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Cuba And Mexico Take Decisive Steps Toward Repairing Diplomatic Damage

by Mike Leffert

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Cuba and Mexico have taken decisive steps toward normalizing diplomatic relations, which were severely damaged during the administration of former Mexican President Vicente Fox (2000-2006). From July 4-6, the two countries held the IX Cuba-Mexico Interparliamentary Meeting.

The event brought to Havana a delegation of 22 Mexican deputies and senators led by Mexico's Senate president Manlio Fabio Beltrones to meet with a delegation of Cuban legislators. Ricardo Alarcon, president of the Cuban Asamblea Nacional de Poder Popular (ANPP) led his delegation and hosted the event. During the meeting, the sides came to a number of agreements and common positions that the official newspaper Granma called a "fruitful consensus." Comments from Beltrones and Alarcon supported that conclusion, as did a declaration they both signed expressing a will on both sides "to contribute to deepening bilateral relations based on mutual respect and the unrestricted exercise of sovereignty."

Signaling a subsequent meeting of heads of state, Beltrones said, "The dialogue between the two parliaments facilitates the conversations between the two executives. The next step is up to both the Mexican government and the government of Cuba in a total re-establishment of our relations that we should never have lost." Alarcon stressed that there were concrete reasons why the executives had to pick up where the legislators left off. "There are questions that cannot be resolved in a parliamentary relationship. They are objective obstacles that were unfortunately created by mistaken actions. To the extent there is a will to rectify, I believe that these relations can be reconstructed."

It is widely acknowledged that the major issues that must be left to the executives include a Cuban debt of US\$500 million to a Mexican export bank and some human rights questions. Nevertheless, the interparliamentary meetings advanced mutual agendas not only politically but also in trade, education, environment, migration, global warming issues, and natural-disaster prevention. The protagonists came away from the two-day meeting satisfied that, as Alarcon said, ties between the countries are now closer than they have ever been. That may be an overstatement, but there is little argument that, during the Fox administration, the countries passed through some of the worst times in the history of the relationship.

Fox, say analysts, dynamited bridges between the two countries by aligning himself with the anti-Cuban policies of the US. Fox threw down the gauntlet with a clumsy dismissal of President Fidel Castro during the Cumbre de las Americas in Monterrey in 2004 to spare US President George W. Bush the embarrassment of having to meet Castro face to face. Fox got caught in a lie when he tried to deny a conversation that Castro, with foresight, recorded and later played for all the world to hear (see SourceMex, 2004-05-12). Rosario Green, former secretary of foreign affairs and now a Partido

Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) senator, said prior to the meeting that the whole point of the encounter was to repair those bridges.

Green arrived in Havana about a week before the meetings to help set up the agenda. In an interview with Reforma, she reiterated the need for presidential follow-up and said she expects a total reconciliation in the short term. "If not, until now I have not been a critic, I have been in solidarity," said Green. "But if there is no [reconciliation], I will be totally critical." Green, together with legislators from the other major parties present at the meeting, also wants to see this reconciliation parlay into closer ties with Venezuela. Senate president Beltrones made it clear that he considered the process with Cuba a prelude to a similar coming together with Venezuela.

Legislators from the Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), the governing party of both the Fox and Calderon administrations, were equally eager to fix what had been broken. Said one, Cesar Leal, the central goal was to "renew a relationship of friendship that never should have been broken." Leal is president of the Senate Committee on Latin American and Caribbean Relations, and from that vantage point he was aware of "an enormous expectation that we will be able to help reconstruct a severely damaged relationship." The restoration seems to have come at the initiative of the Mexicans.

Reports indicated that the Calderon government has been sending clear signals of a desire for normalization with Cuba and with staunch Cuban ally Venezuela as well. More than a month ago, Mexico, as president pro tem of the UN's Human Rights Council in Geneva, oversaw the withdrawal of the council's monitoring of human rights on the island. At the time, Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque responded favorably to the move and suggested the possibility of a process to improve relations. Mexico appears to have used the meeting as a way to announce an end to the Fox-inspired perception of Mexican servility to the Bush administration.

The text of the final declaration of the meeting included a pointed condemnation of "the construction of the border wall between the United States and Mexico," calling instead for an "integral" approach to the problem of trafficking in persons with "better bilateral collaboration to combat this criminal activity." The closing statement also emphasized "the importance of increasing economic and commercial exchanges."

During the time the countries have been on the outs, from 2004-2006, trade has fallen US\$100 million. Further discussion of human rights issues is also contemplated in the document. It states that there exists "a propitious atmosphere to approach an open, frank, respectful, parliamentary dialogue, free of prejudices and conditions." Beltrones said that human rights questions would be discussed at venues where not just one but all parties to the discussions would be obligated to make improvements. He said that agreements and protocols for this type of dialogue exist and must be subscribed by all concerned parties. Beltrones named the Parlamento Latinoamericano and the Euro-Latin American Parliamentary Assembly (Eurolat) of the European Parliament as host institutions for these deliberations.

Notably left out off the agenda and not mentioned in the final document was the issue of the US \$500 million debt. The matter is currently in litigation in international courts. While acknowledging

its importance as a complicating factor in normalizing relations, Beltrones said it is not an interparliamentary matter that ought to be solved by mutual agreement of the executives but rather by the courts.

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