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OAS Electes Costa Rican

by LADB Staff

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Tony Saca of the Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) assumed the presidency of El Salvador June 1, even as his adversary, Shafik Handel of the Faribundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN), boycotted the ceremony, refused to congratulate the winner, and complained of irregularities in the March 21 electoral sweep that drew 70% of eligible voters and threw 57% of the votes Saca's way (see NotiCen, 2004-03-25). The loser promised relentless opposition to the new regime, prompting a counterdemonstration of support from the international community.

The Organization of American States (OAS), meeting in Quito, Ecuador, on the occasion of its XXXIV General Assembly, passed a resolution June 6 congratulating El Salvador for its electoral process. The declaration read in part, "The General Assembly salutes the Salvadoran people and its political forces for heeding a policy of tolerance, dialogue, and understanding expressed by His Excellency, the President of the Republic of El Salvador, Sr. Elias Antonio Saca Gonzalez, for strengthening democratic governability and social development of the Salvadoran people." Observers took special note that all 34 OAS member states signed the document.

The signatures of Jorge Valero, permanent representative of Venezuela, and Foreign Ministers Celso Amorim of Brazil and Patricio Zutilanda of Ecuador were taken to mean repudiation of the FMLN position by its international political allies. The declaration followed a March 31 report from OAS election observers to the Consejo Permanente, also laudatory of the Salvadoran process. Salvadoran Foreign Minister Francisco Lainez called the approval by acclamation "an incredible accomplishment," for its rarity.

The document detailed the rationale under which it was drawn up, noting that the elections "corresponded to a process that permitted the Salvadoran citizenry to freely and overwhelmingly express its political will, decisively advancing democracy in that country and conferring a solid mandate on the new president."

At home in El Salvador, political leaders opined on the measure. Said Francisco Merino of the Partido de Conciliacion Nacional (PCN), said, "The OAS resolution reflects both the reality and the needs of the country. El Salvador cannot permit itself to remain trapped in a confrontation that in no way benefits us."

From the Centro Democratico Unido (CDU), Jorge Villacorta said, "We are totally in accord with the OAS document; we share the position that the elections were completely legitimate. We have no allegations against the elections." But from the FMLN, Norma Guevara said without elaboration, "I believe the country should be glad of whatever congratulations, but the country must pay attention to the critical points that interfered with the legal, legitimate, and democratic development of the elections."

OAS elects Rodriguez

The OAS also had an election for which congratulations were extended. The two major reasons for felicitation were that the body elected a Central American to the post of secretary-general for the first time and that it thwarted the will of the US in doing so. In its third attempt to elect a favorite son, Costa Rica saw former President Miguel Angel Rodriguez (1998-2002) acclaimed to succeed Cesar Gaviria. The former president of Colombia was the longest serving secretary-general, occupying the office for a decade. Rodriguez will be the eighth OAS secretary-general. He will take office Sept. 15. The election ends many months of campaigning, during which Rodriguez's main opponent was the now ex-president of El Salvador, Francisco Flores (1999-2004).

Flores was heavily backed by the US. El Salvador is seen as the most pro-US country in the hemisphere. Analysts said the support of the 14 countries of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) was the definitive event for Rodriguez's election. Expectation that a Central American would be elected, that it was Central America's "turn," was not enough to turn the election Rodriguez's way as long as Flores and his sponsor were contending (see NotiCen, 2003-09-25).

Costa Rican Foreign Minister Roberto Tovar, who nominated Rodriguez, said, "We long for a candidacy that can have the heartfelt support of all, not just the Costa Ricans or the Central Americans, but by all of the hemisphere." Rodriguez will be a change from the string of leaders who preceded him. He is an economist and an academic, despite his stint as president. In accepting the job, he said, "We all have the challenge and the responsibility to diminish poverty, achieve more liberty, guarantee the peace and the security of citizens."

Switzerland is far from Central America

The election also turned out to be another opportunity for Costa Rica to separate itself from the rest of Central America. While most in the OAS viewed the job as having gone to a Central American, Rodriguez saw his election as recognition of "Costa Rican history." In remarks that were not well-received by the Central Americans, he said, "Thank you very much for the honor that, with this election, you foreign ministers present to Costa Rica, for the recognition that you give to this little country in the center of the Americas that has distinguished itself by constructing truth, justice, and peace." There had been some skirmishing and elbowing to get the rest of the isthmus included in the recognition.

Just after the declaration on the Salvadoran election, isthmus presidents agreed to the unanimous backing of Rodriguez to be nominated as the candidate from Central America. The plan, according to reports, was for Jorge Briz, foreign minister of Guatemala, to nominate Rodriguez. Briz was chosen because Guatemala holds the presidency pro-tem of the Sistema de Integracion Centroamericana. But Tovar jumped the line, and it was he who got to nominate and he who got to say, "Costa Rica is grateful for the expression of hemispheric consensus at which we arrive today. With sincere humility, we have interpreted it as a recognition of the struggles for peace, liberty, and democracy and respect for human rights that form part of the tradition of our people." Then, as something of an afterthought, Tovar allowed that Rodriguez's candidacy ought to be thought of as belonging to all the people of the hemisphere, "not just Costa Ricans or Central Americans."

Briz was finally able to second the nomination in the names of Guatemala, El Salvador, Belize, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama, but as he was the ninth speaker to offer a second, his thunder was considerably muted. There may, however, have been more than simple arrogance on the part of officials of the "Switzerland of Central America" in once again distancing it from its neighbors. The OAS agenda calls for concentration on issues of corruption and human rights in the hemisphere, and, like it or not, Costa Rica is far ahead of most of its isthmus mates when it comes to credibility on those subjects.

There may have been just a hint of acknowledgment of that unfortunate fact when Briz said, "Central America is convinced that the ability and personality of President Rodriguez will have a positive influence in articulating the forms of hemispheric cooperation that lean toward the integral development of the American peoples." Briz did not resist reminding the assembly that it was Guatemala that first supported Rodriguez's candidacy, the others coming around later.

Caricom credited, US spurned

In remarks following his election, however, Rodriguez credited Caricom as the cradle of his campaign, followed by the Dominican Republic and his own country, and finally five countries of South America as clinchers in making him secretary-general. In reference to the influence of the US, he said on Ecuadoran television, "This is an example of joining in a current that is not necessarily hegemonic." He said that his objectives for his five-year term are to consolidate democracy, fortify the system of human rights, encourage economic progress with social welfare, and make progress in security against drug trafficking and terrorism.

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