

Rights Groups Reassess Strategies

Black, Hispanic Organizations to Undergo Leadership Changes

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Sunday, December 19, 2004; Page A16

At year's end, the leaders of the nation's largest African American and Hispanic civil rights organizations will step down on the same day -- a first. But despite the common timing, the transitions highlight differences in the two organizations' outlooks and agendas.

The National Council of La Raza has already chosen Janet Murguia, a former University of Kansas administrator, to replace departing president Raul Yzaguirre. The NAACP, the nation's oldest and largest civil rights organization, is searching for a successor to Kweisi Mfume, who announced his resignation Nov. 30.



Raul Yzaguirre, outgoing president of the Hispanic rights group, has had a more confrontational style. (Michael Stravato - AP)

Murguia and whoever is chosen to lead the NAACP will have to navigate a potentially seismic demographic shift: The Census Bureau announced last year that Hispanics had overtaken African Americans as the nation's largest minority group. And while the NAACP and La Raza both have had strained relations with the Bush administration -- President Bush has declined to address their annual conventions since he was elected in 2000 -- the Republican Party has also eagerly courted Latino voters in an effort to counter what has been a reliably Democratic African American voting bloc.

In this new landscape, both organizations are facing questions of how to court and confront power.

At the NAACP, the committee searching for Mfume's successor is being led by Julian Bond, the organization's chairman, who dismissed recent reports that his fiery rhetoric did not mesh with his president's attempts at diplomacy.

"Mfume and I have met at least every other week face to face, and we have communicated almost daily," Bond said. "I disagree that we've had a difficult relationship."

Still, their differences in approach were clear. The day after this year's U.S. presidential election, for example, Mfume sought to end the chilly relationship between the White House and the NAACP with a congratulatory letter. But Bond had repeatedly disparaged Bush and his party over the years -- in the days leading up to November's voting, he said the Republicans "draw their most rabid supporters from the Taliban wing of American politics" -- and now the IRS is investigating whether his remarks during the campaign violated the NAACP's tax-exempt status.

Ronald Walters, director of the African American Leadership Institute at the University of Maryland, suggested that Mfume, whose fundraising acumen helped lift the NAACP out of millions in debt in the mid-1990s, was too diplomatic, and that a leader more like Bond was needed at a time when, he said, the White House sought to politically marginalize African Americans.

But Earl Ofari Hutchinson, a black author and political commentator based in Los Angeles, said, "I think that would be an absolute prescription for disaster."

"This is not 1960," Hutchinson said. "The political dynamic of America has changed. There's been a sea change in black America, too. It's not just civil rights, it's economic justice, social advocacy. It's about black women suffering from HIV. The NAACP's not doing anything on the ground level."

Among those being mentioned as candidates for NAACP president are former labor secretary Alexis M. Herman; Elaine Jones, who resigned as director of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund in May, and Wade Henderson, executive director of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, who competed for the job when Mfume won it nine years ago. But Bond would not comment on potential nominees.

At La Raza, a change in strategy is in the works. Yzaguirre, the group's president for more than 30 years, approached issues and politics with direct confrontation. "My posture has been we are going to award our friends and come down on our enemies," Yzaguirre said. "We are going to speak out on [Bush's] policies if they hurt our people."

But Murguia, who served as deputy director for legislative affairs for the Clinton White House and as a liaison between the Gore-Lieberman presidential campaign and constituent groups in 2000, said she is planning to improve La Raza's relations with the White House.

"One of the first lessons you learn in Washington is you have to work with people on both sides of the aisle," she said. "I am certainly going to take every opportunity I can to reach out to this administration."

When other Hispanic groups criticized Bush's decision to appoint White House counsel Alberto R. Gonzales, a Mexican American, as attorney general, La Raza praised the chance to see a Latino in such a powerful role. The group also welcomed the president's

choice of Carlos M. Gutierrez, a Cuban American and the former chief executive officer of Kellogg Co., to run the Commerce Department.

"I've been very happy with some of the Cabinet choices that have been made," Murguia said. "I'm an advocate for the Hispanic community."

Latino communities have a lot in common with African Americans. Black people are prone to chronic unemployment; among Hispanics are many undocumented immigrants who take the lowest-paying and most dangerous jobs. Black people have high rates of prostate cancer, heart disease and infant mortality, and black women make up the fastest-growing group of people contracting the AIDS virus. Hispanics have had particularly high rates of diabetes. Both groups earn significantly less than non-Hispanic white Americans do.

But the interests of the groups diverge on a pivotal issue for Latinos: immigration. Undocumented immigrants cannot vote, easily own or rent housing, or get a driver's license. La Raza and other Hispanic groups are left to tackle the issue alone.

Murguia said that creating programs to help integrate more Latinos into mainstream society will be her first priority. As La Raza's first female president, Murguia said, she is intent on focusing on the crucial roles that women play in the Hispanic community as working mothers, breadwinners, community leaders and elected officials.

"We need to strengthen our relationship with our 300 affiliate organizations," she said. "We haven't had a consistent effort across the board, and these are the groups that provide our housing programs, health services and after-school educational support."