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LADB Staff

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Manuel Zelaya To Head Honduras And Redefine His Party

by LADB Staff

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Manuel "Mel" Zelaya of the Partido Liberal (PL) is president-elect of Honduras. His victory was suspected soon after the Nov. 27 election (see NotiCen, 2005-12-01), but the failure of the Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE) to produce the data led his opponent, Porfirio Lobo Sosa of the ruling Partido Nacional (PN), to refuse to concede until Dec. 5, when the data became available, abundant, and overwhelming. Even then, however, the TSE had still not published the full count or certified the results.

The reasons for the delay have still not been made public, but TSE sources have told the media that there had been tampering of some kind with the data, leading PL party president Patricia Rodas to comment, "It is becoming clear that the system's software was manipulated in such a way that precise results were impossible to obtain." On the basis of exit polls and scrutiny by election observers, there seems little doubt that the data is representative and that the election process went off in an acceptable manner.

Campaign managers crucial

Blame and credit, respectively, have been given to the candidates' advisors, Ecuadoran Cesar Verduga for Zelaya and Mark Klugman for Lobo Sosa. Verduga achieved a reputation for his handling of the resignation (see NotiSur, 1997-05-30) of Ecuador's former President Abdala Bucaram (1996-1997). Zelaya is said to have personally hired Verduga. Verduga steered Zelaya deftly through a minefield laid by a very aggressive Klugman, a right-winger from the US, who created for Lobo the image of a punitive tough guy, a stubborn unilateralist who could respond to crime and insecurity.

The strategy might have worked in the US, but Hondurans not part of the PN base were scared by it, said analysts. It was on Klugman's advice that Lobo refused to concede, further damaging his standing with the public. Victory within the party as well Zelaya assumed the mantle of president-elect early on, even before the concession, and has already chosen most of his Cabinet. From the look of it, commentators have taken the view that he has not only defeated the ruling party but he has beaten the conservative wing of his own party, too. Zelaya's closest allies now are cofounders with him of the Movimiento Esperanza Liberal (MEL).

The MEL came together for the elections of 2000 and fared badly. Zelaya was significantly outgunned in that election by Rafael Pineda Ponce and Jaime Rosenthal of the PL. Ponce went on to lose the election to President Ricardo Maduro in a savage contest. During the succeeding five years, the MEL, and Mel, have made significant inroads and taken control of the party. Zelaya will govern with a Cabinet composed chiefly of MEListas. Although the election was run from the right, those closest to the new president will be leftist in character.

But, ultimately, say analysts, the Cabinet will be heterogeneous. These are the people most likely to wield considerable power in the new government: Consejo Central Ejecutivo del Partido Liberal (CCEPL) president Patricia Rodas is the daughter of Modesto Rodas Alvarado, who died in 1979. She is married to a Nicaraguan Sandinista and known to be of a progressive bent. Professionally she is a historian and political scientist. Within the party she leads the Participacion Ciudadana movement, is active in international relations, and maintains a relationship with both the Cuban and Venezuelan governments. Rodas is known as Zelaya's right hand.

Roberto Babum is a businessman, well-known on the north coast. He coordinated finances in the north of the country for the movement and has been a close confidant of Zelaya for years. He is well-connected in the private sector in the Department of Cortes and is considered a key player in the new government.

Miriam Mejia is another second-generation political heavyweight. She is the daughter of Oscar Mejia Arellano, vice minister of government and justice in the government of former President Carlos Flores (1998-2002), and, in her own right, she is governor of the Department of Colon. She is a lawyer and close ally of Zelaya.

Aristides Mejia also comes from a PL political family. His father was ambassador to Costa Rica in the Flores government and his mother was a congressional deputy during the same period. He is a lawyer and president of the TSE. In that capacity, he was at the center of the uproar regarding the delayed election results. He is a former ambassador to Greece, director of the Programa de Modernizacion de la Justicia, and vice president of the Comision Nacional Electoral (CNE) in 2000. He and Zelaya are long-time close friends. Milton Jimenez Puerto is another member of Zelaya's inner circle, part of the CCEPL, and sits on the Consejo Consultivo of the TSE. A lawyer, he specializes in criminal, labor, and international law. Roland Valenzuela is a deputy-elect from Cortes. He is a founding figure in MEL and is a physician by profession.

Julio Quintanilla, an economist, has a long history of service in PL governments, largely in finance. During the campaign he was Zelaya's private secretary. Raul Valladares was Zelaya's media consultant during the campaign. He is a well-known radio journalist. Valladares is credited with creating campaign slogans and an effective jingle. He also handled public relations.

Lucio Izaguirre, a lawyer, was a MEL founder and was private secretary to PL former President Carlos Reina (1994-1998). He was a Jesuit seminarian and student of liberation theology. He has a master's degree in international public law from the Universidad de Chile and founded the Movimiento Amplio de Transformacion (MAT) of the Facultad de Ciencias Juridicas y Sociales in Honduras. In the campaign, he served as a coordinating assistant.

Enrique Flores Lanza is a famous human rights lawyer. He was a legal advisor to the Direccion General de Tributacion in the PL government of former President Roberto Suazo Cordova (1982-1986). At present he is director of the Consultorio Juridico Popular, a national NGO that defends women's and children's rights. He was a member of the Comite por la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos en Honduras (CODEH), consultant to the Instituto Interamericano de los Derechos del Nino, and professor in the Facultad de Ciencias Economicas at the Universidad

Nacional Autonoma de Honduras (UNAH). He serves as secretary of political training on the CCEPL.

Hugo Noe Pino is a US trained economist. He was president of the Colegio Hondureno de Economistas (CHE), president of the Banco Central de Honduras, a former ambassador to the US and the UN, and director of the Post Grado Centroamericano de Economia at UNAH. He was also a member of the economic shadow cabinet of President Reina. He is now director of Zelaya's transition team. Zelaya has already made some preliminary picks for his Cabinet. Some of those mentioned above cannot serve in the government because of a law preventing holders of party offices from so doing.

Noe Pino will be secretary of finances. Valladares will be presidential private secretary. The president-elect has chosen Gen. Alvaro Romero for security secretary, but that may change, as the selection has been challenged by human rights organizations, not because of any suspected violations but because they want a civilian. Pineda Ponce, the loser last time around, will be education secretary, taking advantage of his teachers union connections.

The top health spot will go to Orison Velasquez. He was health consultant in the campaign. An outsider to the MEL group, Gabriela Flores, will likely be president of the Banco Central. She was an earlier challenger for the PL presidential nomination. Marlon Lara, mayor of Puerto Cortes, will head the Fondo Hondureno de Inversion Social (FHIS), a key spot. Posts yet to be filled include ministers of defense, natural resources and environment, and presidency.

Overall, it would appear that Zelaya has profound change in mind for his government, surrounded as he is by a great number of left-leaning advisors and the party going that direction as well. But analysts note that change won't be easy. He did not win by much, and he faces a fractious civil society, an entrenched bureaucracy, and plenty of corruption in high places.

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