Elian Gonzalez case yields debacle for Cuban rightists

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With the Justice Department's formal order transferring custody of Elian Gonzalez from his distant relatives in Miami to his father, the four-and-a-half-month effort by right-wing Cuban exiles to turn the six-year-old boy into a political pawn in their campaign against the Castro government appears to be drawing to a close.

The Miami relatives, bankrolled and guided by the well-financed Cuban American National Foundation (CANF), have continued a series of delaying tactics, including spurious legal actions and demands for meetings with the father Juan Miguel Gonzalez at their home in the city's Little Havana section, which remains ringed with hostile protesters.

Late Tuesday night the CANF announced at a Capitol Hill press conference that the relatives would take Elian to his father in Washington on Wednesday. Less than an hour later, Lazaro Gonzalez, the boy's great-uncle, announced the meeting was off because the boy did not want to go. The crowd outside his home erupted in cheers.

Some of those who have taken to the streets in recent days purportedly to protect Elian and his "freedom" have warned that they are "ready for another Waco," invoking the 1993 FBI siege which climaxed in the deaths of nearly 80 people, many of them children.

For its part, the Justice Department, while asserting that Elian must be turned over to his father, has assiduously avoided a confrontation with the right-wing exiles. Attorney General Janet Reno has insisted she wants a “cooperative settlement” and has repeatedly moved back deadlines for the transfer of the child.

Miami Mayor Joe Carollo and Miami-Dade County Mayor Alex Penelas, both of whom had earlier vowed to refuse cooperation with any federal effort to reunite the boy with his father, met with Attorney General Janet Reno Tuesday and urged that the government postpone any action for 30 days, while also insisting that Reno organize a meeting between Juan Miguel and the Miami relatives so they could settle the issue "as a family." The father has rejected any such meeting and has denounced the Miami relatives for refusing to return his son.

While the Cuban-American anticommunists and their allies have repeatedly insisted that Juan Miguel is himself a hostage of the Castro regime, merely parroting lines dictated to him by Fidel, he has repeatedly rejected invitations from US Congressmen and others to defect.

From the moment he stepped off a chartered airplane at Dulles International Airport, the Cuban worker has made it plain that he is both determined to get his son back and seething with anger against those who have held him hostage for political and monetary gain. On the airport tarmac he stated:

"It's been an agonizing experience to see my son submitted to cruel psychological pressures aimed at influencing his personality already weakened by the terrible trauma. Worse still, Elian's been paraded and exhibited in public rallies and by the media with a clear intent to obtain political advantage from this tragedy.

"Politicians, journalists, lawyers ... and others unrelated to the family have been harassing my son ...

"In the last few days my family and I have been alarmed to see the passion ... in Miami and danger displayed on television that make us fear for the safety of my son.

"I am truly impatient to have him returned to me as soon as possible and go back to Cuba together immediately."

What in the end is perhaps most significant about the Elian Gonzalez saga is that there is every indication that the majority of the American people agree with the father. From the standpoint of the public image of the Cuban exile groups, the episode has been an unmitigated debacle.

Every poll has shown majority support for the boy being returned to his father, including by force, if necessary. As time has dragged on, this majority has only grown. Perhaps the most striking results come from Miami itself, where the population has been subjected to non-stop propaganda by the Cuban exile organizations as well as the political establishment over which they exercise substantial influence.

A poll done by the *Miami Herald* and a local NBC affiliate earlier this week indicated that three-quarters of white non-Hispanics and 92 percent of blacks support sending Elian back to Cuba with his father, while non-Cuban Hispanics were more evenly split. Among Cuban-Americans, the poll showed, 83 percent backed him remaining in this country. Analysts said the opinion poll showed the sharpest divide ever between Cuban-Americans and the rest of the population.

There is good reason to suspect that divisions within the Cuban-American community are also greater than expressed in the poll. The political atmosphere created by the Cuban American National Foundation and other right-wing exile groups is rife with intimidation and threats of violence against anyone diverging from their line. On several occasions in recent weeks, people expressing doubts about whether the perpetual political circus organized around Elian is in the boy's best interests have been denounced as

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communists, threatened and physically assaulted on the street near the relatives' home, having to be removed by the police for their own safety. Faced with potential violent retribution, there are many who would think twice before contradicting the political thugs who dominate Cuban-American circles in Miami.

Some media pundits have suggested that the public sentiment in favor of Elian's return to his home in Cuba is an indication that the right-wing Cuban exile groups have become anachronistic, a throw-back to a Cold War era that has faded into the past.

No doubt, within the political establishment there is a substantial layer that holds this view. They chafe at the sway exerted by the Miami Mafia over US policy toward Cuba, seeing it as an impediment to the assertion of US profit interests as the Castro government allows the increasing penetration of European, Japanese and Canadian capital investment. The economic blockade and political isolation demanded by the right-wing exile groups is further seen by many in State Department circles as both providing a nationalist prop for Castro and preventing Washington from exerting any influence in a post-Castro regime.

For the broad majority of working people in the US, however, the turn against the position of the Cuban exile groups is rooted in a far more essential human emotion—revulsion over the cruel exploitation of a defenseless child. The holding of the boy against the wishes of his father, supposedly motivated by concern for Elian's well-being and "liberty," has been exposed for what it is: a ham-fisted attempt to use the child as an unwitting prop in an ugly political campaign.

The anguish and anger felt by millions of people over the boy's predicament also has a political basis. The Elian Gonzalez controversy has not merely exposed the bankruptcy of the Cuban exile factions. In a real sense it has held up a mirror to American society exposing much that is ugly in its social relations and political life.

From the outset, the underlying argument over Elian's future has been argued on a crassly monetary basis. Who could deny that Elian could have more designer clothes, video games and other hot consumer items if he stayed in Miami and his distant relatives' benefactors in the CANF continued to foot the bill? The same argument, of course, would justify the snatching of 95 percent of the world's children from their parents, including those of the more than one-quarter of the US population now living in poverty.

At the same time, the battle over Elian has laid bare the corrosion of the American political and legal system. From the outset, the Clinton administration, the Justice Department and the Immigration and Naturalization Service have temporized and accommodated themselves to the Cuban exile group's over the Elian Gonzalez case, refusing to enforce the law and allowing the CANF to dictate policy. With Attorney General Janet Reno in Miami to meet with "community leaders," it is still not assured that the government will fulfill its pledge to abide by US and international law and surrender the child to his father.

Vice President Al Gore has joined Cuban exile groups in calling for the patently illegal measure of granting the boy permanent resident status so that his fate can be decided in a family court in Miami, where judges are elected and face retribution if their rulings contradict the will of the CANF.

Many have denounced Gore for pandering to the Cuban-American rightists to win their backing in Florida, a key state for the November election. Within days of the Miami and Miami-Dade mayors declaring their defiance of the federal government, calling to mind George Wallace and Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus when they stood in schoolhouse doors to block desegregation, Gore solidarized himself with the position that Elian should remain in the United States. For a sitting vice president to ally himself with such elements against his own administration is historically unprecedented.

In reality, Gore is not merely pandering; he enjoys the closest relations with these political layers. Miami-Dade County Mayor Penelas is a close political ally, reportedly being considered for a cabinet post if a Gore administration comes to power. A Gore political consultant, Robert Shrum, is also a consultant to Miami Mayor Carollo. New Jersey Democratic Rep. Bob Menendez, one of the Cuban-American Congressmen leading the campaign to convince Juan Miguel Gonzalez to defect, has been mentioned as a potential vice presidential candidate on a Gore ticket.

These connections are an expression of the inordinate power exerted over both the Democratic and Republican parties by extreme right-wing forces which are utterly opposed to the social needs and political will of the vast majority of working people. Their influence has grown in direct relation to the decline of any genuine popular support for either big business party as the policies of both the Democrats and Republicans are aimed ever more directly at furthering the interests of the wealthiest layers of the population.

There is a sharp contradiction between the position taken by both presidential candidates in aligning themselves with these elements and the clear sentiment expressed by the majority of American working people in favor of Juan Miguel Gonzalez's simple plea for the return of his son. This is itself a manifestation of the sharp social polarization that characterizes American society at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

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