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Political Relations Between Cuba and Mexico Deteriorate

by LADB Staff
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The political relationship between Mexico and Cuba has gone from bad to worse this year, following disputes over a human-rights vote at the UN and allegations that Cuban President Fidel Castro's government has interfered in Mexico's domestic affairs. Tensions between the two countries have been growing gradually since President Vicente Fox took office in 2000.

The first sign of trouble occurred when Fox took time from a state visit to Cuba in February 2002 to meet with opponents of the Castro government in Havana (See SourceMex, 2002-04-24). This incident was followed by accusations that the Fox government, under pressure from the US government, limited Castro's presence at the UN development summit in Monterrey a few weeks later. In that incident, Castro released an audio tape of a conversation he had with Fox in which the Mexican president asked him to leave the summit early to avoid a conflict with the soon-to arrive US President George W. Bush (see SourceMex, 2002-04-24).

The controversy over the Monterrey situation came just after Mexico's decision in 2002 to support a UN resolution condemning Cuba's crackdown on dissidents. The Mexico-Cuba tensions faded into the background for some months with the resignation of foreign relations secretary Jorge Castaneda, who had been widely blamed for playing a major role in what were perceived as the Fox's government's anti-Cuba policies (see SourceMex, 2003-01-15).

Human-rights vote at UN ignites animosities

Mexico's policies toward Cuba, however, changed little under Luis Ernesto Derbez, Castaneda's replacement as head of the Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE). Under Derbez's watch, Mexico again voted to condemn Cuba's human-rights record in a vote taken by the UN Human Rights Commission on April 15, 2004. Mexico and six other Latin American members of the UN Human Rights Commission Chile, Costa Rica, Honduras, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, and Peru voted to condemn Cuba's human rights record, while Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay abstained.

A presidential spokesperson defended Mexico's vote, saying the Fox government's policy promotes "moderation" rather than "total condemnation" and is not anti-Cuban but rather pro-human rights. The resolution to condemn Cuba in the UN was introduced by Honduras under pressure from the US, Cuban officials said. The Castro government, testing Honduras' commitment to human rights, later asked the Central American country to petition the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights to appoint a relator to monitor the condition of the US base in Guantanamo, where more than 600 prisoners from the Middle East, Afghanistan and other areas are being held (see NotiCen, 2004-05-06).

Before the vote, speculation was rampant that Mexico would abstain in exchange for a speedy return of fugitive businessman Carlos Ahumada, who had fled to the island nation after he was caught...
offering bribes to Mexico City legislative leader Rene Bejarano. All along, Mexican and Cuban officials insisted that the UN vote and the request to extradite Ahumada were totally unrelated. "There is no relationship between Mexico's vote at the UN and the extradition request for Mr. Ahumada," Derbez told reporters on April 14.

While Mexico would not reveal its position as late as the day before the UN vote, White House spokesperson Scott McClellan indirectly revealed that Mexico had already decided to condemn Cuba. In a press conference, McClellan said Presidents Fox and Bush had spoken by telephone and concurred on the need to approve the resolution condemning Fidel Castro's regime. But the Fox administration's failure to dispute McClellan's comment was the strongest confirmation that it would vote against Cuba.

Critics were even more concerned that the news came from the US, which they said was evidence that the Bush administration had strongly influenced Mexico's decision. "The breakdown of relations [with Cuba] is simply a confirmation of the newfound influence that the US government has on Mexico," said political columnist Renato Davalos in the daily newspaper La Jornada.

**Fox government accused of caving in to US pressure**

The theory of US meddling in Mexico's Cuba policies was clearly reflected in public opinion. A poll conducted by Demotecnia polling company on behalf of the Mexico City daily newspaper Milenio, showed that 80% of respondents believe that Fox was pressured by the US.

Pollster Maria de las Heras, who directs Demotecnia, said the results do not necessarily reflect the opinion that Cuba does not violate the rights of its citizens. Rather, she said, many Mexicans believe the US has no right to meddle in Cuban affairs, and especially in Mexico's position regarding Cuba. "At this stage, we do not believe that the United States has any moral authority to question (Cuba) and we simply do not like the ways it tries to do it," said de las Heras.

The reaction was similar in Congress, where all political parties except Fox's center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) passed a resolution condemning the administration's decision to "subordinate itself to the interests of the US" by voting to condemn Cuba's alleged repression of political opponents and journalists. Ricardo Pascoe, who was Fox's first ambassador to Havana, placed the blame on Derbez. "He is not attentive to the strategic interests of the Mexican state, but has unnecessarily caved in to the wishes of Washington," said Pascoe, who resigned under pressure after feuding with Castaneda.

Relations between Mexico and Cuba had been cordial for decades and became especially close during the administration of former Presidents Luis Echeverria Alvarez (1970-1976) and Jose Lopez Portillo (1976-1982). Echeverria went as far as to openly defy the US-led sanctions against the Castro government. Some cracks in the relationship appeared in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Mexican presidents first started to open up to opponents of the Castro government outside Cuba, said the daily newspaper El Universal.

Former President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) raised concerns in Havana when he hosted Florida-based dissidents Jorge Mas Canosa and Carlos Alberto Montaner at the presidential palace.
of Los Pinos. Salinas' action, however, did not alienate him from the Castro government because he was allowed to reside briefly in Cuba during his self-imposed exile following the devaluation of the peso (see SourceMex, 1995-12-06).

The relationship with Cuba remained stable under the administration of former President Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000), although there was some tension because of a decision by then-foreign relations secretary Rosario Green to meet with Cuban dissident Elizardo Sanchez. There was also some increase in animosities when Zedillo and Castro exchanged harsh words during the Ibero-American Summit in Panama in 2000.

Still, the level of enmity during the Zedillo government did not reach the proportions experienced during the Fox years. Cuba deports fugitive businessman to Mexico Tensions between the Fox and Castro governments exploded again in early May of this year, following Cuba's decision to deport Ahumada back to Mexico.

By deporting Ahumada rather than extraditing him, Cuba sent a signal to the Mexican government that it wasn't pleased about its recent policies toward the Castro government. The principal source of tension, however, was a statement by Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque alleging that Ahumada had told Cuban officials the videotapes showing Bejarano receiving bribes were "deliberately calculated to achieve political objectives."

The Cuban official's statements were contained in a diplomatic note that accompanied Ahumada's deportation. Ahumada's attorneys later said Cuban authorities pressured their client into making the remarks while being held for extradition. The Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR) has asked Cuban authorities to hand over video footage of Ahumada during detention in Cuba to look into these claims.

Perez Roque's statement implied that the Fox administration had a role in the release of videos in an attempt to embarrass the administration of Mexico City Mayor Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD). The Mexico City mayor, who contends he is a victim of a plot, was a runaway favorite in most public polls to win the 2006 presidential election until the release of incriminating videotapes. These included not only Bejarano receiving the bribe from Ahumada, but also Mexico City treasurer Gustavo Ponce gambling at an exclusive hotel in Las Vegas (see SourceMex, 2004-03-10). Lopez Obrador, who has not officially declared his candidacy, remains ahead in some polls but his lead has shrunk.

The Fox government immediately took issue with Perez Roque's allegations, which were followed by a Castro speech harshly criticizing Mexico on International Labor Day on May 1. In the speech, Castro said Mexico's prestige in the world had "turned into ashes" because of its vote against Cuba. "The statements of the foreign minister in relation to Mr. Ahumada's deportation, the speech of President Castro on May 1 and actions taken by functionaries of the Cuban government...lead Mexico to conclude that the attitude of the Cuban government has been to meddle directly in internal affairs that are the exclusive domain" of the Mexican government, Derbez said.
Mexico accuses Cuba of interference in domestic affairs

To make matters worse, reports surfaced that members of the Cuban Communist Party (Partido Comunista Cubano, PCC) had traveled to Mexico to meet with PRD officials to help plot a strategy to rescue Lopez Obrador's reputation and help reduce the damage from the Ahumada case on the mayor's possible presidential campaign. PRD officials at first denied any formal meetings with Cuban officials had taken place. They later acknowledged having met with PCC officials Jose Antonio Arbezu Fraga and Pedro Miguel Lobaina in Mexico City for informal discussions on mutual concerns, but not about Ahumada or Lopez Obrador.

"We meet with the leaders of the Cuban Communist Party, the Brazilian Labor Party, the Spanish Socialist Worker's Party, the Argentines, the Japanese," said PRD President Leonel Godoy. "We have these kind of meetings constantly, but now everything PRD members do is considered suspicious."

Still, the reports of the PRD-PCC sparked a war of words between the Cuban and Mexican governments, culminating with a decision by Mexico to expel Cuban Ambassador Jorge Bolanos and recall Mexican Ambassador Roberta Lajous from Havana. "Our Constitution expressly forbids foreigners from getting involved in domestic politics," said Interior Secretary Santiago Creel. Mexico was not the only country in conflict with the Castro government over the UN vote.

On the same weekend that the Fox administration withdrew its ambassador from Havana, the Peruvian government downgraded its diplomatic relations with Cuba over "offensive" remarks Castro made about President Alejandro Toledo's subservience to the US. The Fox government also took steps to present a tough stance against the Castro government, including statements by Economy Secretary Fernando Clariond Canales calling on Cuba to pay its debts to Mexico's foreign trade bank (Banco Nacional de Comercio Exterior, BANCOMEXT).

Derbez downplayed the tensions between his country and Cuba, leaving open the possibility of restoring relations with the Castro government. "There is no rupture. All the channels are open, all the relationship is normal. The only exception is that we have downgraded the post of ambassador," Derbez said in a radio interview.

The foreign relations secretary suggested the two countries may attempt to patch up relations at the upcoming Latin American Summit in Guadalajara on May 28-29. Mexican officials have gone to great lengths to emphasize that Castro would be welcomed at the summit. Derbez's gestures have not convinced a skeptical Mexican Congress, which again accused the Fox government of kowtowing to US interests. "The administration is doing a favor to the Bush administration ahead of the November presidential election," PRD Deputy Manuel Camacho Solis said in an interview with the Mexico City daily newspaper El Sol de Mexico.

Still, the Fox government has taken some small steps to distance itself from the US administration. During a meeting in Madrid with Spanish counterpart Miguel Angel Moratinos, Derbez said Mexico refused to go along with a Bush administration appeal in mid-May to Latin American countries to increase economic restrictions on Cuba and further isolate the island nation. Derbez's refusal
to endorse the Bush campaign was welcomed by Cuban officials, who called on other countries in Latin America to take a similar stance.

"This is the position we would like the majority of Latin American countries to assume," said Dagoberto Rodriguez, chief of the Cuban interests section in Washington. "They should not be allowed to be seen by the US government as instruments of a hostile policy." (Sources: Milenio Diario, 04/19/04, 05/03/04; Excelsior, 04/29/04, 05/03/04; Los Angeles Times, 05/04/04; The Christian Science Monitor, 05/05/04; Associated Press, 04/19/04, 05/02/04, 05/04/04, 05/06/04; The Dallas Morning News, The New York Times, 05/03/04, 05/06/04; Reuters, 05/03/04, 05/10/04; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 04/14/04, 04/15/04, 04/19/04, 04/22/04, 05/03-05/04, 05/10/04, 05/11/04; Spanish news service EFE, 04/15/04, 04/21/04, 05/03-05/04, 05/10/04, 05/11/04; Notimex, 04/20/04, 04/28/04, 05/02-06/04, 05/10/04, 05/11/04; El Financiero, 05/03-06/04, 05/11/04; El Independiente, 04/15/04, 04/16/04, 05/03-05/04, 05/10-12/04; La Cronica de Hoy, 04/15/04, 04/16/04, 05/03-06/04, 05/11/04, 05/12/04; The Herald-Mexico City, 04/15/04, 04/20/04, 04/21/04, 05/03-07/04, 05/11/04, 05/12/04; El Universal, 04/15/04, 04/30/04, 05/03-07/04, 05/11/04, 05/12/04; Unomasuno, 04/16/04, 05/03-05/04, 05/12/04; El Sol de Mexico, 04/16/04, 05/03-07/04, 05/11/04, 05/12/04; La Jornada, 04/16/04, 05/03-07/04, 05/11/04, 05/12/04)

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