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Rodriguez Resigns at OAS

by LADB Staff

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Miguel Angel Rodriguez has resigned as secretary-general of the Organization of American States (OAS). Simultaneously with his resignation, the attorney general of Costa Rica issued an arrest warrant for the former president, effective upon Rodriguez's loss of ex officio immunity on Oct. 15. The warrant will probably not be necessary.

Rodriguez said in his letter of resignation that he would return to Costa Rica to face the corruption charges that led to his stepping down after only two weeks at the OAS helm. He will return, said the letter, "to dedicate myself exclusively to my defense and to clearing up the facts before the Costa Rican judicial authorities." Rodriguez faces the possibility of a ten-year or more sentence if convicted of having received illegal payoffs from the French company Alcatel, which has lucrative contracts with the Instituto Costarricense de Electricidad (ICE), the state electricity and telecommunications monopoly (see NotiCen, 2004-10-04).

Central America could lose its turn

Candidates for the newly vacated post began to emerge almost immediately after the Oct. 8 resignation. Rodriguez was elected partly because he was a Central American, and there was agreement among the 34 member states that, since Central America had not produced a secretary-general in the last 50 years, it was their turn. There is no certainty now that the agreement applies, as some feel that Central America has had its turn, even if it only lasted two weeks. Central America does not see it that way.

The region unified around Rodriguez's candidacy prior to the June 15, 2004, election, adopting a single-candidate strategy to ensure success. Another potential postulant, former Salvadoran President Francisco Flores (1999-2004), had the backing of the US for the job, but never formally applied. Now he reportedly wants a second chance, but has not said so. Salvadoran President Antonio Saca has begun a campaign primarily for his region, but only subtly for his predecessor. He has aggressively sought US backing and has also sought to get his regional homologues to sign back onto the single-candidate strategy. "I have made telephone calls to presidents of the area, I have talked with them, and they are very much disposed to support the candidate being Central American and that it be a single candidate," he said.

Saca said a number of possible candidates were mentioned, but there was no consensus at this time. As for Flores, "If he wants to be a candidate, although he has not said so publicly, he will have to await the decision taken by the presidents of Central America," Saca said. US more circumspect this time around Four days before those remarks to the Salvadoran media, Saca was in Washington on a one-day trip to lobby for, among other things, extension of the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for the more than 240,000 Salvadorans in the US who are El Salvador's largest single source of dollars.

He also spoke to US Secretary of State Colin Powell about support for a Central American OAS chief. At a news conference following the meeting, Powell responded to a question about whether he would support a Central American and whether that Central American would be Francisco Flores. Powell, with Saca beside him, hedged. "It's important that the OAS have the best qualified candidate, and the president clearly indicated to me that he will be consulting with the other Central American candidates to come up with a very, very strong candidate, and if consensus throughout the hemisphere can rally behind that candidate then that will be fine. But, of course, we cannot take a firm position now until we have heard from all of the nations of the hemisphere and until we have seen the full range of candidates who might come forward to compete for this position," said Powell, declining to mention any specific candidate.

In the early running, Francisco Flores is not the only candidate. He is not even the only Flores. The former president of Honduras, Carlos Flores (1998-2002), has also been mentioned. He has said he is not interested, but that has not been taken as a "no" by his supporters. He owns a newspaper in Honduras, *La Tribuna*, a plus for a campaign. He wrote in his paper, "The job is important, and an honor for anyone, but I had no interest before when ex-President of Colombia Cesar Gaviria finished his term and I don't have any now." Unlike Francisco Flores, who is a member of President Saca's party, Carlos Flores is not a member of Honduran President Ricardo Maduro's party but of the opposition.

Speaking for the Maduro administration, Foreign Minister Leonidas Rosa Bautista told the media the government has not yet decided on a candidate but has a list of four names from which to choose. He did not give their names, but reporters were told unofficially that they are all former foreign ministers Cesar Batres, Carlos Lopez Contreras, Guillermo Perez-Cadalso Arias, and yet another Flores, Roberto Flores Bermudez. The Guatemalan government has announced it will nominate and support economist and diplomat Gert Rosenthal for OAS secretary-general.

President Oscar Berger also said he would defend Central America's "right" to its turn at the top. Rosenthal was executive secretary of the Economic Commission for Latin American and the Caribbean (ECLAC) from 1988 to 1997. From 1998 until now he has been Guatemala's UN representative. Nicaragua's former foreign minister Ernesto Leal has expressed enthusiasm for the job as well, but the government has not formally endorsed him. Leal is head of the *Secretario de Integracion de la Presidencia de la Republica*. He was foreign minister during the presidency of Violeta Barrios de Chamorro (1990-1996).

Testing regional unity

A first test of isthmus solidarity behind the single-candidate strategy will come Oct. 14 in El Salvador. On the initiative of President Saca, the foreign ministers of each of the countries, including Panama and Belize, will meet in San Salvador to endorse the principle. Saca has held back on putting forward the name of Francisco Flores until that question is settled. Saca's candidate will face opposition from outside the region as well.

Venezuela is vehemently against Flores for having supported Pedro Carmona, the momentary self-proclaimed president of Venezuela during the briefly successful coup against President Hugo

Chavez in April 2002 (see NotiSur, 2002-04-19, NotiCen, 2003-09-25). Venezuelan Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel was adamant. "In advance, we say that we will never accept a candidacy like that of Francisco Flores, ex-president of El Salvador. First, because he aligned himself with the Carmona coup and, second, because he has maintained a constant policy against the constitutional government of Venezuela," Rangel said.

In El Salvador, Flores faces opposition from the opposition Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN), primarily for his support of the Venezuelan coup. FMLN Deputy to the Parlamento Centroamericano (PARLACEN) Nidia Diaz charged that Flores violated the OAS Democratic Charter in so doing, a charge that might well resonate with voters who might not otherwise be supportive of the Chavez government. In the event that the Central American ministers uphold the single-candidate principle and go on to name a consensus candidate, the region still faces a battle from nominees from elsewhere in the hemisphere. Venezuela has cast its lot with Jose Miguel Insulza, vice president and interior minister of Chile, and there are more potential adversaries.

From Chile former foreign minister Soledad Alvear and former defense minister Michelle Bachelet; from Peru: ex-President Valentin Paniagua and Foreign Minister Manuel Rodriguez Cuadros; from Uruguay Foreign Minister Daniel Opertti. The Caribbean has not named a candidate, but it is known that the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) is very interested in having its own candidate who would start out with a windfall of 14 votes from this region. These 14 CARICOM votes went to Rodriguez in the last election. With no shortage of candidates, the OAS must still grapple with the extent to which it has been damaged by the Rodriguez resignation.

It is now under the interim leadership of assistant secretary-general Luigi Einaudi, of the US. Objection to US leadership has been muted, even by Venezuela, because expectations are the arrangement will be brief. Conservative commentary from the US took the position that the organization was not hurt at all, and in fact its image got a boost from having acted quickly to replace a tainted leader.

Ambler Moss, former ambassador to Panama, even credited Rodriguez for wasting no time in stepping down. Steve Johnson of the right-wing Heritage Foundation took a similar position, crediting Costa Rica as well for acting against Rodriguez rather than to "sweep corruption charges under the carpet." From the Washington-based Council On Hemispheric Affairs (COHA) came the notion that the Rodriguez resignation would increase US influence in the OAS. "The OAS is already a paper tiger and the resignation further weakens it. This is a huge embarrassment, and whoever takes over now will be weak because he is not the first choice," said Larry Birns of the left-leaning COHA.

From Peru, potential candidate for the OAS post Valentin Paniagua said the organization would need "a total renovation to recover its diminished credibility and improve its mechanisms of internal and external control." These mixed assessments suggest that, in the absence of overwhelming sentiment, the extent of the damage will largely be determined by the new leader's performance. Rodriguez came in with high expectations that he would accomplish a much-needed top-to-bottom reorganization of the OAS. The new secretary-general will inherit that mandate.

In Costa Rica, in an atmosphere of intense embarrassment, President Abel Pacheco has said the country would press on with the investigation and possible indictment of Rodriguez as well as with other corruption cases that have left it, too, in need of extensive renovation.

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