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Regional Security Council Seat In Doubt In Marathon Guatemala-Venezuela General Assembly Balloting

by LADB Staff

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After 35 successive ballots Oct. 17-18, the UN General Assembly was not able to give the decisive 128 votes either to Guatemala or to Venezuela to fill the Latin America regional seat on the Security Council. Guatemala led on all but one of the ballots but despite intense lobbying was not able to convince a two-thirds majority of member countries that it deserved the position. Guatemala has never won a place on the Security Council, whereas Venezuela has done so four times.

By most accounts, this has been one of the most contentious electoral battles since the end of the Cold War, occasioned by the vast difference in visions between leftist Venezuela and a Guatemala that is widely regarded as a US surrogate (see NotiCen, 2006-07-27). The vote was taken by secret ballot, meaning that both countries were disappointed by countries that might have committed to them during the preceding weeks of lobbying at the UN and high-level visits to world capitals. Several countries' diplomats expressed the hope that one or the other of the contestants would drop out.

Argentina's UN Ambassador Cesar Mayoral began talking to the Guatemalan press about the possibility of a third candidate entering the mix on the second day of voting. "But, at the moment," he told the reporter, "I've spoken with them and neither wants to cede." It was commonly held that Peru would propose Uruguay and Ecuador would propose Panama or the Dominican Republic, countries that already have their hats in the ring for the next open seat next year. With Guatemala winning all but one of the rounds by spreads in the 80-110 range, the Central American country remained hopeful.

Foreign Minister Gert Rosenthal said retiring "would be something premature," because in his view Guatemala was edging ever closer to the magic number. Former Foreign Minister Gabriel Orellana recalled that, in 1979, Cuba and Colombia fought through 154 rounds over three months before Mexico stepped in and won. Venezuela would not give up either.

In a rhetorical style that is becoming that nation's trademark, Ambassador Francisco Arias Cardenas said, "We are fighting against the first power of the world, the owners of the universe [the US, not Guatemala]. We're happy, we're strong, and we will continue."

For Venezuela, this is just one battle in a long-term battle against US domination. "This battle will prepare us for another battle within the international community," said Venezuelan diplomat Roy Chaderton. The battle has inflicted damage on both sides. Guatemalan diplomats and government officials acknowledged their candidacy had been hurt by the pressures the US brought to bear on their behalf.

Rosenthal had repeatedly voiced his discomfort with the heavy-handedness of his major ally. "And, frankly, we resent it a bit being told we are going to toe the line of not only the United States but any other power. We make our own decisions." Not enough countries were buying Rosenthal's protestations that his nation would be an "independent voice" at the UN's most exclusive and powerful forum.

After the 12 rounds of voting on Oct. 24, Rosenthal was girding for the long haul, but showing signs of wear. "If this goes on for several days, and we can see that there's no movement in either of the candidates being able to get two-thirds of the vote, we probably would have to think of a third consensus candidate for the region. But we think the time hasn't come for that yet."

US hurts Guatemala, Venezuela hurts itself

While Guatemala, in its own view and that of analysts, was hurt by its association with the US, Venezuela appeared to be hurting itself. President Hugo Chavez had put a lot of time, work, and travel into his nation's candidacy, but he may have lost the support of many nations with a flamboyant and vitriolic speech to the General Assembly days prior to the vote in which he lashed out against the US and its President George W. Bush. It was a classic case of overkill, said commentators around the world.

Countries already on board with Venezuela in its disdain for US unilateralism and arrogance in global affairs were repulsed by Chavez's vehemence and lack of decorum in an ad hominem attack on Bush on the floor of the UN. Delegates gave Chavez a thundering, protracted ovation for a speech sharply critical of the superpower's hegemonic intrusion into every aspect of international relations and its frightening bellicosity. But, at the same time, they were concerned that this kind of performance on the Security Council would rob the body of the dignity and restraint essential to its work in these highly sensitive times.

For Riordan Roett, director of Latin American studies at Johns Hopkins University, that speech was the spoiler. "You can talk like that in Latin America, and people will have a chuckle, but there is a traditional respect for protocol, and it was not amusing to a lot of people who see the UN as the forum for expressing Third World views." A Latin American ambassador *The New York Times* declined to name told the paper, "US-bashing is acceptable, but not the UN-bashing that they thought Chavez's speech amounted to because in the end this is everyone's house, and a speech like that goes down the same dirty drain as the bitter criticisms of the US."

This electoral marathon goes on against a backdrop of relative ease in other regions. The 53-nation African group, the 54-nation Asian group, and Western Europe chose their representatives to the Security Council by consensus, thus seating South Africa, Indonesia, Italy, and Belgium, respectively, in a single round, whereas the 33 countries of Latin America and the Caribbean could not. "We probably have the least amount of time difference among our countries of any group, but we have the greatest difficulties getting together," said Nicaragua's Ambassador Eduardo J. Sevilla Somoza.

There are, however, significant disparities of interests within the region, split several different ways, between the small countries of Central America and the Caribbean, the Andean countries, and the countries of the Southern Cone. Or, the split might be seen as between the northern sphere, closest to the US, which includes Mexico, the southern sphere, and the Andean sphere. It is from the Andean sphere that a possible breakthrough presented itself after the General Assembly took a five-day break.

On Oct. 24, Bolivia's President Evo Morales announced, "Our friend Hugo Chavez says that to seek consensus he leaves the candidacy to Bolivia. We're candidates for the Security Council. I hope we can achieve consensus." At first, there were denials all around. Venezuelan Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro said that Venezuela would not drop out unless Guatemala did so and other conditions were met. Gert Rosenthal said the Bolivian candidacy "was apparently a unilateral decision by Venezuela because they have not notified me. We have not pulled out, and we have no intention of doing so."

Venezuela later confirmed passing the baton to Bolivia, and a hastily arranged informal meeting of the region's ambassadors got together at midday on Oct. 25. But true to its word, Guatemala did not pull out. Venezuela was back in the race with the explanation that the Bolivia arrangement was simply exploratory, a quest for consensus. An hour or so later, the General Assembly resumed the vote, with results very similar to the 35 prior rounds. At 41 rounds, the members called it a day with the hope that the two countries would reach a deal between them that would permit a consensual result for the region.

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