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Nicaraguan Reagan Foe Miguel D'escoto To Head Un General Assembly

by LADB Staff

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Quiet, patient diplomacy and apparent US passivity have combined to virtually ensure that Nicaragua's Miguel D'Escoto, foreign minister of the Sandinista government from 1979 to 1990, will be the next president of the UN General Assembly (GA). D'Escoto now functions as President Daniel Ortega's advisor on border issues and foreign policies with the rank of minister. D'Escoto has been called the country's second foreign minister.

Foreign Minister Samuel Santos nominated him for the UN job in August 2007. Miguel D'Escoto Brockman is a Maryknoll priest. Santos nominated him at a meeting of 15 Latin American ambassadors to Nicaragua last year, and in March 2008 the Grupo Latinoamericano y del Caribe (GRULAC) accepted him to run as the GRULAC candidate. GRULAC is the regional bloc within the UN. The presidency of the General Assembly rotates among the regional groups. This year's session, the 63rd, is GRULAC's turn, hence D'Escoto's virtual assurance of victory. Another reason to expect his election is that he is the only candidate. The nomination was officially transmitted as a letter from the GRULAC chair, Ambassador Francisco Javier Arias Cardenas of Venezuela, to current GA president Srgjan Kerim of Macedonia, whose term ends in September.

The vote for the one-year post is expected in June, according to Janos Tisovsky, General Assembly spokesman. The rule governing the matter states that a president must be elected at least three months before the new session, which in this case means before June 16. D'Escoto was an outspoken critic of the US during his years as foreign minister when the Ortega government he served fought an internal war against the contras, a US proxy force. Latin American ambassadors uncomfortable with the choice have criticized the US for not opposing the D'Escoto nomination. One, who spoke to The New York Times on condition of anonymity, said, "What the Americans do when they really want to make their case forcefully is mobilize high officials, but they didn't in this case. They just talked to us in the corridors."

Patience over puppetry, a perfect calculation

For an explanation of the US passivity, some Latin American officials looked back to the US-inspired battle to keep Venezuela from gaining a non-permanent seat on the Security Council by backing Guatemala (see NotiCen, 2006-10-26). The battle raged for 48 ballots, neither country prevailed, Panama won (see NotiCen, 2006-11-09), and now no one wants to repeat the exercise for this office. An unnamed Central American ambassador told the Times, "Nobody wanted another confrontation within the group, particularly one that would have been ideological, in which Venezuela, with Cuba and Bolivia and Ecuador, beat up on the Americans and called countries that disagree puppets of Washington." If the Central American's view is correct, it paints the US as a considerably weakened player within the hemispheric community, and a senior US diplomat, also unnamed, confirmed that weakness in denying US passivity. He said the US had offered strategic advice, but nobody took

it. He threw the blame on those he said were known to oppose the Nicaraguan bid. "They all were suggesting possible third men, but none of them was willing to be one," he said.

Latin American diplomats credit Nicaraguan diplomacy under Samuel Santos as crucial to the success of the nomination. Santos allowed a brief period of resistance to blow over without response after the August nomination, never mentioning it at monthly GRULAC meetings until just this March. Commented a South American diplomat, "They let the basic force be inertia. It was the perfect calculation." D'Escoto's new position is not thought to be a powerful one. While he and his country will get credit for the coup, and perhaps for outmaneuvering the US, the power of the post is limited. GA resolutions are nonbinding, and the president does not even vote. The GA does control the UN budget, however. It is also not entirely clear that the US did not have domestic motives in letting Nicaragua have the prize without a fight. In the upcoming US presidential elections, Republican candidate Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) is having difficulty mobilizing his party's notoriously anti-UN core.

Having the General Assembly in the hands of an enemy first challenged by former President Ronald Reagan (1981-1989) could give them something to get fired up about. In 2004, D'Escoto took to the US radio airwaves to call Reagan "the butcher of my people." As foreign minister, it was D'Escoto who brought Nicaragua's successful suit at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague against the US government in 1986. The court found that the US was "in breach of its obligations under customary international law not to use force against another State," "not to intervene in its affairs," "not to violate its sovereignty," "not to interrupt peaceful maritime commerce," and "in breach of its obligations under Article XIX of the Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation between the Parties signed at Managua on 21 January 1956." The court awarded Nicaragua US\$17 billion in reparations, but Reagan refused to recognize the court, and the US has never paid its debt.

D'Escoto was born in Los Angeles, California, the son of a Nicaraguan diplomat. His training for the priesthood and higher education also occurred in the US. He is a Maryknoll priest, an adherent of liberation theology, and, as such, became a Sandinista very early on as a member of the Grupo de los Doce (Group of Twelve), who helped establish the legitimacy of the Sandinista struggle against the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza Debayle (1967-1979).

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