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No Consensus on OAS Candidate

by LADB Staff

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The candidacy of former Salvadoran President Francisco Flores (1999-2004) for secretary-general of the Organization of American States (OAS) has run into problems of sufficient gravity to put his aspirations in serious doubt.

Central America as a region continues the battle to convince the 34-member organization that it is still the isthmus' turn at the helm despite the resignation of Costa Rica's former President Miguel Angel Rodriguez (1998-2002) after barely two weeks in office (see NotiCen, 2004-10-14). Essential to that battle is the naming of a single nominee, supported by all, and Flores lacks that support. Flores looked like a good bet for the job when most Central American presidents voted to support him on Nov. 19 at the XIV Cumbre Iberoamericana in Costa Rica.

On Nov. 23, El Salvador's President Antonio Saca announced that the region's foreign ministers would launch an "offensive" to promote Flores. He said the diplomatic stage had begun, "the stage of rapprochement and the stage of negotiation that will lead Francisco Flores directly to winning the support of the foreign ministers of the area. They are going to start an offensive, meetings with presidents, with foreign ministers, to win the [office] of secretary of the OAS."

Maduro holds out

The holdout, the missing tooth in the regional smile, was Honduran President Ricardo Maduro. "There is no consensus for a single Central American candidate to the OAS," said Maduro. "The presidents continue seeking consensus and personally I believe it is still not the moment to define who will be the single candidate." Consensus is at the core of the debate between Saca and Maduro. For Saca, the majority ruled at the summit, Flores is the candidate, and, if Maduro disagrees, it is a problem for Honduras, "because the rest of the countries are absolutely clear on the candidacy of Francisco Flores."

Maduro, however, said his view was founded in "the Protocolo de Tegucigalpa, which is the juridical instrument that rules the institutionality of Central America and [which] establishes that presidential decisions be adopted by consensus, and we continue seeking that consensus in the matter of the OAS." He said he would promote the candidacy of Honduran ex-foreign minister Carlos Lopez Contreras. The disagreement regarding consensus and procedure, however, do not explain the disagreement between the two presidents that prompted Maduro to withhold endorsement of Flores.

Several issues divide the two presidents. Ernesto Paz, Honduran foreign relations minister from 1994 to 1995 and now a university professor, said Flores did not support Central American integration, he did not maintain good relations with the countries of South America, he is too close to the US, and "furthermore, he was the only president in the world who rushed to recognize a de

facto government in Venezuela." Paz, a regionally known political scientist, also said that Flores had made an alliance with Nicaragua's then President Arnaldo Aleman (1996-2002) to isolate Honduras by supporting a ferry service between El Salvador and Nicaragua and simultaneously discouraging the use of Puerto Cortes in the Gulf of Honduras.

Bilateral issues

Those points aside, Maduro has accused Flores of having deliberately held up the formal demarcation of the Honduras-El Salvador border in compliance with a 1992 ruling of the International Court of Justice (see NotiCen, 2002-09-19). Last year, Flores sought to appeal that ruling at The Hague. Flores responded to the charge with a statement that the appeal "should not be seen as an act of aggression against Honduras and that, if elected to the OAS post, he would recuse himself from any border matters between the two countries. He said that Honduras "can count on my pledge on this subject and on everything having to do with the process of demarcation between El Salvador and Honduras."

Stepping aside on border issues would likely prove tricky for Flores as secretary-general. The OAS has, in past months, provided experts to intervene in the hope of settling the dispute. Flores has laid the enmity of Maduro to politics and said he thinks he can eventually win him over. "Honduras is now in its process of electoral primaries and the situation is very polarized. That is why the government of President Ricardo Maduro cannot be with us at this time, but I have no doubt that the problems can be resolved," he said.

FMLN also opposed

But even if that turns out to be the case, Maduro is not Flores' only problem. He is opposed within his own country as well and that opposition may be contributing to the erosion of his support among the presidents. El Salvador's main opposition party, the Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN), just after the vote at the summit, accused Flores of having diverted funds to an institution created by Flores' wife, Lourdes Rodriguez de Flores. FMLN leader Shafik Handal claimed to have documentary proof of acts of corruption on Flores' part during his presidency and said the party would take the matter before the courts.

FMLN Deputy Gerson Martinez, president of the legislature's treasury committee, appeared to confirm the claim. He showed reporters documents, assumed to be original, demonstrating corrupt activities. One referred to a water well drilled on Flores' property at a cost of US\$120,000 of allegedly public funds. The accusation may have triggered a retraction of support from Costa Rica, where a gun-shy President Abel Pacheco has just witnessed corruption indictments of his three most recent predecessors, one of whom was Miguel Angel Rodriguez. Pacheco, however, based his retraction on the rules of the Sistema de Integracion Centroamericana (SICA) that mandate consensus. Nor was Costa Rica the only country to contradict Saca's assurance of absolute clarity on the question of Flores.

Panama, whose President Martin Torrijos voted in favor of Flores at the summit, also appears to be less than solidly behind him. After a meeting with Torrijos a week after the vote, Peruvian Foreign

Minister Manuel Rodriguez Cuadros signed a joint statement with his Panamanian counterpart Samuel Lewis Navarro reading in part, "It is necessary to initiate a process of consultations in search of the widest consensus possible on the designation of the new secretary-general of the OAS as an appropriate and needed measure for the strengthening of the organization."

Lewis Navarro, who is also vice president of Panama, spoke directly to the Flores issue at the signing of the document, saying, "Instead of speaking of individual candidates that create more conflicts, we must assure ourselves that whoever is elected can count on the greatest support possible." His further remarks reflected the concern that, after the Rodriguez resignation, the legitimacy of the new leadership was crucial to the organization.

Another blow to Flores' hopes could be his support from the US. This could be a kiss of death for those countries seeking freedom from US domination of the region or those antagonistic to the Bush administration. The US has not formally endorsed Flores, but US Ambassador to the OAS John Maisto says he is the only candidate meeting US criteria for the job. Among those criteria, said Maisto, the ideal OAS secretary-general would be an ex-president from Central America.

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