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UN Votes Again For End to US Blockade Of Cuba

by Mike Leffert

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Every country in the world, with the exception of the US, Israel, the Marshall Islands, and Palau, voted in the UN General Assembly to end the US-imposed economic blockade against Cuba. The Oct. 31 exercise was the 16th time in as many years the UN has officially urged the US to end to what Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque called its "brutal economic war."

If this year's effort was in any way distinguished, it was, said Perez Roque, in that "the blockade had never been enforced with such viciousness as over the last year." He said US President George W. Bush's administration has adopted "new measures bordering on madness and fanaticism" that have hurt Cuba and interfered in its relations with no fewer than 30 countries. The 184 to 4 vote, with one abstention, was a one-vote improvement over last year and prompted a burst of applause when the result was flashed on the chamber screen.

The world body paid little heed to pleas of US diplomat Ronald Godard just before the vote as he argued, "It is long past time that the Cuban people enjoy the blessings of economic and political freedom." Godard convinced no one as he exhorted, "We urge member states to oppose and condemn the Cuban government's internal embargo on freedom, which is the real cause of the suffering of the Cuban people."

A week earlier, Bush had marked the 46th year of the blockade with a speech so filled with vitriol it even angered organizations opposed to the Cuban government. Four of these organizations condemned the speech. Arco Progresista, Grupo Mediatico Consenso, Alianza por una Nueva Nacion, and Concertacion Pro Dialogo called the speech a "provocation" and an "interference" that negatively affects the process of dialogue on the island. The written statement from the four groups excoriated Bush for a performance they called "a paternalistic speech, saccharine, provocative, somewhat politically retarded, truly dangerous, and with the interfering streak of those who speak from these imperial heights."

Particularly galling to the Cuban opposition was the continuing Bush assertion that it will be he, not the Cubans, who decides the island's future. "Instead of listening to the numerous voices of the nation, he has opted to dictate to them how, when, and at what speed we must move toward democracy," they said. They are further angered that Bush, with his "imperial incontinence," is calling on other countries to follow his pattern and in doing so "invites the rupture of the rules of international law."

Reaction in the US to the speech was no better. The Los Angeles Times, no friend of the Castro government, has pretty much given up any hope of a turn from Bush's counterproductive US Cuba policy and is already looking beyond him for some relief. "Bush may be too unimaginative to try a new policy toward Cuba, but the next president shouldn't be," editorialized the paper after it questioned why the theory of economic engagement applies to China and Vietnam but not to Cuba.

Perhaps the most telling of the reactions to US Cuba policy and its blockade was the announcement in Iran that Tehran and Havana have agreed to establish a joint shipping line to boost Iran-Latin America trade. Iranian Finance Minister Massoud Mir-Kazemi said contracts have been signed on transport as well as other industries in which Cuba sought Iranian investment. "Both countries have important business ties. Cuba needs railroad cars and other Iranian products, and we are interested in Havana's well-developed biology projects," said the finance minister.

Cuban election Fidel out?

Meanwhile, as Bush rails on about transition, Cuba is going about its own preparations for the evolution of its government. An election cycle began Oct. 21 that will, say reports, eventually lead to a decision next year on whether Fidel Castro will remain at the head of the government. The October municipal elections begin a series of elections that culminates with parliamentary elections next spring.

A possible outcome of that would be the official replacement of Fidel with acting head of state Raul Castro as head of the 31-member Council of State. The recent elections chose 15,236 municipal assembly members from among 37,258 candidates throughout the island. According to the official media, more than 95% of the country's 8.3 million voters took part. Voting is not mandatory in Cuba.

These municipal elections occur every two and a half years. The Partido Comunista de Cuba (PCC) is the only political party allowed by the Constitution, but candidates do not have to be members. There is no organized campaigning. Instead, informational material, including age, marital status, education, and experience are made available for each candidate. Where there is no majority winner, runoffs are held the following week.

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