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## **U.S. Backs Francisco Flores As El Salvador, Mexico, and Chile Vie for Top OAS Spot**

by LADB Staff

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The US has made official its support for Francisco Flores in his bid for secretary-general of the Organization of American States (OAS). Flores is a former president of El Salvador (1999-2004) and because of that meets two of the US criteria for the job: one, that the candidate be a former president, and two, that the candidate be a Central American.

The OAS has never in its history elected a secretary-general who did not have the backing of the US, but this could be a first. At the moment, there are two other candidates for the position, each formidable, each with respectable support among the 34 voting-member nations of the hemisphere. They are Foreign Relations Secretary Luis Ernesto Derbez Bautista, the entry from Mexico, and Jose Miguel Insulza, foreign minister of Chile. Each of the three is reported to have at least seven committed votes, but in some cases the support is soft, and some countries have not yet declared.

### *Flores fits the US bill*

Flores gained favor with the US for maintaining his country's status as the Central American country closest to the US in matters of policy and for demonstrating his commitment to US interests. His is the only country in the hemisphere still to have troops in Iraq; he presided over the de facto dollarization of El Salvador's economy; and he laid the groundwork for El Salvador's becoming the first, and so far only, country to give legislative approval to the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) with the US (see NotiCen, 2005-01-06).

The endorsement of Flores was a two-stage affair. First, US representative to the OAS John Maisto formally endorsed him at the Jan. 27 session of the OAS; then, Roger Noriega, assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, made an announcement of support at a news conference. In his remarks, Noriega reiterated the US belief that Central America continues to deserve to head the OAS after the tenure of former Costa Rica President Miguel Angel Rodriguez (1998-2002) came to an end after less than a month, when he stepped down to return home to face corruption charges (see NotiCen, 2004-10-07). Rodriguez was elected to the office partly because it was agreed that it was Central America's turn at the helm, a position the region had never held.

Noriega spelled out his government's fondness for Flores high up in his prepared text. He said that former President Flores represents "a new generation of Latin American leaders: thoroughly modern, dynamic, forward leaning who view the challenges of the 21st-century globalized world not as threats to be shunned, but as opportunities to be embraced." He credited Flores with "playing a central role in the birth of a new El Salvador: socially at peace, economically vibrant and outward looking, and politically stable."

## *Central America squandered its turn, says Mexico*

US adhesion to the principle that it is still Central America's turn is an idea whose time has gone, for many OAS members, including Mexico, whose government postulated Derbez partly because, after a ten-week wait for the isthmus to agree on a candidate, the countries could not come to consensus. Said Derbez, "We waited ten weeks for that moment, and the result is that Mr. Flores is not a unanimous candidate." Derbez is correct. Honduras would not back Flores, leaving his chief sponsor, El Salvador President Antonio Saca, to hedge that Flores was a majority candidate. But the rules of the Pacto de San Jose call for a consensus candidate.

Flores reacted vituperatively to the competition from the north. He charged Mexico President Vicente Fox with breaking a promise to support him. "For a president, breaking your word has dangerous results," he told a Mexican newspaper. After it became clear that Central America could not meet its own criteria for a single candidate, Fox declared himself released from his promise to support a Central American nominee and nominated his own, Derbez. Fox may have had ulterior motives in the nomination, in that Derbez might otherwise have emerged as a presidential candidate, but the nomination attracted support among OAS members nonetheless.

From the outset, Derbez faced more opposition within Mexico than in the hemisphere, but, as January wore on, he was able to bring most opposition Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) and Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) legislators aboard just one day before the US declared for Flores. Derbez used the issue of US influence in winning over the deputies. Recalling his foreign-relations work in the Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) government, he told the Comision Permanente of the Congress, "This is the first government that has dared to put before the government of the United States the need for migratory reform, and even though it is true that this hasn't been achieved, it has given great support to my candidacy to advance [the issue] in the [OAS] agenda for development."

Derbez outlined for the committee a plan to gain consensus not only from the 34 member nations but also from the 64 non-member observers. He said that among these, he had the support of the most powerful, Germany, China, and Japan. With Derbez, a power shift in the offing Derbez said he intends, as head of the OAS, to preside over a power shift, emphasizing that in the past the organization has not worked for Latin American and Caribbean interests. "The OAS is perceived as an instrument that has not responded in favor of the less-developed countries, Bolivia, Peru....The OAS is used as an instrument of the United States."

The candidacy of Insulza took Mexico by surprise, much as Derbez's candidacy surprised El Salvador. "It surprised us also that the Chilean government, after having discussed with them the postulation and presentation of a Mexican candidate...for whatever reason brought out a candidate," said Derbez. The countries are close. They have a bilateral trade agreement in the works; both are members of the UN Security Council and usually vote together, most notably against the US invasion of Iraq.

Derbez said Insulza had "declared to the four winds" that he would not be a candidate, and he said that Mexico had put up its candidate first. Both had declared in early December. Flores did not make his bid formal until January.

The official vote count among the contenders is very fluid, and, as one observer put it, "there would have to be 84 countries voting to account for all the votes the candidates claim." But there is some agreement that Insulza has the lead months before the election that may be held in June. There is no precise date. Insulza promises reality over rhetoric Insulza does have the votes of Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Venezuela, and thus is as problematic for US pretensions of continued influence over the organization as is Derbez, perhaps more so.

The Chilean has called for a pragmatic turn in the OAS agenda. "The OAS is an organization that not only has many countries, but many realities," he said. "What is real is that there is a sense in the communities of the region of a rhetorical agenda instead of a practical agenda." He has said he wants the OAS to move beyond security and terrorism issues to tackle questions of poverty. "The battle against poverty has to turn toward cooperation, institutional development, the creation of institutions in our countries." He said that the OAS needs to create mechanisms of greater coordination with the Organizacion Panamericana de la Salud (OPS), the Economic Commission for Latin American and the Caribbean (ECLAC), and other similar institutions of the region, to return the OAS to relevance and to "recover its credibility."

As the campaign gathers momentum, all three candidates attended a meeting of foreign and trade ministers of the vote-rich Caribbean Community (Caricom) in Georgetown, Guyana, in early January. Only Derbez and Insulza were invited, because Flores had not yet officially declared his candidacy, but Flores went anyway, unwilling to forego a chance at the 15 votes represented there. Although OAS officials have reiterated the need for a consensus, just 18 are needed to put one of the three in the driver's seat. Appealing to voting blocks may not be the optimal strategy in the present situation, however.

In the opinion of Alex Chavez, Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA) analyst, "With three candidates, the blocks that normally vote as a group have parted." The Flores campaign, for instance, claims Central America, but only Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Guatemala have come out for him. Elsewhere, he seems to have the support of the Dominican Republic and Colombia, but on his home turf, Honduras has withheld support, Panama has not declared but is increasingly looking southward, and Belize has thrown in with Derbez.

Derbez also appears to have benefited from cold relations between Bolivia and Chile over Bolivia's campaign for access to the sea (see NotiSur, 2004-01-23), and that country now supports the Mexican candidate. Derbez also appears to have Paraguay in its corner. Ecuador and Peru remain mum, with Peru's President Alejandro Toledo continuing to hint he may put up a candidate of his own. Venezuela is on record as hostile to Flores because of his enthusiasm for the coup-for-a-day that temporarily unseated President Hugo Chavez (see NotiSur, 2002-04-19).

As Chavez observed, "There is no Central American consensus, there is no Caribbean consensus, and, bueno, there never has been South American consensus." The OAS recognizes the unusual

lack of alignment. That could translate to a long wait for an election. "There is still no fundamental reason to expect submission of this question to a vote in the organization," said Mexico's OAS representative Jorge Chen. The diplomat suggested that some countries have decided, but are withholding public announcement to "avoid a series of pressures of various kinds."

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