

6-4-2009

Organization Of American States Reinstates Cuba By Consensus Despite U.S. Objections

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Organization Of American States Reinstates Cuba By Consensus Despite U.S. Objections." (2009).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9707>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Organization Of American States Reinstates Cuba By Consensus Despite U.S. Objections

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Region

Published: Thursday, June 4, 2009

In the person of Secretary of State Hillary R. Clinton, the US appears to have walked away yet again from an opportunity to reintegrate itself into the affairs of the Western Hemisphere. Again, the hump the US could not seem to get over was Cuba. Scarcely a month ago at the Summit of the Americas in Trinidad and Tobago, President Barack Obama was unsuccessful in turning the discussion away from the island and its treatment at US hands (see NotiCen, 2009-04-23). Before that, Vice President Joseph Biden reportedly let the Dominican Republic's warming to Cuba become an occasion to exclude the country from a Sistema de Integracion Centroamericana (SICA) meeting in Costa Rica (see NotiCen, 2009-04-02). Among the things Cuba and the US have in common is their avid affection for baseball. It is, therefore, not inappropriate to reflect that, in the Obama administration's very first inning, the top of the lineup, Biden, Obama, and Clinton, have struck out; the side is retired, and Cuba is up to bat. A packed agenda The 39th annual General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS) opened May 2 in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, with Secretary-General Jose Miguel Insulza expressing the hope that Cuba would not overwhelm a packed agenda, as it did at the Summit of the Americas. He had hoped to get traction on a list of hemispheric needs headed by the economic crisis. Participants had matters of energy production and consumption, both renewable and not, to consider, and environmental issues. The assembly had governance and democracy questions to mull; they needed to find hemispherewide solutions and avoid insular, protectionist measures. Insulza gave assurances that some progress along these lines had been made despite the overshadowing Cuba issues. But the progress had been far from enough. This year's OAS meeting also had on the list migration and public security. All these subjects weigh heavily on the region, and it is no surprise that Insulza wanted to get on with them, but his insistence on brushing aside the question of Cuba's freedom to re-enter the organization played to the perception that the OAS is a mechanism of Yanqui colonialism and that he is their consigliere. Insulza said he was worried by pressure from some Latin American presidents to reform the OAS or abandon it. "When I hear voices that call for an end to the OAS, I ask myself, 'Who will do the work we do?' When they speak of imperial bureaucracy, I can only think of our officials who carry out missions in countries like Haiti, who work practically for free," he said. When these questions are asked outside the confines of Insulza's private thoughts, however, answers emerge. Whether they are entirely suitable or not, organizations such as the Alternativa Bolivariana de las Americas (ALBA), the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR), SICA, the various UN agencies, all have been suggested, usually in some workable combination, by several leaders, including Presidents Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva of Brazil. Meanwhile, the stonewalling on Cuba was heating up rather than cooling off the rhetoric. The annual meeting's host, Honduran President Manuel Zelaya, called the years-ago expulsion of Cuba "a day that will live in infamy." Secretary Clinton, rather than meet criticisms head on, used the same arguments that failed Obama at Trinidad and Tobago. "It's not about reliving the past," she said. "It is about the future and being true to the founding principles of this organization." This willful ahistoricity was galling to the ears of the Latin Americans who lived the past they were being asked to forget.

The Obama administration has predicated its policy in the region on "listening," but the top three members of the team seem incapable of hearing themselves as others hear them. Zelaya laid bare the fallacy, insisting that failure to correct the mistake of ousting Cuba amounted to "colluding with that mindset of yesterday." Nicaragua's President Daniel Ortega, perhaps unheard because of his part in the US's history in Central America, said, "As long as that sanction is not lifted, we continue to be accomplices of the sanction, therefore we lose dignity, we lose sovereignty." Clinton no carrot, no stick, just a hoop nobody wants to jump through Clinton came to the annual meeting with the idea that somehow, despite clear advance warnings to the contrary, she would be able to finesse a solution to the problem without backing away from the provocative position that Cuba must make concessions to US notions of democracy, morality, human rights, and the relations of property before it could qualify for readmission to the fold. The glaring error, beyond the chauvinism of the position, is that Cuba has no incentive to move in the direction Uncle Sam is pointing. Cuba has repeatedly informed the world that it has no interest in rejoining the OAS. Former President Fidel Castro wrote in the national Cuban press June 3, "Cuba is not an enemy of peace nor is it reluctant to exchange or cooperate among countries of different political systems, but it has been, and will be, intransigent in defense of its principles." Fidel also wrote that the OAS is little more than a gateway that "opened the doors to the Trojan horse" in Latin America, the US. President Raul Castro has also expressed his categorical rejection of returning to an organization still seen as dominated by the country that has maintained a crippling physical and economic blockade against his country. Clinton's expected breakthrough had not come as night fell on San Pedro Sula on the first day of the two-day meeting, and so, despite prior statements that her attendance was important, she left Honduras, telling the media, "At this moment, there is no consensus, and there is no agreement to take any action." Her departure left Thomas Shannon, assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, to blame others for the failure. Among the accused were Venezuela and Nicaragua. "Regretfully, we were unable to construct a consensus largely because [those] countries were unprepared at this point to accept enumeration of those core principles," he said. This was seen as doubly counterproductive because Shannon is a holdover in his position from the administration of former US President George W. Bush, leaving the impression that US policy for the hemisphere remains unchanged from a broadly reviled previous regime. With Clinton gone, so precipitously that she did not even deliver her scheduled speech, the US's policy nightmare came true. Late in the afternoon of June 3, shortly before the scheduled close of the meetings, the OAS voted to lift its suspension of Cuba, inviting the island's return after 47 years. It could have been worse for the US. The language of the resolution was that Cuba's return would be "the result of a process of dialogue begun at the request of the Cuban government and in line with the practices, purposes, and principles of the OAS." This insulates the organization from a Cuban rebuff and also leaves room for the interpretation that re-entry is contingent on further negotiations. Those negotiations might include the US stipulations, and they might also include Cuban insistence on lifting the blockade. Generally, however, the decision was perceived to have been taken, as Ecuador's Foreign Minister Fander Falconi put it, "without conditions." Falconi said, "This is a moment of rejoicing for all of Latin America." The decision also met one of Insulza's main criteria. He wanted to avoid divisions that a split vote might cause among member states, and preserve the OAS tradition as a consensus body. This was a consensus decision, which also means that the US accepted it.

-- End --