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CANF Shaken by Resignations

by LADB Staff

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Since July, the powerful Miami-based exile organization the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF) has gone through a name change, a radical policy reorientation, and a mass resignation of directors. Many of the older, hard-line directors have formed a new organization. Early this year, CANF began a very public process of reorientation and reorganization. Having suffered a serious public-relations setback after the failed attempt by the exile hard-liners to keep Elian Gonzalez in Miami (see NotiCen, 2000-07-13), CANF got a boost with the election of George W. Bush as president.

Claiming that Cuban-American votes in Florida were critical in the election, CANF moved quickly to ask the administration for favors. CANF executive director Joe Garcia expected changes right away under Bush. He said the status quo was "unacceptable" and announced a new legislative initiative (see NotiCen, 2001-04-12). "We're preparing a major legislative package," said Garcia. "We have a commitment, not only from the president of the United States, but from the Republican Party....We're going to send funds to feed the people of Cuba....We'll support the opposition with aid, both moral and economic....If Fidel Castro refuses assistance, as I anticipate he will, it is a demonstration to the world that he doesn't care for the well-being of his people." Garcia explained the policy shift as necessary to repair the organization's credibility outside the exile community. Alluding to the Elian Gonzalez debacle, he said, "We have to realize that in the American context, if we can't explain ourselves, we're doomed."

In February, CANF opened a Washington office and put a former career diplomat, Dennis Hays, in charge. The appointment of Hays, who is not Cuban-American, has been interpreted as an effort to broaden support and to meet opposition arguments with tact and nuance. CANF chairman Jorge Mas Santos told the Daily Business Review that the strategy was to become a more high-profile organization to combat the business and agriculture interests pressing Congress to soften or lift the embargo. "We want to change the debate toward Cuba," he said. "No more can the embargo be the central issue related to Cuba. We want to take the debate to human rights, to freedom, justice, and democracy."

The St. Petersburg Times said in an editorial that the new CANF leadership could help improve Cuba-US relations and "have a positive effect on all the Democratic and Republican politicians who have grown accustomed to baiting Castro for votes and campaign money."

Hard-liners pushed out

CANF has nearly been torn apart by what analysts say is a combination of internal generational and policy differences. Many of those who resigned were contemporaries of Fidel Castro in their 60s and 70s and were close to CANF founder Jorge Mas Canosa, who died in 1997. There were signs for several months that the older hard-line elements were fighting a losing battle against the leadership

of younger people like Mas Santos, 38, and Garcia, 37, who have never lived in Cuba and did not begin their political lives with the expectation of leading a triumphal return to Cuba.

An analysis published in The Miami Herald suggested that even prominent anti-Castro Florida lawmakers Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) and Rep. Lincoln Diaz-Balart (R-FL) are no longer adhering to the CANF line. Some in the Bush administration are unhappy with what they see as insufficient CANF support in the 2000 election and the campaign contributions CANF made to Democrats. The rift became obvious in July when Ninoska Perez resigned from CANF. Perez was CANF's most visible spokesperson and the host of a popular radio talk show, *La Voz de la Fundacion*. Her husband, Roberto Martin Perez, also resigned. Four others had quit CANF in 2000 with less fanfare.

One of those was Mirta Iglesias, who criticized the appointment of Hays and Garcia. "To bring in people from outside with contracts? Patriots don't need contracts," she said. Jose Antonio Llamas, who also left last year, said, "There has been huge discontent, and little by little, some of us have jumped ship." In all, 22 directors resigned, including Alberto Hernandez, president of the board of directors, and CANF founders Feliciano Foyo, Elpidio Nunez, Horacio Garcia, and Diego Suarez. Mas Santos said that as many as 40% of the organization's 153 directors are younger members. He said he received strong support for his policies at the CANF conference held in Puerto Rico in July. But many of the old guard were not present.

Before the convention, several directors held their own meeting and said they would boycott the conference. "A lot of the people who started with Jorge Mas Canosa in 1981 will not attend this meeting," they said. Mas Santos said the resignations were the result of a conspiracy originating in Havana. Another explanation came from CANF president Francisco Hernandez, who said the resignations were ordered by the Republican Party as revenge for Mas Santos' invitation to Sen. Joseph Lieberman (D-CT) to visit CANF in June. Hernandez said the visit was in line with new foundation efforts to reach out to both parties.

Perez and others who resigned said in a statement that CANF under Mas Santos' direction had taken an "undemocratic path" that was not compatible with the original goals of the organization. The statement also accused Mas Santos of making unilateral decisions, breaking agreements, and engaging in "futile battles."

Some complaints centered on Mas Santos' attempt to respond to the bad publicity surrounding the Elian affair by presenting a more centrist face to the public. The legislative package, featuring direct taxpayer assistance to Cuban dissidents, may have been right politically as a counter to the trend in Congress against the embargo, but it was not popular with the organization's hard-liners. In her first public explanation of why she resigned, Perez said she and others had been pushed aside. She said Mas Santos gave her three months to leave her radio program, and he said that the foundation could buy out any station where she might broadcast. She also charged that CANF was planning to shut down her short-wave broadcasts to Cuba to save money.

Perez told The Miami Herald, "When they decided to make changes and bring in new people, they did it with total disregard for those who had been there so long. If you criticized anything they did,

you became the enemy, and they marginalized you; they excluded you." In response, Mas Santos said, "The foundation has the same goals and objectives as it has always had, which is freedom and democracy for the people of Cuba." "A lot of people said the Cuban exile community and the foundation were dead...after Elian Gonzalez, but I think we're still powerful and making more noise than ever," said Mas Santos.

Invitation to Latin Grammys was last straw

Mas Santos outraged some hard-liners by lobbying to bring the Latin Grammy music awards to Miami even though several performers from Cuba were expected to attend. The late Mas Canosa's bodyguard, Mario Miranda, told The Miami Herald that the Grammy issue was the "last drop" that caused the bucket of resentment to overflow. "This is not the democratic organization that Jorge Mas Canosa intended it to be," he said, and accused Mas Santos of "rubbing elbows with the communists." After the Supreme Court struck down a 1996 Dade County ordinance prohibiting Cuban artists from appearing in county venues, Miami-Dade Mayor Alex Penelas, Miami city Mayor Joe Carollo, and Mas Santos bid for the show. Indicating a major shift toward a policy less hostile to Cuban artists, Mas Santos said music and politics should be separated. "This is a community that is a center of ideas of freedom of expression and cultural exchange," he said. However, Grammy organizers awarded the show to Los Angeles out of concern that hard-liners in Miami could instigate violence after 67 exile groups announced plans to protest the appearance of Cuban performers.

Grammy executive Michael Greene said, "We have people coming from all over the world. Having them have to run the gantlet is demeaning at best and dangerous at worst." The loss to South Florida in tourist revenue was estimated at US\$35 million. CANF executive director Garcia said, "It's a loss for Miami. When Miami looks bad, Cuban-Americans look bad and so does the Cuban American National Foundation." There are now two Cuban American National Foundations. In mid-June, former bodyguard Miranda announced he had registered the name Cuban American National Foundation with Florida state authorities, listing himself as president. Since Mas Santos had let his rights to the name expire, Miranda said the name had been abandoned. Mas Santos said the organization would seek a legal remedy to get the name back, but meanwhile, the foundation changed its name for tax reasons.

The Miami dailies El Nuevo Herald and The Miami Herald reported that, in 1994, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) audited CANF to determine if it was using tax-deductible donations to finance its lobbying efforts, which would have been a violation of the IRS code. Part of the problem was that CANF and its Washington lobbying arm, the Cuban American Foundation, had similar names. Though no major tax violations were found, the IRS required the organization in Miami to change its name and officers to more clearly separate the two organizations. CANF then renamed itself the Jorge Mas Canosa Freedom Foundation, and changed the name of its lobbying arm to CANF. Mas Santos also replaced longtime officers of the foundation with Mas family members.

The Herald reported that critics of Mas Santos said he used the IRS agreement to take control of the Miami organization. One of those who resigned, foundation treasurer Feliciano Foyo, said, "There are two million Cubans out there in exile who could have replaced us, not just the Mas family." Fight

over money Press reports also said that, besides the political disagreements, the resignations also stemmed from arguments about control of the Jorge Mas Canosa Freedom Foundation operation fund, set up after Mas Canosa's death to maintain the organization's activities. The fund, now worth US\$2.6 million, is generated by an endowment started with shares of the family telecommunications firm MasTec.

Dissidents set up new organization

Contrasting with Miranda's organization, which exists mostly on paper, on Aug. 22, Perez, Alberto Hernandez, Foyo, Ignacio Sanchez, and Luis Zuniga, among others of the old guard who resigned, formed a new organization in Miami called the Consejo Cubano por la Libertad (CCL) to work for "freedom and democracy for Cuba."

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