. "But for others it is an attempt to set aside that bone of contention in the process of forming a consensus."

Dissident groups compete for international attention

At stake in the factional bickering is possible US backing and financial and other assistance for the transitional government the US promotes. Paya has enjoyed considerable international exposure since former President Jimmy Carter championed the Varela Project during his visit to Cuba in May. Czech President Vaclav Havel proposed Paya for the Nobel Peace Prize. The National Democratic Institute an affiliate of the Democratic Party gave Paya its Averell Harriman Democracy Award. The European Parliament gave him its Andrei Sakharov human rights prize.

Another dissident who has captured international attention is Oscar Elias Biscet, who was recently released from prison. Biscet, a physician, is head of the dissident group Fundacion Lawton. The Miami hard-line exile organization Consejo Cubano por la Libertad (CCL) arranged for a telephone conference during which Biscet called for support from democratic countries against Castro. Biscet is positioned beside the hard-liners by his association with the Consejo, his opposition to the Varela Project, and his support for the embargo. The growing factionalism among the dissident groups has mirrored splits within the Miami exile community.

Last year, 22 directors resigned from the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF) because of ideological, financial, and personal differences with chairman Jose Mas Santos and formed the CCL. Since the death of CANF founder Jorge Mas Canosa in 1997, and especially since the erosion of CANF's credibility because of its handling of the Elian Gonzalez debacle (see NotiCen, 2000-07-13), Mas Santos has tried to soften the foundation's image. But CANF hard-liners who resigned accused him of moving to the political center and undermining the struggle to topple the Castro government (see NotiCen, 2001-10-25).

Cuba dismisses dissidents

The Cuban government dismisses dissidents as US hirelings with no real support among the Cuban people. In the first meeting of the current session of the National Assembly in November, President Fidel Castro said US attempts to create an opposition in Cuba were failing for lack of popular approval. "There is no oxygen for the counterrevolution," he said.

In 1996, the National Assembly passed the Reafirmacion de la Dignidad y la Soberania Nacional law as an "antidote" to the Helms-Burton Act. The new law established penalties for Cubans convicted of cooperating with Helms-Burton (see EcoCentral, 1997-04-17). While Helms-Burton is generally viewed in the US as retaliation for the downing of exile planes by Cuban jet fighters in 1966 (see NotiSur, 1996-03-01), it is better known in Cuba for its detailed blueprint for obliterating the revolutionary system in a post-Castro Cuba.

In contrast to the Asamblea leaders and Biscet, the more moderate Paya has not been imprisoned for the Varela Project. But for the hard-liners, the National Assembly passed new criminal legislation

(see NotiCen, 1999-03-11), applying heavy prison terms and even the death penalty for those who "collaborate" with the US counterrevolutionary agenda. The Ley de la Proteccion de la Independencia y la Economia de Cuba, which went into effect in March 1999, criminalized acts in support of US Cuba policy with penalties up to 20 years. Support was defined, in part, as disseminating information to the media that could undermine Cuban sovereignty or the economy. At the time of its passage, the law appeared from the outside as censorship targeting Cuban independent journalists.

However, the law really was aimed at Cubans who accept money and other assistance from the US Interests Section in Havana or anti-Castro elements in the US such as CANF to develop a client opposition. The law was a response to President Bill Clinton's policy shift earlier in 1999, which he described as support for dissidents "consistent with our policy of keeping pressure on the regime" (see EcoCentral, 1999-01-21). The legal crackdown came just in time to try four leaders of the Grupo de Trabajo de la Disidencia Interna Roque, Manzano, Bonne, and Vladimiro Roca Antunez. The four were convicted on criminal charges stemming from a critique of the 1997 V Communist Party Congress and efforts to scare foreign capital out of Cuba.

In 1997, the four reiterated threats to foreign investors contained in a 1992 letter from Mas Canosa. In this and other communications, radical exile organizations threatened the security of foreign investments in Cuba. "In a post-Castro Cuba, said Mas Canosa, all financial or other kinds of resources invested in Cuba will become part of the national heritage and placed at the disposition of the new government." Investors were warned they would "have to deal with the consequences" if they did not withdraw from Cuba.

The official Communist Party newspaper Granma said the four had cooperated with a US program of "trying to procreate dozens of minigroups which it supports, incites, gives publicity to, orients, and finances. It contributes so much money that it has transformed internal counterrevolutionary activities into an occupation and an easy lifestyle."

In October, at one of the frequent conferences and seminars on post-Castro transition, Adolfo Franco of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) explained that the US should increase its efforts to support "nascent independent civil society, which will become the vital core around which Cuba's democratic transition will take place." Franco followed the outline of post-Castro Cuba mandated in the Helms-Burton Act. Helms-Burton requires a transition government without the participation of Fidel or Raul Castro that would transform Cuba into a likeness of the US political and economic model and in return would receive technical and other assistance. The USAID recently awarded the University of Miami more than US\$1 million to develop "a blueprint for the free Cuba of the future."

While transition planners may be clear on what a post-Castro Cuba will look like, it was not at all clear from the new Asamblea's statements what sort of system would replace Cuban socialism. Despite the Asamblea's antipathy to socialism, Bonne, for example, said legalization of the US dollar in 1993 was inconsistent with socialist equality. "Cubans used to obtain refrigerators and other goods on merit," he said. "Now there is only one merit: the greenback merit." Bonne did not

say whether, in the new Cuba, the market economy's rationing of goods by money would replace socialist distribution.

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