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Cuba Sees Vindication in Election to New UN Human Rights Council

by Mike Leffert

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A new UN Human Rights Council has been created and its membership elected. Of the 44 new members of the council, eight are from Latin America and two of those from the Central America-Caribbean region. The two are Guatemala (see other article, this edition of NotiCen) and Cuba; the others, Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, and Uruguay. From other regions, 13 were from Africa, 13 from Asia, and 13 from Europe. Three additional members have yet to be elected.

The new council was elected at a plenary session of the UN and will begin its term June 16. The regional composition of the new council is based on population; to get a seat, a country had to be elected by a majority vote of the General Assembly. The new council will replace the Human Rights Commission created in 1946. The old commission had lost credibility through the years and had become a forum for political activities of powerful countries, most notably the annual denunciation of Cuba by the US.

Cuba immediately hailed its election to the new body as, said a press release from the Foreign Relations Ministry, "an outright victory against the Imperium and irrefutable proof of the international prestige of Cuba." Cuba was elected with 135 of 191 votes, despite US lobbying against it, hence the claim of "resounding victory." The US had wanted the vote to be decided by a two-thirds rather than a simple majority. Cuba would have been elected even if the US had prevailed on the issue.

A platform for the Cuban viewpoint

In a long statement, the Cuban Foreign Ministry (MINREX) made much of its election, emphasizing its contributions to human rights movements and causes in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean, rather than the allegations from the US regarding its internal abuses. "It was those countries, in their great majority from the south, those that appreciate the active labor of our country in defense of the causes our peoples share, that made possible the presence of Cuba on the Human Rights Council as a founding member." The MINREX statement called the election a rejection by the international community of the May 1 announcement by the administration of US President George W. Bush of a toughening of what Cuba called the US "policy of hostility, blockade, and aggressions against Cuba." It predicted that the US would no longer be able to exclude or condemn Cuba when "the conditions exist for the countries to exercise their vote secretly and freely...."

The vote was secret, making it more difficult, said the ministry, to determine how any country voted. That should, it said, "diminish significantly the fear of eventual political, economic, financial, commercial, and even military reprisals from Washington that tend to undermine the expression of sovereignty of vulnerable governments."

Making the very most of its opportunity to lash out against its powerful adversary, the ministry recalled how the US failed to gain a seat on the old commission in 2002, and how, to recover its membership the next year, it had to prevail upon former Prime Ministers Jose Maria Aznar of Spain (1996-2004) and Silvio Berlusconi of Italy (1994-1995, 2001-2006) to withdraw their candidacies so that the US could not lose. Both those leaders lost their posts in subsequent national elections. The document also mentioned that the US did not put forward its own candidacy for membership in the body.

While scarcely able to contain itself at what it saw as vindication in the election, the ministry statement turned somber at times, lamenting that, although an important success, the election "should not be interpreted as a guarantee for the future neutralization of anti-Cuban activity by the United States on the council. The empire will continue counting on its lackeys in the ranks of the new agency who are disposed to carrying out any anti-Cuban mission dictated from Washington."

While many rights groups have welcomed the new council, the US Ambassador to the UN John Bolton said it looked set to inherit the flaws of its predecessor. The US has opposed its creation with the argument that it did not go far enough to prevent countries with bad rights records from gaining seats. He said of the Cuban election, "What a joy. That simply says that the deficiencies from the previous commission may well now be carried over." He said the US would work with member states "to make the council as strong and effective as it can be." The US was one of only four countries to vote against creation of the new council. The others were Israel, the Marshall Islands, and Palau. These countries also voted against the UN resolution demanding an end to the US blockade of Cuba.

Commenting on his country's decision not to stand for election, Bolton said, "I don't think it is worth it. I believe strongly that our leverage, in terms of our performance [on human rights] is greater by the US not running." He said this in April, and his statement drew reporter's questions on whether the country chose not to run because its performance at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq might cause a repeat of the 2001 failure to be elected. Bolton sidestepped, saying, "I don't think it's a question of fear that we could not get enough votes. It's a reality that the number of countries in the Western group was already exceeding the quota set up by the UN General Assembly resolution."

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, in a kind of denial of Bolton's assertion, expressed "disappointment" at the decision. He said through a spokesperson that he "very much hopes the US will participate next year." He hoped that the US would support the council even though it was not running. The new body promises to be more active than the last. The old commission met once a year, while the new one has proposed three annual meetings of from six to ten weeks in duration, with the possibility of convening extraordinary sessions at the request of a member with the support of one-third of the membership.

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