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Region Sends A Surprised Panama To Security Council

by LADB Staff

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The stalemate for the Latin America non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council has ended; the winner by consensus was a genuinely surprised Panama. The selection ended a proxy battle between US-backed Guatemala and the vehemently anti-US-President-George-W.-Bush Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. Neither country was able to get the 128 votes necessary for a two-thirds majority in the General Assembly that would have earned it a two-year stint on the world's most powerful deliberative body.

After 47 consecutive ballots proved inconclusive, Ecuador's UN Ambassador Diego Cordovez hosted meetings between Guatemalan and Venezuelan officials in the hope of getting one or the other to back out of the contest or, failing that, getting both to withdraw to clear the way for a new third candidate. It was the second of these choices that finally bore fruit, permitting Cordovez to announce, "The two candidates reached an agreement to step down, and they came up with Panama as a consensus candidate."

With mutual backing from the adversaries, Panama's election in the General Assembly was assured. "We are recognizing today this role of Panama as a political and geographical meeting point, and we are very happy to reach this consensus," said Venezuelan Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro.

A surprised but apparently happy Panamanian Foreign Ministry responded, "It wasn't in our foreign policy plans to be a part of the Security Council in the near future," but it said Panama would strive to support policies on the council that promote "peace and justice in the world."

Guatemala, repeatedly and agonizingly just short of victory in the balloting, showed a hint of regret in announcing its withdrawal. "We would have preferred for our competitors to step down, so that we could take the seat," said Foreign Minister Gert Rosenthal. "They didn't offer that solution, so instead of dragging this on for another month or two, we felt the time had come to step down and let a sister state take the role of the Latin American group."

Loss of the seat was a blow to Guatemala's prestige because the country's candidacy was heavily lobbied by the US, giving rise to the perception that it would play the role of surrogate for the superpower on the council (see NotiCen, 2006-10-26). Rosenthal was obliged to continue to battle that perception, even though the contest was over. "We feel that it was not a major element in this campaign our colleagues from Venezuela do. We believe that this was a contest between two Latin American states for one vacancy. We would like it to be perceived as such. This is not about the United States."

But in the US, it was very much about the US. The current administration's loss of influence in Latin America and in the UN has been the subject of ongoing criticism. The outcome of this contest is

seen among the critics as a double failure, while for Venezuela only a partial failure. Venezuela was unable to gain the seat for itself, but its initiative was successful in subverting the US agenda.

Venezuela's performance was particularly effective according to some analysts since, as James Paul of Global Policy Forum put it, "It's a very hardball kind of game that gets played here. Everybody assumes that the United States knows how each country votes and will punish and reward them accordingly." Paul was referring to media reports through the years quoting British and US officials as saying that US intelligence agencies eavesdrop against diplomatic missions at the UN (see NotiSur, 2003-03-14). "Everyone is aware that the United States listens in to all their meetings, phone calls, and cables," Paul explained to the San Francisco Chronicle, "and they know the United States has a lot of weight with the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, all kinds of mechanisms. The United States will push a few buttons and some country in Africa starts to hurt all of a sudden. It's an instrument they play all the time, like an organ with lots of stops, buttons, and keys."

Panama pledges consultation and independence

With everyone else's loss their gain, Panama pledged to conduct itself on the council in an independent fashion and to consult with the region on matters of concern to Latin America and the Caribbean. Vice President Samuel Lewis Navarro assured the 33 nations that make up the regional group that the Panamanian delegation would seek the opinions of the group in pertinent matters and "at the same time serve as a balance on the world's most important political forum."

Bringing equilibrium to the Security Council is a tall order, however, and Panama has had to admit being unprepared for the seat. Nevertheless, said Ambassador to the UN Ricardo Arias, his country "has the professional capacity, the knowledgeable people, and the common sense to be able to carry out this assignment with the required level of responsibility."

One of the first tests of that resolve next year is likely to be the nuclear ambitions of Iran. Arias said he would prefer to wait until the issue comes up before discussing it, but his country tends away from armed conflict. "Panama is a country that in its foreign policy makes serious efforts to seek understanding between countries and peaceful solutions to conflicts," he said. He made reference to the unique position of his country as a place where everything, people and goods, come together from all over the world as the underlying motive for its diplomacy.

Closer to home, "This is our relationship with Venezuela as well as with Guatemala." A system of rotation needed The Panamanian solution to the region's difficulty in choosing its representation appears to have worked out well this time, Arias observed, but "this has once again put at the center of the discussion the fact that the region must seek a system of rotation on the Security Council and in the other UN organizations like the other regions of the world have." The other regions with spots on the council routinely make their selections in short order and do not subject the General Assembly to days of balloting.

The Panama consensus was in doubt briefly when Chile and the Caribbean countries asked for more time to consider the candidacy. The Caribbean Community (CARICOM) was upset because it had not been consulted prior to the mutual decision by Venezuela and Guatemala. Until Panama was

chosen, the Dominican Republic had emerged as the leading candidate. It was reported that the nod went to Panama because of its excellent relations not only with Guatemala and Venezuela but also with the US and Cuba. Chile did not elaborate on its need for time, but quickly resolved its issue, as did CARICOM, clearing the way for the General Assembly's 48th vote. That vote was held Nov. 7, and Panama scooted in safely with 164 votes in the 192-member assembly, well in excess of the two-thirds needed.

Eleven holdouts voted for Venezuela, four for Guatemala, and Barbados got one. General Assembly President Sheikha Rashed Al Khalifa said she was "delighted" that Panama would join Belgium, Indonesia, Italy, and South Africa as the newest nonpermanent member of the Security Council on Jan. 1, 2007. Panama sat on the council in 1958-1959, 1972-1973, 1976-1977, and 1981-1982.

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