

MARTINEZ RESIGNS AS REPUBLICAN CHAIRMAN

BYLINE: LARRY LIPMAN, Palm Beach Post Washington Bureau

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Sen. Mel Martinez, who became general chairman of the Republican Party 10 months ago in a bid to broaden its base but drew fire for his pro-immigration stance, abruptly resigned Friday.

WASHINGTON -- Rumors had been circulating for weeks that Martinez would relinquish his party position in February after a GOP presidential candidate had been chosen. But Martinez made the surprise announcement Friday. "I feel that it has been a successful run," he told Florida reporters in a conference telephone call from Miami.

Martinez said he made the decision to step down this week after discussing it with President Bush, who personally selected him after November's drubbing in which the GOP lost control of both houses of Congress.

Martinez said his goal in taking the post as general chairman was to help rebuild the party and its fund-raising apparatus, and that he felt it had been accomplished.

"There is never a perfect time," Martinez said, when asked why he made the announcement now.

He said he felt the party was "in sufficient shape" to wage a successful presidential campaign next year, and that "now was as good as any" time to resign.

Martinez said he looked forward to devoting all of his attention to being a U.S. senator from Florida.

Bush said in a statement that Martinez "has served his party with the same distinction he serves his country."

"Mel has effectively communicated our party's commitment to addressing the issues most important to all Americans," he said.

"His message of hope and opportunity has resonated throughout America and strengthened support for our agenda. Because of his leadership, more Americans understand the Republican Party's efforts to grow our economy, support our troops, strengthen our schools, and protect our country."

Mike Duncan, the Republican National Committee chairman who has managed the party's day-to-day operations since January, will continue heading the party. Usually, the RNC chairman leads the party, and Martinez was a rare exception as the party's figurehead but not its organizational leader.

Martinez, who turns 61 Tuesday, is the first Cuban-American elected to the U.S. Senate.

Martinez was selected in an effort to attract more minorities, particularly Hispanics, to the Republican Party.

Two months ago, he chided GOP presidential candidates Rudy Giuliani and Mitt Romney for their increasingly strident stands against illegal immigration.

Martinez said Friday that he rejects the premise that the Republican Party "ought to be viewed as a party that is anti-immigration," noting that some Democrats also oppose comprehensive reform.

But Martinez drew repeated fire from many GOP conservatives for supporting Bush's efforts to establish a pathway to citizenship for many of the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants living in the United States.

Some conservative bloggers nicknamed him "Amnesty Mel."

Martinez denied that his support for comprehensive immigration reform was a factor in his resignation.

"It played no role in my decision whatsoever," he said.

Grover Norquist, president of Americans for Tax Reform and a leading Republican activist, said Martinez's performance as party chairman suffered because he had to split his duties with that of being senator.

Martinez acknowledged that one of his frustrations as party chairman was that it sometimes conflicted with his Senate duties. He said he had to miss some party functions because of the Senate's unpredictable schedule.

Another part of Martinez's job was to raise money on behalf of the party.

Martinez claimed he was successful at that task. The RNC has raised about \$60 million this, compared with about \$40 million by the Democratic National Committee.

But Republican presidential candidates have lagged behind their Democratic counterparts. Democratic presidential candidates have raised \$223 million compared to \$150 million for the GOP candidates.

Two days ago, in his role as party chairman, Martinez told a disappointed audience at a \$1,000-a-person money-raising dinner in Washington that only two of the GOP presidential candidates, Romney and Rep. Ron Paul of Texas, would be speaking.

Florida's Democratic Party gleefully hailed Martinez's resignation.

"For too long, Martinez's loyalty to President Bush has trumped his responsibilities as Florida's junior senator," Alejandro Miyar, a party spokesman, said in a statement. "Florida Democrats sincerely hope that Martinez's resignation from the RNC will allow him to refocus on the job Floridians elected him to do, which is to represent the people -- not the Republican Party -- in the U.S. Senate."

Martinez called the statement "just politics as usual."

A Cuban refugee who came to the United States under operation "Pedro Pan" as a teenager in 1960, Martinez was Orange County chairman in 2000 when he was tapped by Bush to be secretary of Housing and Urban Development. He resigned after three years and was elected to the U.S. Senate in 2004 after a close and bitter GOP primary and a close general election.