

## **Cuba Sees Fervor Over Elian Useful in Other Battles**

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### **Body**

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Now that **Elian** Gonzalez is home and has begun to reclaim his young life, officials say that it will be a challenge to sustain the emotional commitment Cubans had to that case as the government presses its latest **battle** with the United States **over** its trade embargo and immigration policy.

The embargo and the Cuban Adjustment Act are emerging as the centerpieces of a post-**Elian** era, and officials intend to continue the public rallies and televised discussion that were a staple of daily life throughout the seven-month custody **battle over Elian**. But in an acknowledgement that the issues are different, Ricardo Alarcon, the president of the National Assembly and the main adviser to the Gonzalez family, said the events would be scaled down somewhat.

"Do you ask if there can be the same emotional level? No," he said in a 90-minute interview on Monday. "You cannot ask people to have the same emotional level about a boy without a mother, separated from his father, for a discussion of the adjustment law. It is more abstract."

Still, Mr. Alarcon, who was the highest-ranking Cuban official to greet **Elian** when he arrived at Jose Marti International Airport last week, said the public events staged on behalf of **Elian** had proved **useful** in mobilizing people and reaching out to Cuban youth. It was an opportunity, he said, born of the campaign by Cuban-Americans and their Congressional supporters to keep **Elian** in Miami after he was rescued from an inner tube last Thanksgiving.

"They gave it to us on a silver platter," he said. "This is a **battle** of ideas that we appreciate clearly. This did not begin in November or in the first days of December. The denunciations started with **Elian**, and at that time we did not think it would go so long. But those seven months have allowed us to discover new forms, methods and actors, and a lot more youth, above all. Why stop that when there are so many problems to resolve?"

Those problems, officials contend, stem from the economic havoc wreaked by the embargo and are exacerbated by policies that allow Cubans who reach American soil to apply for asylum. Others, including ordinary Cuban citizens, feel the real problem is a lack of enthusiasm for the revolution among a people who have been fed a diet of slogans while adjusting themselves to the daily struggle of inventing ways to resolve their personal economic crises.

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Mr. Alarcon said it was "simplistic" to believe the rallies were intended to revive the revolution's flagging domestic appeal. But he acknowledged that Elian's case had intense support among the young, who have been featured players in the rallies and other events.

"The youth will continue to be the protagonists, but that is the march of life," he said of the new campaign. "Elian touched almost all the youth. Elian was 5 years old. His mother, Elisabet, was around 24. His father Juan Miguel was 31. The grandparents are in their 50's. They were children at the triumph of the revolution."

He said that the public support for Elian paid off with his return, which he said some young people likened to Jan. 1, 1959, when Fidel Castro and his revolutionaries took power.

"For the youth, Jan. 1, 1959, was something they read about of their parent's generation," he said. "This is theirs. We speak about how youth are into other things. But no one could imagine how the events here firmed up people of both generations."

Cuban officials want to capitalize on that attention, although at a rally in Manzanillo last Saturday many there seemed to be going through the motions, waving flags during speeches filled with familiar scorn for American policy. Just in case, officials have reduced the time of the televised discussions to one hour and 45 minutes from two hours, as well as freeing up one of the country's two state-run television stations for regular programming. In the interview, Mr. Alarcon took issue with how a recent Congressional agreement allowing American food sales was portrayed as a softening of the embargo. He insisted it would make sales of wheat and rice more difficult unless American banks are allowed to finance the transactions and ships are allowed to make deliveries without being penalized. Currently, ships cannot dock at American ports for six months after going to Cuba.

As officials turn their attention to the new priorities of trade and immigration, the Gonzalez family may find it difficult to attain its own goal of being a normal clan. For now, they are in a seaside Havana home, where Elian and some of his classmates are wrapping up their first-grade studies before going off on a vacation with the eventual plan being that the Gonzalez family will return to its hometown of Cardenas.

In recent weeks, the government media has been filled with praise for Juan Miguel and Elian as model citizens, raising the question of whether greater things are in store for Mr. Gonzalez.

"Juan Miguel will be able to do whatever he wants," was all Mr. Alarcon would say about the future. "He was a normal person who was turned into something else. Returning to what he was before will not be easy."

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## Graphic

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Photo: Ricardo Alarcon, the president of the National Assembly in Cuba. (Associated Press)

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