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Francisco Flores Folds, Exposing Rifts In Organization Of American States As Vote Fails

by LADB Staff

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El Salvador's former President Francisco Flores (1999-2004) withdrew as a candidate for secretary-general of the Organization of American States (OAS) on April 7, leaving Mexico's Luis Ernesto Derbez and Chile's Jose Miguel Insulza to vie for the job in the April 11 election. Flores was the favored candidate of the US. His departure might, therefore, represent the first time in OAS history that the US will not have handpicked the leader of the 34-nation organization (see NotiCen, 2005-02-03), but that conclusion is not yet certain.

In a withdrawal statement, Flores said that a late analysis of his candidacy had convinced him that pressing on could "contradict the principle for which we entered the contest, which was the vindication of the Central American region." He meant this in the sense that the region had been harmed by the forced resignation of Costa Rica's Miguel Angel Rodriguez (see NotiCen, 2004-10-14), noting that "the conditions of his resignation left the region with the need to reassert its position in the hemisphere." But the Flores vote count did not add up to vindication.

With 18 votes needed to win, Flores had the commitment only of El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and the Dominican Republic. In his immediate neighborhood, Honduras had spurned him for bilateral reasons, Belize declared for Derbez, and Panama had not made its choice known. Flores said he had agreed to run only after he had been asked to do so by his successor, President Antonio Saca, and several Central American presidents. But, he conceded, "with few days to the election, the reality is that one candidate is running with the backing of the Southern Cone, and two candidates are disputing the same Mesoamerican region."

Flores' analysis slightly missed the mark. The April 11 election attempt did reveal a north/south rift, but the key players were the nations of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). In the Southern Cone, Derbez was the reported choice of Bolivia, Peru, Colombia, and Paraguay, but in CARICOM, Insulza had the bulk of the vote, according to reports. The ballots were secret.

Never a contender

Flores was a shaky candidate from the outset. He not only lacked consensus in his own region, but even within his own country. Commenting on the departure, Medardo Gonzalez, coordinator general of the opposition Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN), said, "This is the only road Flores has. We greet the decision with satisfaction and joy because it is like a political reversal for the ex-president who never had the support of the countries."

Warming to his analysis, Gonzalez added, "This perception that the continent had of Flores as a man very obedient to the policies of the US weighed heavily, undoubtedly, on producing this result. He didn't have the support he thought he had."

Opposition within El Salvador was not limited to the FMLN. Jose Maria Tojeira, rector of the Universidad Centroamericana Jose Simeon Canas (UCA), a Jesuit institution, said, "I don't believe that Flores had the capacity to reach the OAS. His government was among the least coordinated. A person like this cannot get such an important job where what is needed is someone who has the ability to seek and build rapprochement. Flores does not radiate this confidence."

Adding up the minuses

Gonzalez's view was more than the glee of a political opponent. Disdain within his own country was just one of Flores' minuses. In the present environment of US-Latin American relations, the US endorsement was something of a kiss of death. His lone support of the 2002 coup against President Hugo Chavez in Venezuela won him condemnation as anti-democratic. His policies as president, among them the politically motivated severe treatment of youth gangs, painted him in some quarters as a human rights violator. These strong negatives have led to speculation that the US could live with a conservative Derbez and saw its chance to derail the socialist Insulza by leaning on Flores to get lost at the last minute.

If that was the strategy, it almost worked; five successive ballots in the April 11 OAS election resulted in a 17-17 tie. The OAS rescheduled the election for May 2. In the interregnum, OAS rules allow for any member country to postulate a new candidate. Chile outflanked in Haiti Supporting the spoiler hypothesis, Haiti was reported to have voted for Derbez. The US, having installed the country's interim government, still appears to have influence there.

It is also the case that Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, brother of the US president, has been working on a business-friendly, Florida-to-Haiti aid package and that a ceremony lauding the gift was held in Miami the day after the OAS vote, with Haiti interim Prime Minister Gerard Latortue in attendance. CARICOM has pointedly refused to recognize the Latortue government.

Chilean sources have been quoted anonymously as suspecting that a switch by Haiti derailed their candidate. Just before the election, Chilean Foreign Minister Ignacio Walker said with apparent certainty that Insulza had the 18 necessary votes, even without Flores to split the opposition. With the floodgates thrown open for new nominations, Panama and Peru quickly responded with suggestions that they had candidates on tap. Peru has two, maybe three ex-President Valentin Paniagua and Foreign Minister Manuel Rodriguez were named by the country's OAS Ambassador Alberto Borea as possibilities, while Peruvian Deputy Luis Gonzalez named former foreign minister Allan Wagner.

In Panama, Foreign Minister Samuel Lewis called for a consensus candidate and hinted that he may have one. "I don't like to speculate, but the truth is that we must not discard the possibility that a Panamanian could serve as a bridge," he said. Lewis is also vice president of Panama. Speaking on Panamanian radio from Washington, he hedged, saying, "We have to manage the subject with a lot of caution," since Panama will preside over the OAS general assembly on May 2 when the election takes place.

Lewis' hints and circumlocutions were a prelude to a meeting scheduled immediately after the OAS session with US Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. It was the first high-level meeting between the two countries since last September and reportedly focused on free-trade negotiations, which have been stalled since January, and on plans for enlarging the Panama Canal. Lewis also said the meeting might result in an invitation for President Martin Torrijos to meet with Bush.

Whatever the outcome, whether or not new candidates emerge, the regional fault lines exposed by the unbreakable deadlock have led early commentators to conclude that whoever becomes secretary-general will preside over a badly fractured OAS, already weakened to the point where it is affectionately called the Colonial Ministry.

The organization has been criticized for years as being beset by, as Venezuelan analyst Susana Pezzano put it, "low efficiency, scant budget, and questionable credibility." Pezzano also saw President Hugo Chavez as a contributor to the perfect polarization. His enthusiastic support for Insulza might have given the US just enough of an edge to turn a vote, perhaps in Haiti, the Bahamas, or Grenada.

Now, unless a consensus arises, the US, even with its clout diminished, can still influence the secretary-general by exerting pressure on his region, his country, or his person. But this does not mean, necessarily, lockstep within the Ministry of Colonies. Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, Chile, and Uruguay have become formidable in their ability to shape Latin American affairs, and, with CARICOM moving their way, the balance of power continues to shift

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