

Racist remarks in leaked audio of L.A. council members spark outrage, disgust

<https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2022-10-09/city-council-leaked-audio-nury-martinez-kevin-de-leon-gil-cedillo>



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Times staff writer Brittny Mejia contributed to this report.



L.A. City Council President Nury Martinez, shown in 2019, made racist comments in a 2021 meeting, according to a recording reviewed by The Times.

(Al Seib / Los Angeles Times)

Behind closed doors, Los Angeles City Council President Nury Martinez made openly racist remarks, derided some of her council colleagues and spoke in unusually crass terms about how the city should be carved up politically.

The conversation remained private for nearly a year, [until a leaked recording](#) reverberated explosively Sunday and turned the focus of a sprawling metropolis toward Los Angeles City Hall.

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[Breaking down crucial moments in the racist leaked recording of L.A. councilmembers](#)

Oct. 10, 2022

By Sunday evening, three of Martinez’s council colleagues had [called for her to resign](#). The leak had quickly become a new and incendiary issue in the coming Nov. 8 election, with candidates — some of them endorsed by Martinez — having to stake out positions.

Martinez and the other Latino leaders present during the taped conversation were seemingly unaware they were being recorded as Martinez said a white councilmember handled his young Black son as though he were an “accessory” and described Councilman Mike Bonin’s son as “*Parece changuito*,” or “like a monkey.”

VIDEO | 03:12

City Council leader makes racist comments about colleague’s young son

Play Video

Council President Nury Martinez makes racist remarks about Councilmember Mike Bonin’s young son while others chime in during this section of the conversation. The group was discussing a dispute between Councilmembers Curren Price and Marqueece Harris-Dawson, who were at odds last year over whose district would represent USC and Exposition Park once the new maps were finalized. The clip begins with Martinez recounting a conversation she allegedly had with businessman Danny Bakewell.

During the conversation with Councilmembers Gil Cedillo and Kevin de León and Los Angeles County Federation of Labor President Ron Herrera, Martinez described Bonin at one point as a “little bitch,” according to a recording of the meeting reviewed by The Times.

Martinez also mocked Oaxacans and said “F— that guy ... He’s with the Blacks” while speaking about Los Angeles County Dist. Atty. George Gascón.

De León appeared to compare Bonin’s handling of his child to Martinez holding a Louis Vuitton handbag. The [conversation took place in October 2021](#) and focused heavily on councilmembers’ frustration with maps that had been proposed by the city’s 21-member redistricting commission.

Along with revealing cruel and racist comments, the leaked audio offered a rare window into the behind-the-scenes machinations of the redistricting process and the bare-knuckled fighting between various groups trying to secure political power.

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[L.A. council members made racist comments in leaked audio. Read our full coverage](#)

Oct. 12, 2022

On Sunday, after this article was published online, Martinez issued a statement apologizing for her comments, saying: “In a moment of intense frustration and anger, I let the situation get the best of me and I hold myself accountable for these comments. For that I am sorry.”

“The context of this conversation was concern over the redistricting process and concern about the potential negative impact it might have on communities of color,” she added. “My work speaks for itself. I’ve worked hard to lead this city through its most difficult time.”

Also on Sunday, De León called the comments “wholly inappropriate” and said he had fallen “short of the expectations we set for our leaders.”

“I regret appearing to condone and even contribute to certain insensitive comments made about a colleague and his family in private,” he said in a statement. “I’ve reached out to that colleague personally.”

Cedillo, contacted by The Times Saturday night, said, “I don’t have a recollection of this conversation.”

On Sunday night, Herrera apologized and asked for forgiveness, saying there is “no justification and no excuse for the vile remarks made in that room.”

“And I didn’t step up to stop them and I will have to bear the burden of that cross moving forward,” he said.

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Oct. 10, 2022

Julie Gutman Dickinson, a lawyer representing the L.A. County Federation of Labor, sent a letter saying the conversation was “recorded in violation of California’s privacy and recording laws on LA County Federation of Labor property.” If The Times published information from it, “it is condoning this illegal conduct,” she added.

Times General Counsel Jeffrey Glasser responded to Gutman Dickinson in a letter Sunday morning, defending the newspaper’s right to publish the material.

Audio of the wide-ranging, roughly hourlong conversation was posted on Reddit by a now-suspended user. It is unclear who recorded the audio, who uploaded it to Reddit and whether anyone else was present.

“It is a fundamental principle in the United States that we do not prohibit or punish the receipt and publication of newsworthy information,” Glasser wrote.

The leak comes a month before a consequential city election in which the mayor and several council seats are being contested. Martinez has endorsed several council candidates in the [Nov. 8 election](#), and their fate could determine whether she retains the powerful council presidency.

Focus on the leak spread far beyond the typical milieu of municipal government. The words “Nury” and “resign” both briefly trended locally on Twitter Sunday, as ordinary Angelenos and political insiders alike expressed their shock over its content.

“Wow, you know it happens, but when you actually hear it, it’s unbelievable,” the now-suspended Reddit user said in text accompanying the audio, according to a screenshot reviewed by The Times. “The labor movement is in bed with City Hall.”

The group discussed the city’s once-a-decade process of redrawing council district boundaries, which was underway at the time, as well as the need to reelect Latino council members and ensure that heavily Latino districts did not lose economic assets, such as USC and Van Nuys Airport.

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Dec. 7, 2021

Latino residents make up roughly half of L.A.’s population but represent less than a third of the council’s 15 districts — a fact that has led to complaints that the population is not being fairly represented.

At one point in the conversation, De León referred to Bonin as the council’s “fourth Black member.”

“Mike Bonin won’t f—ing ever say peep about Latinos. He’ll never say a f—ing word about us,” he said.

Bonin's son was brought into the conversation as the group discussed a dispute between Councilmembers Curren Price and Marqueece Harris-Dawson, who were at odds last year over whose district would represent USC and Exposition Park once the new maps were finalized. Both men are Black and represent parts of South Los Angeles.

Martinez told the group she had a conversation with businessman Danny Bakewell about the situation, and argued that if Harris-Dawson was seeking an economic asset for his district that he should seek to move Los Angeles International Airport out of Bonin's Westside district and into his.

"Go get the airport from his little brother — that little bitch Bonin," Martinez recalled advising Bakewell.

Martinez said that Bonin appeared with his son on a float in a Martin Luther King Jr. Day parade that featured a number of politicians. She also said the child was "an accessory."



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Oct. 10, 2022

De León seemed to compare Bonin's handling of the child to "when Nury brings her Goyard bag or the Louis Vuitton bag."

"*Su negrito*, like on the side," Martinez said, using a Spanish diminutive term for a Black person that can be considered demeaning.

Martinez suggested the child was misbehaving on the float and might have tipped over the float if she and the other women on the float didn't step in to "parent this kid."

"They're raising him like a little white kid," Martinez said. "I was like, this kid needs a beatdown. Let me take him around the corner and then I'll bring him back."

Martinez's reference to Bonin's child as *changuito* occurred during that part of the conversation.

In an interview Saturday night, Bonin said he attended the MLK parade in 2017 with his young son and was "angry and heartsick" over the remarks.

On Sunday, Bonin and his husband, Sean Arian, called on Martinez, De León and Herrera to resign.

"The entirety of the recorded conversation ... displayed a repeated and vulgar anti-Black sentiment, and a coordinated effort to weaken Black political representation in Los Angeles," they said in a statement.

"Any parent reading her comments will know she is unfit for public office," they said of Martinez. "No child should ever be subjected to such racist, mean and dehumanizing comments, especially from a public official. It is painful to know he will someday read these comments."

Bonin was joined by two of his council colleagues — Nithya Raman and Paul Koretz — in calling for Martinez to resign. Eunisses Hernandez, who [beat Cedillo in the June primary](#) and will take office later this year, also said she should quit.

Mayor Eric Garcetti did not say if any of the elected leaders should step down, keeping his remarks broad. "There is no place in our city family for attacks on colleagues and their loved ones, and there is no place for racism anywhere in L.A.," he said.

The secretly recorded conversation also dealt with the future of Councilmember Mark Ridley-Thomas, who had just been indicted, and whether he would step down or fight to hold onto his seat.

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[L.A. Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas and ex-USC dean indicted on bribery charges](#)

Oct. 13, 2021

Martinez said she explained to another councilmember that if Ridley-Thomas were to be suspended, City Controller Ron Galperin would decide whether he still gets paid.

“You need to go talk to that white guy,” she says. “It’s not us. It’s the white members on this council that will motherf— you in a heartbeat.”

VIDEO | 01:12

Nury Martinez comments on Mark Ridley-Thomas’ suspension

Play Video

City Council Nury Martinez discusses City Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas’ relationship with the city after his indictment on bribery charges. It’s up to City Controller Ron Galperin to decide whether he will still get paid, Martinez said. She then goes on to state that it’s “white” politicians that will motherf— you in a heartbeat.”

The council later suspended Ridley-Thomas, who is awaiting trial on bribery and other federal charges. Galperin ultimately terminated Ridley-Thomas’ pay and health benefits.

Still, much of the conversation focused on the maps that had been proposed by the city’s redistricting commission. Martinez voiced frustration that the panel had proposed removing a number of economic assets from her San Fernando Valley district, including the Van Nuys Airport and the Anheuser-Busch brewery.

“If you’re going to talk about Latino districts, what kind of districts are you trying to create?” she asked. “Because you’re taking away our assets. You’re just going to create poor Latino districts with nothing?”

At one point, Cedillo said there were certain councilmembers who do not merit “rescuing” during the redistricting process. He then made clear that he was referring to Nithya Raman, who had been fighting to ensure her Hollywood Hills district was not moved to the west Valley.

“She is not our ally. She is not going to help us,” he said.

Later in the conversation, the group talked about how Koreatown — a largely Latino neighborhood — should be handled in redistricting.

Martinez said the area was in Council District 10, which was Ridley-Thomas’ district. Martinez then noted that Raman “wants a play for K-Town” but said that would not happen because she didn’t want “beef” with Ridley-Thomas.

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Oct. 10, 2022

Martinez said that giving Raman what could amount to a safer council district would not be good for Martinez and her allies.

“It serves us to not give her all of K-Town,” Martinez said, referring to Raman. “Because if you do, that solidifies her renters’ district and that is not a good thing for any of us. You have to keep her on the fence.”

The group then questioned whether Shatto Place, a small street, and Lafayette Park are in Koreatown.

“I see a lot of little short dark people,” Martinez said of that section of Koreatown, employing stereotypes long used against Oaxacans in Mexico and in the United States.

“I was like, I don’t know where these people are from, I don’t know what village they came [from], how they got here,” Martinez said, before adding “*Tan feos*” — “They’re ugly.”

Herrera then interjected to bring the group back to their broader strategy.

“I get what we have to do, right? Just massage to create districts that benefit you all. And the future. But we got to figure out Mark’s seat too,” Herrera said, referring to Ridley-Thomas.

“If he resigns and the African Americans look at this as a hostile takeover because he’s gone, we’ll have to figure that s— out,” Martinez said of Ridley-Thomas. “Because politically, they’re going to come after us.”

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Oct. 11, 2022

Herrera, the labor official, later said that removing Ridley-Thomas was necessary regardless of potential political blowback, arguing the scandal would hurt all incumbents and make people think “that the council’s corrupt.” If they do put someone in, “that person has to support the three of you,” Herrera said.

“The one who will support us is Heather Hutt,” Cedillo said.

De León then floated nonprofit director Irma R. Muñoz as a possible replacement for Ridley-Thomas, noting that she’s “married to an African American and she lives up in Baldwin Hills.”

Last month, the council voted to [install Hutt](#) as Ridley-Thomas’ interim replacement.