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Maj. Alvarez: The cop behind Miami's top cop

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Cigar chomping and displaying blustery swagger, Miami police Maj. Alfredo Alvarez has led vice raids, appeared on television shows and openly entrenched himself in the city's bare-knuckle political scene.

He also is the head of the Miami Police Department's internal affairs unit — a sensitive law enforcement position normally filled by low-key, apolitical leaders who are neither seen nor heard and must be perceived as objective.

Alvarez's multiple roles — mainly as the right-hand man of embattled Police Chief Miguel Exposito — have intrigued political and law enforcement observers, while daunting dissenters within the department.

Over the past year, Alvarez has morphed into Exposito's minister of information of sorts, a spokesman on Spanish-language television and radio defending Exposito and blasting city administrators and news media critical of the police department.

In one interview earlier this year on América TeVe, Alvarez showed off emails suggesting a television news reporter who aired a piece critical of Exposito was too cozy with the mayor — the chief's nemesis.

And in recent weeks, the political plot lines have grown even more prominent.

One police commander whom Exposito sought to demote alleged, in a whistle-blower letter, that Alvarez threatened to use his internal affairs powers against him unless he sided with the chief by serving as a double agent against the mayor.

And an inner-city activist told The Miami Herald that Alvarez, in another move to back up the chief, drove him to a meeting with the city manager to drum up support for another of Exposito's controversial demotions.

Alvarez declined to comment, citing City Manager Johnny Martinez's order that police brass not speak to the media without permission. Martinez was on vacation and could not be reached for comment.

The internal affairs unit investigates officer misconduct, and can also ferret out misdeeds of other city employees except for elected officials.

Patrick Franklin, a former Miami Beach police detective and polygrapher who serves as a police internal affairs consultant, said it is highly unusual for the head of an I.A. unit to be so active in the city's politics.

"The I.A. commander had to be beyond reproach and he cannot even have the appearance of favoritism, political or otherwise," said Franklin, who conducts internal investigations for South Florida's smaller police agencies.

Alvarez has been the most visible ally of Exposito, who by contract is supposed to retire in January but has vowed not to go. Martinez has squabbled with Exposito over demotions and could move to fire this week, although Exposito late Friday filed a whistle-blower claim aiming to head off the move.

Alvarez began with Miami police in 1981 patrolling Overtown and Liberty City. He later went on to investigate robberies before becoming a sergeant with the "problem solving team," which cracked down on "quality of life" vice crimes in the city.

He was also the sergeant-at-arms at City Hall, driving around Commissioner Marc Sarnoff.

When Exposito was appointed to the top job in November 2009, he promoted Alvarez to the rank of major, briefly over criminal investigations, then over internal affairs. His friendship with Exposito is no secret: At his promotion ceremony, Alvarez proudly showed off his major's badge, the very one Exposito had used.

Alvarez's and Exposito's tenures quickly got off to a rocky start when internal affairs made a series of public corruption arrests, despite objections from prosecutors.

Alvarez and Exposito adamantly insisted the cases were solid enough for a judge to sign off on the arrest warrants. But the police did an end-run around prosecutors to get the warrants approved, and the state attorney's office later dropped the cases.

The unit also took flak for investigating the disappearance of a bicycle given to former Miami Mayor Manny Diaz. Rather than a theft, it turned out to be a personal gift from a staffer.

Alvarez's rise to prominence, however, came with his role in police department's war on the maquinitas, the video machines that he and Exposito insist are illegal gambling devices.

Last year, Mayor Tomás Regalado pushed through an ordinance aimed at regulating and taxing video slots. But Alvarez and Exposito — who led ballyhooed vice crackdowns in years past — protested, saying the ordinance would flood the city with

machines actually used for gambling.

Flouting the ordinance, the department mounted the “Lucky 7” raid, which netted the seizures of more than 400 machines and more than 20 misdemeanor arrests. Alvarez helped supervise the raid and even caught two men loading the machines into a truck, presumably to spirit them away as the raids spread across Miami.

Some law enforcement experts say an internal affairs commander’s role in the vice investigations could pose a conflict of interest, especially if a citizen were to file a complaint against an officer involved in the raid.

“It compromises the objectivity and the neutrality of the internal affairs bureau,” Franklin said.

Said retired Miami-Dade Division Chief Russell Fischer, a former I.A. captain: “Generally speaking, an I.A. commander has to be held to a higher standard and generally speaking, they don’t perform investigative functions beyond I.A.”

Exposito later claimed Regalado meddled in the Lucky 7 raid, a complaint he forwarded to the FBI. Regalado denied the accusation, and the two have been at odds ever since.

Alvarez thrust himself publicly into the row over the machines, which the adult arcade industry claim are for amusement only and do not constitute “games of chance.” He ferried several reporters to the Miami police warehouse where the seized machines are kept.

Two of the men charged in Lucky 7 are fighting the charges in Miami-Dade court. Alvarez is listed as a government witness in their cases, and says he is an expert about the machines.

“I offered to make you an expert, too. It will take only 10 minutes in my warehouse,” he told a defense lawyer during a June deposition.

Alvarez also appeared on Spanish-language radio and television programs, chronicling what he called organized crime involvement with the video machines.

The result: One Hialeah businessman, who had been indicted but cleared in an organized crime case, is suing Alvarez and Exposito for defamation. The lawsuit is pending. Both officers say they were speaking as part of their public safety duties, according to court records.

Alvarez’s public appearances have slowed in the past couple of months after City Manager Martinez forbade the chief and his staff from speaking to the press without permission, unless about public safety.

But that doesn't mean Alvarez hasn't been active behind the scenes.

After a contentious July budget meeting, at which Exposito sought to beat back allegations from the police union of wasteful spending, Fraternal Order of Police Vice President Javier Ortiz was heckled by Alvarez and a group of cigar-smoking officers outside City Hall.

"Alvarez said, 'I told you so, you look like a fool!' " Ortiz recalled. "They've always worked on intimidation. It's smoke and mirrors, but I'm not really worried about it."

More recently, after Exposito unsuccessfully tried to demote Assistant Chief Roy Brown, the highest-ranking black officer in the department, Alvarez intervened. He called community activist Brian Dennis, president of the activist group Brothers of the Same Mind, to support the demotion.

Dennis said Alvarez and another major picked up him a few weeks ago and drove him to to meet with the city manager, though Dennis said he originally was under the impression they were going to the police department.

"We met, and they picked me up, and we all went down there," he said. "I thought I was going to meet with the chief."

At their behest, Dennis offered tepid support for replacing Brown with the other black police major, Ian Moffet. Dennis now says he and other community leaders fully support keeping Brown in the position.

The other commander Exposito sought to demote, Jose Perez, claimed in a whistleblower letter that Exposito, Alvarez and executive assistant Alfredo Vega tried to recruit him to feed them inside information against the mayor.

At one point, the letter contended, "Maj. Alvarez then chimed in and said: 'You can float and grow and get promoted. Or, I will make sure as the chief of IA (Internal Affairs) that you are f---ed with if you take five extra minutes for lunch.' "