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Cuba in the OAS: Communist Fox in the Democratic Hen House?

by Ray Walser, Ph.D.

On June 3, as many recalled the 20th anniversary of China's crushing of a fragile democracy movement in Tiananmen Square, 34 hemispheric leaders convened in Honduras for the annual gathering of the Organization of American States (OAS). There they repealed a 1962 resolution that suspended communist Cuba from membership.

The repeal reportedly rids the OAS of a Cold War relic and opens the door for the return of Cuba. The resolution's second clause, however, said, "Cuba's participation in the OAS will result from a process of dialogue started at the request of Cuba's government and according to the practices, purposes and principles of the OAS."

Cuba Vindicated?

The leftist president of Honduras, Manuel Zelaya, exclaimed, "Fidel Castro said history will absolve me, and today history has absolved him," referring to Castro's historic 1953 speech. Overall, jubilation accompanied the OAS's repeal of the exclusion order, giving the appearance that the Castros and Cuban communism had won a great victory.

Administration officials differed. They argued that the beef is in the second clause. "Today," announced Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Shannon, "we removed an historical impediment to Cuba's participation in the OAS, but we also established a process of engagement with Cuba based on the core practices, principles, and purposes of the OAS and the Inter-American system." He looked forward to the day when a



"democratic Cuba" would join the OAS.

Cuba, the Bolivarian Left, and the OAS

The charge for Cuba's return to the OAS was led by leaders with tarnished democratic credentials, notably Hugo Chávez of Venezuela and Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua. Along with Bolivia, the Dominican Republic, Honduras, and Cuba, they are members of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA). Argentina, Ecuador, and Paraguay are also closely affiliated with the ideological line of their ALBA friends.

In Honduras, the ALBA view was reflected by Ortega. He lauded the removal of a great "stain" on hemispheric relations and indicated that the ALBA alliance intends to wage a campaign against U.S. economic restrictions on trade and travel with Cuba. In short, ALBA will pursue within the OAS a strategy that tries to isolate and confront the U.S. rather than push for democratic changes long overdue in Cuba.

Pressure for Cuba's return to the OAS is also the result of efforts by other Latin American and Caribbean nations, even friendly democratic ones. Many could not pass up an opportunity to highlight past resentments against the U.S., rather than speak out on Cuba's continued denial of political and economic liberties. Many are beneficiaries of Cuba's medical diplomacy (i.e., dispatch of Cuban doctors and health workers in large numbers) and Venezuela's assistance and oil subsidies. Whether they will have the courage to press for anything more than a cosmetic dialogue with Cuba remains to be seen.

Yet it is unclear Cuba wants to join the OAS after 47 years in the wilderness. In the past, Fidel Castro has relentlessly disparaged the organization, calling it "an unburied cadaver." In his "Reflections" on June 3, he again called it a "Trojan Horse." White House National Security Council director for Latin America Dan Restrepo correctly noted that Cuba must "swallow" its former hostility to OAS. Even with the



sugarcoating offered by other OAS members, the pill may be too bitter.

Overall, Cuba and the ALBA group see little potential for long-term gains within the confines of the OAS. The U.S. continues to advance liberal democracy, rule of law, and individual freedoms and expects OAS members to abide by democratic values, so future clashes are inevitable.

The ALBA alliance and its supporters openly advocate creation of a "for Latins only" regional organization if they cannot dominate the OAS. They may not have reached critical mass yet for a breakaway. They will press to attract additional members like El Salvador or smaller Caribbean states. For now, Cuba is a lever to sow disunity in the OAS.

Hollow Multilateralism Ahead

Bright visions for the future of the OAS emerged in the 1990s after Latin Americans rid themselves of military and civilian strongmen and restored electoral democracy. For a decade the states of the Americas worked with reasonable harmony, making an enduring commitment to democratic governance in the Inter-American Democratic Charter of 2001.

The Bush Administration proposed adding teeth to the OAS democratic charter by insisting that elected leaders must govern democratically. Proposals for a review body to challenge undemocratic actions by the likes of a Chávez or an Ortega were rejected as too interventionist. Troublesome developments--blatant electoral fraud in Nicaragua's municipal elections in November 2008 and Chávez's ruthless assault on the opposition in Venezuela--have failed to produce serious OAS actions.

The OAS is moving from being a community of democracies to becoming a contentious association of states. Political neutrality, a horror of interventionism, and varying degrees of anti-Americanism make it possible for the ALBA members to effectively neutralize the OAS on key



political issues.

The Administration argues that lifting the ban on Cuba will strengthen the OAS. This point is subject to debate. The addition of a contentious, totalitarian Cuba will inevitably weaken the institution. A few will stick to demands for democratic change, while others--perhaps a majority of members--will give Cuba a free pass if it wants it.

Recommendations

- **Add a third rail to Cuba policy.** The Administration has dealt with Cuba issues in the OAS and is opening limited talks with the Cuban government. It must not be afraid to press forward with direct contact with the Cuban people and with the democratic movement on the island as a third pillar of engagement with Cuba.
- **Choose substance over symbolism in the OAS.** The OAS will be polarized and fractious for the foreseeable future. The Administration should make clear that it will not sacrifice democratic principles for the appearances of hemispheric unity, because doing so risks losing the support of the American people for the inter-American body.

Common Themes

Speaking in Cairo on June 4, President Obama said, "America respects the right of all peaceful and law-abiding voices to be heard around the world, even if we disagree with them. And we will welcome all elected, peaceful governments--provided they govern with respect for all their people." The context for the President's speech was democracy in the Middle East, but for those on an island 90 miles from the U.S. frozen in a communist system, the message is just as important and as timely as ever.

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