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No Consensus on OAS Candidate

by LADB Staff

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El Salvador's President Francisco Flores went to Belize early in September with the prospect of gaining consensus among Central American governments on his quest to become Secretary-General of the Organization of American States (OAS). The presidents had gathered there for a meeting of the Sistema de Integración Centroamericana (SICA). He did not get what he came for; Costa Rica still has hopes of electing one of its own, ex-President Miguel Angel Rodriguez (1998-2002), to the office.

Although not on the agenda, the OAS election was nevertheless the high point of the meetings. The principal theme of the summit was regional security, and that matter ended on an ambiguous note, with a text calling for a "reasonable balance of forces" that none of the presidents could, subsequent to signing, define. Also mentioned in the culminating document was a sense of "urgency" connected with the security issue, the limits of which the presidents were also unable to explain.

Perhaps the most concrete outcome of the get-together was the inclusion of the Dominican Republic as an associate member of SICA. But on the event's hot topic, President Abel Pacheco of Costa Rica told reporters, "Costa Rica is with Miguel Angel Rodriguez, who has made his candidacy official." Flores had not made his aspirations official at the time of the meetings. "Paco [Flores] is an exceptional individual, out of the ordinary, but I have a personal friendship with Miguel Angel Rodriguez, and I will support him to the end."

Honduran President Ricardo Maduro told reporters, "We believe it would be ideal to have one single candidate in Central America. There are two aspirants, it is hard for us because Honduras isn't one of them, and obviously not having a single candidate or an agreement among them puts the rest of us in a certain difficulty. Obviously we hope that a candidate of consensus can be achieved." Flores said, "This candidacy issue comes up in every one of the countries. We have never wanted to put pressure on the presidents or interfere in their exercise of their sovereignty, so we will make our decisions based on what they decide."

Prime Minister Said Musa of Belize said, "Belize is going to back a candidate, but that candidate has to be one of consensus. That is also the position of the Caribbean as well. CARICOM [Caribbean Community and Common Market] is going to support a candidate but that candidate has to be one of consensus."

Recent reportage on the subject has it that CARICOM could be the key to this election. Belize, geographically Central American and culturally Caribbean, takes on an amplified importance to the contenders. There had been some speculation that, although the OAS election was not part of the meeting agenda, Flores would use it for the official announcement of his intentions. Prior to the meetings, El Salvador's Foreign Minister Maria Eugenia Brizuela told local papers, "Officially,

nothing's been planned for the meeting, but the subject is in the air, and there won't be many more opportunities after this summit for the presidents to talk about it."

Flores would not venture to say more than that he didn't want to put pressure on anyone. He had been lying low on the subject ever since he spoke in Chile in July, when he said that he would accept a candidacy if he felt it was what Latin America needed. Speaking to the press in Chile, Flores said, "It is Central America's turn" to lead the organization when Colombian ex-President Cesar Gaviria (1990-1994) leaves the office next year (see NotiSur, 1994-04-08). He said that "the opportunity lies in having one candidate who enthuses Central America, who unifies Central America," adding that countries of South America, North America, and the Caribbean already have expressed their support for the postulation of a Central American. But he stopped short of announcing his candidacy at that time, promising instead to support whomever the regional choice might be.

And he had to tread lightly on the subject. Former Chilean Foreign Minister Jose Miguel Insulza had also been mentioned as a possible candidate. Just before the Belize meeting, Flores said, "This is not a thing you do on your own whim, because you decided to; I'm talking about myself. The opportunity that Central America has to be in the Secretariat depends on all the presidents of Central America backing a single candidate. We'll see at the appropriate time what the Central American position is, and then I'll make a decision." Rodriguez has a leg up To hear Costa Rican Foreign Minister Roberto Tovar tell it, the Central American position will favor Miguel Angel Rodriguez. Tovar said that, according to his ongoing monitoring of the situation, Rodriguez is "showing positive and encouraging signs" of taking a lead in the region. Tovar said that the election is not just a local matter, but also one of all 34 member states, "and we keep on knocking on doors that are becoming more apt to open to us every day."

Rodriguez has, Tovar said, "broad recognition and respect among the nations of the hemisphere and we are gratified at the enormous appreciation of his capabilities and qualities." Among those qualities, the OAS noted in a press release announcing his candidacy that, in addition to having been president from 1998-2002, Rodriguez had also served as minister of planning and economic policy and been a deputy in the Asamblea Legislativa and president of that body.

At the international level, Rodriguez had actively supported the adoption of the Inter-American Democratic Charter, adopted by the OAS general assembly on September 11, 2001. The press release also noted that Rodriguez had called for the Charter to be invoked, during the Rio Group's summit in San Jose in April 2002, "to ensure respect for Venezuela's constitutionally-elected President Hugo Chavez Frias, amid an attempted military coup."

Central America sought the secretary-generalship before, in 1999, when Costa Rican ex-President Rafael Angel Calderon (1990-1994) led a movement to succeed Gaviria, but the member states re-elected the Colombian. Tovar said that he expects support from Nicaragua for his candidate. "Of course we expect the support of Nicaragua for don Miguel Angel. Sure, absolutely, that is our hope, and Nicaragua is one of the first countries whose help we are going to ask," said the minister on Sept. 19. Tovar said that, during the first week of October, Rodriguez would go to Managua to meet with President Enrique Bolanos and Foreign Minister Norman Caldera to request their support.

Taking the show on the road

After that, said Tovar, Rodriguez would keep on traveling. "The first doors we will knock on are those of our fellow Central Americans. We want a Central American to be the next secretary of the OAS." He said that Costa Rica would take advantage of any and all international meetings, multi- or bilateral, in the hemisphere to promote Rodriguez. That plan would include Abel Pacheco meeting with his hemispheric counterparts at the General Assembly of the UN in New York and at the Ibero-American Summit, to take place in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, in November. In contrast to the Flores approach, which appears to have done little other than to gain the support of US President George W. Bush (see NotiCen, 2003-06-12), the Costa Ricans have gone all out in their quest for the job.

The Foreign Ministry has a strategy committee in place that meets once or twice a week. Presidential advisor Rina Contreras, a member of the committee, said that they have been sending official notices of the candidacy to all the OAS governments. Speaking from Washington, OAS headquarters and his place of residence, Rodriguez said, "We are in a stage of contact with the governments, and I am very happy with the positive reactions being generated." Rodriguez is currently teaching at the Elliott School of International Affairs of George Washington University. According to the school's Web site, he teaches trade and economic development in Latin America. His academic credentials include a doctorate in economics from the University of California, Berkeley.

The only other Central American in contention for the office has been Eduardo Stein of Guatemala. But Oscar Berger, front-running candidate for the presidency of Guatemala in the November 2003 elections, told Salvadoran reporters, "The alternative of Eduardo Stein doesn't count anymore, because he will be my vice president. As far as the others are concerned, between Rodriguez and Paco,...I know Paco better."

On Sept. 24, Flores was in New York, at the UN. He gave an interview to the Salvadoran paper *El Diario de Hoy* in which he seemed to be downplaying his OAS aspirations, even at a time when he was aware that the Costa Ricans were taking maximum advantage of the moment. Asked by the reporter when he would make an official announcement, Flores answered, "I'm convinced that a unified Central American position is more important than any personal decision of mine. The only chance Central America has of gaining this position is by unification of judgment. It seems to me that, as long as we don't have that, we are wasting the opportunity. When Central America announces, I will announce." Flores said that he had spoken with Rodriguez the day before, but neither had mentioned the OAS job.

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