Many Florida Blacks, Tossed by Population Shifts, Say They Feel 'Left Out'

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Body

M. Athalie Range became Miami's first ***black*** city commissioner in 1965, a time when the civil rights movement was "roaring," she ***says***, and ***blacks*** nationwide had the promise of new political and economic frontiers.

A string of other ***black*** politicians followed her in the commission seat, the only one of the five seats ever held by ***blacks***. But last November, three decades after Ms. Range fought to bring things like sidewalks and street lights to her constituency, the seat was lost to a Hispanic man.

For ***many*** ***blacks***, that political setback has come to symbolize unfulfilled promise in the Miami metropolitan area, where so ***many*** other Floridians have prospered.

"We ***feel*** more or less ***left*** ***out***," ***said*** Ms. Range, now an 81-year-old funeral director.

Florida, a state that in the last 50 years has leapfrogged to fourth most populous in the country, has been a magnet for retirees, immigrants and others seeking sunshine, a refuge or the kind of economic opportunity that comes with explosive growth.

But as whites have come from the northern states and Hispanic immigrants from foreign countries, ***Florida***'s transformation has come at a cost to part of its ***black*** ***population***. ***Many*** restaurant and hotel jobs once held by ***blacks*** now go to white and Hispanic applicants. ***Black*** neighborhoods have been lost to urban development. And as their percentage of ***Florida***'s ***population*** has eroded, ***blacks*** have lost influence or failed to gain the economic and political foothold envisioned by ***many*** in the 60's.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Miami, where ***black*** residents talk of the sense of being passed by, rather than displaced. It plays ***out*** at polling places, where ***blacks*** have declined to a quarter of registered voters while Hispanic residents have grown to one-half of registered voters. As recently as the early 1970's, the number of ***blacks*** registered to vote here was more than twice that of Hispanic residents.

It plays ***out*** in ***black*** sections like Overtown and parts of Coconut Grove, where poverty, unemployment and low educational attainment contrast sharply with the tourist glitz and a booming downtown that almost engulfs them. And it plays ***out*** in ethnic tensions that have flared in riots, boycotts and a recent dispute over the leadership of a conference intended to promote understanding among ethnic groups.

The Rev. Willie E. Sims Jr., the assistant director of the Dade County Office of ***Black*** Affairs, ***said***: "Most ***blacks*** here, when they go home to Alabama or Georgia for funerals or family visits, to the backward areas they fled for Miami, they find more ***blacks*** in elected positions, more ***blacks*** living well. Some ***say*** the car travels faster going north away from Miami than going back."

South ***Florida*** offers the clearest example of demographic changes that have occurred statewide. From 1950 to 1990, ***Florida*** moved from being the 20th-most-populous state to being 4th most populous, and at the same time, its ***black population*** also grew, to 1.8 million from 600,000, according to Census Bureau figures. But as a percentage of ***Florida***'s ***population*** over all, ***blacks*** dropped to 14 percent from 22 percent.

Of the 14 million residents now in ***Florida***, 14 percent are Hispanic, ***say*** researchers at the University of ***Florida***, and Hispanic residents may have already surpassed ***blacks*** as the state's largest minority.

In cities like Miami and Orlando, Hispanic immigrants have increased competition for jobs, social services and political influence. But in cities like St. Petersburg, which is 19 percent ***black*** and 76 percent white, with few Hispanic residents, the complaints of ***black*** residents have more to do with vestiges of the legal segregation that lasted until the 1960's. The attitudes and patterns of such segregation, sociologists ***say***, continue informally through discrimination in housing, jobs and credit and in police practices around ***Florida***.

After two disturbances in a ***black*** neighborhood in St. Petersburg in late 1996, prompted by the fatal shooting of a ***black*** teen-ager by a white policeman, an advisory panel to the United States Commission on Civil Rights found that while the killing had ignited the violence, feelings of alienation had fueled the undercurrent of tension that had exploded.

"I saw hopelessness, despair, nothing to look forward to," ***said*** Rabbi Solomon Agin, the panel's chairman.

Many of the frustrations mirror those of other ***blacks*** throughout the country. And ***blacks*** in ***Florida***, like in the rest of the country, have also made significant advances after the end of legal segregation opened doors to schools, jobs and a better standard of living.

More ***blacks*** hold elective office in ***Florida*** than ever before: 210 in 1994 compared with 110 in 1980, according to the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies in Washington. They include 4 of the 13 Dade County commissioners, 7 state legislators and a Congresswoman, Carrie P. Meek. A significant victory came last year when Nathaniel Glover Jr., 53, became the sheriff of Jacksonville, ***Florida***'s first ***black*** sheriff since Reconstruction.

"Certainly, we've come a long way," ***said*** Sheriff Glover, a Jacksonville native. "Ten years ago it wouldn't have happened."

But Census Bureau figures also show that 32 percent of ***Florida***'s ***black*** families lived below the poverty level in 1989, compared with 9 percent of white families and 20 percent of Hispanic families.

It was Fidel Castro's assumption of power in Cuba in January 1959 that made immigration concerns, not integration, the paramount issue in Miami as the exodus of Cubans to South ***Florida*** began. In 1960, Census Bureau figures show, Miami's ***population*** was 77 percent white and 22 percent "nonwhite," the category then used by the bureau. By 1990, it was 24 percent ***black***, 12 percent white and 62 percent Hispanic.

In recent years, educational levels, government relocation aid and, in some cases, money from home have given immigrants, including ***blacks*** from countries like Jamaica, an advantage over Miami natives.

The divisions have affected in politics. The last two elections for mayor of Dade County, where half of the two million residents are Hispanic, and for the Miami City Commission, were fought along racial lines, with the ***black*** candidates losing despite near total support from ***black*** voters.

Of the five city commissioners, four are Hispanic and one is white.

Miami is also a place where a ***black*** "brain drain" is considered serious. Part of the problem, business experts ***say***, is that Miami does not offer the level of professional jobs offered by cities like Atlanta. But ***black*** professionals ***say*** they find Miami inhospitable in other ways, from being shut ***out*** of jobs that require a knowledge of Spanish to the lack of nightclubs, restaurants and other places that appeal to ***blacks***.

"There seems to be no stable ***black*** middle class," ***said*** Bill Diggs, 34, a ***black*** native of Augusta, Ga. Mr. Diggs is a telecommunications manager who first moved here from Wilmington, Del., for a job in 1987, ***left*** in 1989 for Atlanta and returned in 1995. "There is no jelling of the community," Mr. Diggs ***said***. "We've almost become a caste system."

This time around, he settled with his wife and two children in neighboring Broward County. And this time, Mr. Diggs has found in Miami a ***black*** business and social network through the ***Black*** Executive Forum, a group that started two years ago to recruit and retain ***black*** professionals, among other things.

The forum is the result of what is known here as the quiet riot, a three-year tourist boycott of Dade County that was organized by ***black*** civic leaders and brought on by two events that happened in close proximity: the police beating of Haitian demonstrators who accused workers in a Hispanic-owned store of mistreating ***black*** customers and the snubbing of President Nelson Mandela of South Africa on his 1990 visit here by Cuban-American politicians for his refusal to denounce Mr. Castro.

The boycott, which county officials estimated had cost over $20 million in convention business, was called off in 1993 when civic leaders accepted economic goals to increase ***black*** participation in the tourist industry of the Miami metropolitan area.

Ari Sosa, who has been director of the Dade County Department of Community Affairs for the last 13 years, ***said*** other programs in the last three years to promote Hispanic- and ***black***-owned businesses in each other's neighborhoods and increase ***black*** hiring, among others, had brought ethnic groups closer.

Incidents that could once have led to trouble have instead led to apologies, Mr. Sosa ***said***. He also noted that in the dispute over the community relations conference, the meeting's planners settled for increasing the list of leaders to include all races.

Marilyn Holifield, a Miami lawyerwho helped organize the protest, ***said*** that "when we resolved the boycott, we didn't really win, but we made it possible for people to be sensitive in ways they never were before."

But no change has brought as much anticipation as the opening of the first major hotel in the area to be owned by ***blacks***, the result of a $10 million incentive package offered by the City of Miami Beach as part of the agreement to end the boycott. The hotel, in the popular South Beach section, is to open by 1999.

Electoral defeats and other setbacks may give ***blacks*** the sense of "getting nowhere," ***said*** Ms. Range, the former city commissioner who served for five years, but a ***black***-owned hotel will be a monument to the boycott and a symbol of hope. "People, both ***black*** and white, need to see something that represents the struggle, something we can put our hands on," she ***said***. "It's something that's resulted from success."

Graphic

Photos: Demographic changes in ***Florida*** have clouded the hopes of ***many*** ***black*** residents. M. Athalie Range, now a funeral director, became Miami's first ***black*** city commissioner in 1965. A ***black*** business and social network is important for Bill Diggs, having breakfast with his wife, Thomasina, their 12-year-old son, Drew, and daughter, Desiree, 3, in Broward County. (Photographs by Cindy Karp for The New York Times)

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