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LADB Staff

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President Fox Meets Cuban Dissidents

by LADB Staff

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During a one-day visit to Cuba Feb. 3, Mexican President Vicente Fox Quesada and Cuban President Fidel Castro attempted to repair relations damaged in recent years. From all accounts, both leaders were satisfied with the progress made in private conversations, but Fox ignited controversy by meeting briefly with six Cuban dissidents. The Fox visit was carefully observed for signs of a thaw in relations that began to freeze up in the late 1990s during the administration of Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) and continued under his successor President Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000).

The change became obvious in 1998 when Salinas met with right-wing Cuban-exile leaders and was reinforced through the Zedillo years as he and his Foreign Minister Rosario Green lectured Castro on Cuba's human rights record and lack of democratic elections (see NotiCen, 2000-08-31). Mexico abstained instead of voting against the US-sponsored resolution to condemn Cuba in the 2000 and 2001 meetings of the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva. Before the 2001 vote, Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque accused his Mexican counterpart Jorge Castaneda of lobbying for votes against Cuba (see NotiCen, 2000-05-10, 2001-05-03).

Diplomatic circumstances have changed

Although Fox strongly criticized Cuba on human rights issues and lack of democracy during his 2000 election campaign, changed circumstances and reciprocal interests have altered the diplomatic environment. Cuba obliged Mexico by supporting its bid for a seat on the UN Security Council, while a downturn in the Mexican economy has made trade with Cuba more attractive. Cuba is mounting its annual campaign to dissuade Latin American nations from voting to condemn Cuba at Geneva. Behind the posturing on dissidents and democracy are real issues. The Salinas and Zedillo line on Cuba coincided with their unconditional support for the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Castro's response to Mexico's posture toward the US was to charge Mexico with welcoming US economic and cultural hegemony (see NotiCen, 2000-08-31). A milder tone from the Fox administration began with a cordial visit by Fox to Cuba as president-elect.

Administration officials said the February visit was to be free of ideology and heavy on practical matters. Mexican Foreign Minister Castaneda said that Mexico wanted to base its relations with Cuba on real issues and not "revolutionary myths." "We want the relationship to evolve in terms of commerce and in terms of regional issues that are important to both governments. And we want to be able to talk about human rights issues without rancor or conflict," he said. "Relations with the Cuban revolution are over, and relations with the Republic of Cuba have begun."

Some analysts have taken that remark as spelling out a new Mexican doctrine that distances Mexico from Castro and the Castro revolution while moving back to a close economic relationship that could outlast the life of the current Cuban president. Writing in the Los Angeles Spanish-language

newspaper La Opinion, Jorge Carrasco Araizaga noted that neither Fox nor Castaneda championed human rights when visiting China last year, and he suggested their diplomacy in Cuba was "dirty work" on behalf of the US. By framing this revised policy as a relationship with Cuba and not the Castro revolution, Mexico moves closer to the US position of basing present policy on conditions expected to prevail in a post-Castro Cuba.

However, Cuban authorities did not see the Fox policy that way. Cuban Foreign Minister Perez Roque said Fox's visit was an act in "defiance" of US pressures. He said it took "a certain bravery and a certain dose of independence" to come to Cuba. While both presidents emphasized the cordiality of the meetings, this was a "working visit," downgraded from a planned state visit, and reduced from two days to one. Castro treated it at first with informality.

The Mexican daily La Jornada described Castro's reception of the Mexican president as barely meeting minimal standards of diplomatic courtesy. The newspaper noted that Castro did not meet Fox at the airport and received him in his military uniform instead of the business suit he reserves for formal state occasions. But Castro soon departed from his schedule and accompanied Fox everywhere during his visit. Both leaders said they had warm and friendly talks. Perez Roque said bilateral relations had warmed up to a "tropical temperature."

Talks center on economic relations

In an interview with the Mexico City daily El Universal, Mexican Ambassador in Havana Ricardo Pascoe Pierce blamed the chilled relations on Zedillo and said disappointing economic trade figures were the result. He said that, starting with the Fox visit, bilateral relations would emphasize commercial and economic matters, with both sides seeking harmonious comparative advantage. With the downturn in the Mexican and US economies, Mexico is paying more attention to its reduced economic relations with Cuba.

Mexico opposed the US restrictions on third-party trade with Cuba through the 1996 Helms-Burton Act, but did not openly defy US policy. From a leading position in the Cuban economy in the early 1990s, Mexico all but abandoned Cuba after passage of Helms-Burton. With the US government threatening sanctions against Mexican companies doing business in Cuba, only a handful of Cuba-Mexico joint ventures survived into 2001.

In 1996, Cementos Mexicanos (CEMEX) stopped doing business in Cuba (see NotiSur, 1996-06-07), and Mexican telecommunications firm Grupo Doms began pulling its investment (see EcoCentral, 1997-04-17). While Cuba-Mexico trade dramatically increased after the Cuban economic opening in the early 1990s, it has declined during the past several years. From yearly averages of about US \$60 million in the 1980s, trade grew to more than US\$400 million in the mid 1990s, falling to US\$330 million in 2001.

Mexico's oil exports to Cuba have disappeared as Cuba now buys most of its imported oil from Venezuela, a loss to Mexico last year of US\$1 billion. In 1999, Mexico dropped Cuba from the San Jose Pact, an arrangement for selling oil to Central American and Caribbean countries on favorable terms, because of concerns about Cuba's ability to pay (see NotiCen, 1999-10-07). While

no announcement was made of any deal for Mexico's state-owned oil company Petroleos Mexicanos (PEMEX) to sell oil to Cuba's Cubapetroleo (CUPET), the subject likely came up during the Fox visit.

Ambassador Pascoe Pierce said Mexico was interested in the Cuban energy model, which combines private investment with protection of state interest in oil and electric energy sources. Fox and Castro visited a natural-gas-fired generating plant run by Energas, a joint Canada-Cuba venture. The ambassador suggested that the Energy Committee of the Mexican Congress should study the model for possible application in Mexico, where there is great resistance to any privatization of PEMEX or the state electrical sector (see SourceMex, 2000-07-12, 2002-01-23).

Manuel Orella, Mexico's trade representative in Havana, said that Mexico's foreign-trade bank (Banco Nacional de Comercio Exterior, BANCOMEXT) was very active in Cuba and that there could be an announcement about export-credit guarantees to facilitate Cuban imports from Mexico as a result of the Fox visit. Mexico already has an investment-protection agreement (Acuerdo de Promocion y Proteccion Reciproca de Inversiones, APPRI), ratified by the Mexican Senate and awaiting ratification in Cuba. Orella said the agreement, which Fox signed last year, could make Mexico one of the biggest investors in Cuba.

Dissidents issue draws most attention

While few significant results were announced after the Fox trip, his brief meeting with dissidents set off a round of recriminations in Mexico and became the central event of the visit in most media reports. Before the trip began, Fox's center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) and the Foreign Ministry gave conflicting statements on whether Fox would meet with dissidents. Cuban exiles in Mexico asked Fox to meet dissidents and to seek the release of Pedro Riera, a Cuban turned over to Cuban authorities by Mexico in 2000. Riera had claimed he was a Cuban agent who spied on CIA operations in Mexico (see NotiCen, 2001-06-07).

Almost at the last minute, Fox met with six dissidents in the Mexican Embassy in Havana for about 15 minutes. He told reporters that he had informed Castro in advance about the meeting and that it did not seem to bother him. "As far as I could tell, he was not annoyed," said Fox. "Of course, he made some comments on the matter, but he left us free to decide on our own." Ambassador Pascoe Pierce said that, just before Fox's departure, Castro said there was no need to worry about the dissident meeting. Castro's muted response to the meeting contrasted with his reaction after Mexican legislators met with Cuban dissidents in 1999. At that time, he called the meeting "an unfriendly gesture." Fox also said that, in private conversation with Castro, he had asked the Cuban president to review the cases of six jailed activists. Fox said this was not an exceptional request and that Mexico would, as a matter of policy, make the same efforts on behalf of human rights everywhere.

On his return to Mexico, Fox announced the pardon of Brig. Gen. Jose Francisco Gallardo, imprisoned in 1993 by the Mexican military on questionable charges after he demanded the investigation of the military for human rights and other abuses (see SourceMex, 2002-02-13). Members of Fox's PAN expressed satisfaction with his brief encounter in the embassy. PAN Deputy Tarcisio Navarrete said the meeting was "a very important experience" and something that should

become a "permanent practice" for Mexican presidents in visits to any country. He said Mexico was willing to have Cuban officials talk with any Mexican dissident group. The center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) took the opposite position, charging that the meeting violated the agenda approved by Congress when it gave Fox permission to go to Cuba.

PRD Deputy Emilio Ulloa called the meeting "profoundly imbecilic" and said the PRD would introduce a motion in Congress denouncing Fox and Castaneda. The former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) reversed its position on Cuba as developed by PRI Presidents Salinas and Zedillo. PRI Deputy Librado Trevino said the party would take measures in the future to avoid a repetition of Fox's behavior in meeting the dissidents, which he said was damaging to Cuba-Mexico relations.

But PAN Deputy Maria Elena Alvarez countered that there was only general agreement in Congress as to what the agenda would be in Cuba and that Fox was free to do whatever he wanted. Of potentially greater importance than the symbolism of meeting dissidents was an official statement from Foreign Minister Castaneda that Mexico would not co-sponsor any resolution to condemn Cuba on human rights grounds in the upcoming human rights meeting in Geneva. Castaneda told a news conference in Havana that Mexico would probably take the same position it did in 2001 by abstaining in the Geneva vote. And he renewed Mexico's rejection of the Helms-Burton Act.

These statements appeared to place Mexico in a neutral position with regard to both Cuba and the US. While the Zedillo administration had moved toward open criticism of the Castro regime, Fox has now vowed, in Castaneda's words, not to act as "negotiator, messenger, communicator, or facilitator between Cuba and the United States." Later, Castro said he was particularly pleased with the Mexican pledge on the Geneva vote. Castro clears up some details Shortly after Fox returned to Mexico, Castro clarified some media reports concerning the dissidents. He told reporters that Fox gave him no list of dissident cases to review.

Instead, Fox gave the list to Foreign Minister Perez Roque before leaving for Mexico. But Castro said he had not seen the list and insisted Fox never brought up the issue of political prisoners. "He was very respectful, very careful," said Castro. Castro said Fox mentioned dissidents during the last hours of his stay but did not say he would meet with them. "He said his foreign minister would meet them in the morning at the Mexican Embassy and the meeting would be limited to greeting them," Castro said. His concern, Castro said, was not about the dissidents but that this "detail" would draw attention away from more important issues covered by the two leaders.

Asked what he thought of a remark from Castaneda that Mexico was now dealing with the Republic of Cuba and not the revolution, Castro said he could not understand what Castaneda meant since Cuba had the opposite view of Mexico and its 1910 revolution. Neither could separate its histories from its revolutionary past, he said.

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