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Cuba in Recent Summits

by LADB Staff

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Two Latin American summits this year contrasted Cuba's fortunes in negotiating with the European Union (EU) and with its neighbors. During the Third Latin America-Caribbean-European Union (ALCUE) Summit in May, Cuba was unable to get much backing for its campaign against the hostile US Cuba policy. Then, in November, with only two EU states Spain and Portugal present at the Ibero-American Summit, the Cuban agenda fared better.

The May ALCUE meeting of 58 states in Guadalajara, Mexico, like all ALCUE summits, covered a variety of topics, but could not avoid taking up the Cuban agenda, which is mostly about its campaign against the US economic blockade and an ever-growing list of sanctions. EU members are reluctant to have these meetings turned into referenda against US policy while Latin American and Caribbean states complain that the EU is primarily interested in protecting its trade and financial advantages, especially its barriers to trade with the region. The result is a series of summit declarations that, at best, reflect small areas of minimum consensus.

President Fidel Castro skipped the summit and gave as one of his reasons EU "complicity" with US "crimes and aggressions" against Cuba. Castro's catalogue of complaints summed up Cuba's long-running disagreements with the EU including its cooperation with the Helms-Burton Act and support for US-sponsored resolutions against Cuba at the annual UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) meetings in Geneva. Castro also said he could not go to Mexico because of the unresolved disagreements with Mexican President Vicente Fox Quesada (see NotiCen, 2002-09-26) and Mexico's expulsion of the Cuban ambassador earlier this year as a result of the "false and dishonest accusation that our country has intervened in the internal affairs of Mexico" (see SourceMex, 2004-05-12).

Cuba not happy with EU

For a meeting that was supposed to further interregional cooperation, the summit was especially polemical. A Dutch official accused the Cuban delegation of pressing its own agenda. "And when we disagree, they complain about us," he said. "They're trying to hijack this thing." At issue were Cuban proposals to make specific accusations about US policy in the final declaration. The whole idea behind ALCUE summits is to hammer out public expressions of cooperation and multilateralism, but the Latin American and Caribbean delegates expressed dismay, saying that the enormous differences in power and wealth among the regions made true multilateral negotiations, particularly on trade matters, impossible.

Remarks on the subject by Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque sum up what Cuba regards as real rather than rhetorical multilateralism. The EU, said Roque, may well be an example of multilateralism but only within itself, not toward Latin America and the Caribbean. He told the delegates that the Latin American and Caribbean states came to the summit "naked and

disorganized, and therefore we cannot effectively defend our interests." Support for multilateralism in the Cuban context means opposition to US unilateralism, especially in the Middle East and in Cuba, and endorsement of the traditional Latin American doctrine of nonintervention.

To keep the US as an issue out of the final declaration, the EU found itself resisting a seemingly innocuous statement that its relations with Latin America and the Caribbean should be based on the principles of self-determination and respect for sovereignty outlined in the UN Charter. Perez Roque said that some EU delegates had told him privately that they were not comfortable with the principle of nonintervention. While accepting a general statement endorsing multilateralism, the EU refused to explicitly oppose unilateralism. EU delegates also showed an indifference to basic changes in the international order, resisting some statements favoring democratization of the UN structure.

Cuba fails to detach EU from US

The final declaration exposed areas of difference more than of agreement. The Latin American and Caribbean contingents wanted language on human rights worded in such a way as to specifically condemn the US for abuses against prisoners. The wording declaring the delegates "dismayed by the recently documented examples of this behavior" clearly pointed to US treatment of prisoners held at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and elsewhere. In case the point might be lost on anyone, the draft resolution asked all states to pay attention to the Geneva conventions as they apply to prisoner abuse and torture. The EU wanted to omit the word "torture" in reference to Iraq but settled for the word "mistreatment."

The EU also blocked a section condemning the 1996 Helms-Burton Act by name, substituting a vaguely worded clause in support of multilateralism. Nevertheless, Castro and Perez Roque may have been too harsh on the summit or perhaps they aimed for the most explicit language hoping to get some minimum roundabout condemnations of the US. Among the articles in the declaration that implicitly allude to US policy are those supporting the Kyoto environmental protocol, the treaty on land-mine clearance, and the International Criminal Court (ICC) all opposed by the administration of US President George W. Bush.

Several articles support the expansion of government-funded social services in defiance of neoliberal doctrines the US promotes through international financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Article 42 of the declaration cautions against "dependence on external financing for these [social] policies." Article 44 of the declaration calls for "fiscal policies allowing a better redistribution of wealth and ensuring adequate levels of social expenditure." Article 79 ratifies the need for regional integration and support for "projects designed to promote sustainable economic, social, cultural, and human development on a regional basis."

Better luck at Ibero-American Summit

The Cuban agenda met with more success in November when delegates from 21 countries met at the Fourteenth Ibero-American Summit in San Jose, Costa Rica. Missing again was Castro, who is recovering from a fall and has apparently given up on summits. Also absent were Venezuelan

President Hugo Chavez and the heads of state from Brazil, Chile, Peru, and Portugal. Before the summit got underway, the Cuban Foreign Relations Ministry (MINREX) issued a note criticizing the host government for permitting an anti-Cuba forum organized as a countersummit by the Costa Rican Solidarity with Cuba Committee. The forum was shut down by a demonstration of Costa Rican trade unions and pro-Cuba groups.

Reports in the Cuban newspaper Granma said one of the demonstration's Cuban-born leaders admitted the group had received financial aid from the "counterrevolution." Among the speakers at the forum was the noted anti-Castro polemicist Carlos Alberto Montaner, whom Granma identified as a CIA agent and terrorist. The MINREX note said that the demonstration was financed by the US and that the Costa Rican government was "an accomplice of this farce."

Not entirely happy in San Jose either

The Cubans had other complaints. Education, the main theme of the summit, got superficial treatment, they said. In an interview with the Cuban news service Prensa Latina, Cuban Vice President Carlos Lage said the 42 million functional illiterates in the region were not even mentioned in the final declaration. At the outset, Cuban Deputy Foreign Minister Rafael Daussa challenged the other delegates to show they were not hypocritical on the terrorism issue. He wanted language condemning what Cuba calls the US double standard of dividing terrorists into good ones and bad ones; good ones being anti-Cuban terrorists. Despite the dispute with Costa Rica over the counterforum, delegates adopted much of what the EU had objected to or blocked in May.

In the section on terrorism, the declaration does not mention the US by name but its wording is full of markers identifying the US. In condemning terrorism, the delegates say they "are determined to reinforce our national legislation." It was Cuba's national legislation passed in 1996 and 1999 that criminalized cooperation with US policy toward Cuba and resulted in the 2003 conviction and jailing of 75 journalists and others charged with working as paid agents of the US (see EcoCentral, 1997-04-17; NotiCen, 1999-03-11, 2003-04-24). In another clause, delegates pledged not to give asylum or help "to perpetrators, sponsors, or participants in terrorist activities." This should be read as a reference to former Panamanian President Mireya Moscoso's pardon of Luis Posada Carriles and three accomplices convicted on charges relating to an alleged attempt to assassinate Castro in 2000 (see NotiCen, 2000-11-30).

Instead of a bland condemnation of terrorism, the delegates pledged to deny asylum to the four pardoned terrorists, who were listed by name in the declaration. Three of them were admitted to the US after the pardon. The US habit of channeling funds to counterrevolutionaries through such private organizations as the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) can be glimpsed in the promise to "prevent the concealing of financing sources." Rather than the generalizations about multilateralism issued in Guadalajara, the Declaration of San Jose singled out the Helms-Burton Act, rejecting it for its unilateral and extraterritorial character and calling for the US to end its enforcement and to end the economic blockade of Cuba.

Cuba also won support for special communiques, separate statements addressing the troubles in Haiti and supporting Argentina's claims to the Malvinas (Falkland Islands) against EU member

Great Britain. One reason for the relative success of Cuba's agenda was the absence of former Spanish President Jose Maria Aznar, who had sided consistently with the US on Cuba policy. During the 2000 summit, Aznar wrecked consensus by insisting on a statement condemning the Basque separatist group ETA but refused Cuba's proposal to condemn the Posada terrorist group.

His successor, Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, moved quickly to mend relations with Cuba and is now in the process of trying to reverse the EU sanctions policy (Common Position) against Cuba sponsored by Aznar in 1996 (see NotiCen, 2003-02-06). Still, the EU reluctance to cut its ties to US Cuba policy raises the question of how far EU leaders will go toward normalization of relations with Cuba. The EU Council of Ministers is expected to decide in mid-December what form its relations with Cuba will take.

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