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Honduras' Alba Ratification Figures Prominently In Presidential Primaries; A Candidate Comes

by LADB Staff

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Honduras will stage presidential primary elections Nov. 16, and, as the date nears, the president of the parliament Roberto Micheletti has gained the support of President Manuel Zelaya. He is running well ahead of contenders from the four other tendencies within the ruling Partido Liberal (PL). On his way to the top, Micheletti performed a stunning about-face on the subject of Honduras' entry into the Alternativa Bolivariana de las Americas (ALBA) group of nations led by Venezuela and including Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Cuba.

The general election is slated for November 2009. According to Honduran electoral law, campaigns for the primaries may not begin until 50 days before the elections Micheletti was adamant back in August when he lambasted Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez for saying that anyone who opposed the ALBA membership was either "a traitor or an ignoramus" (see NotiCen, 2008-08-28). Though even then, at the peak of the opposition to Zelaya's initiative, Micheletti left himself an out by distinguishing ALBA from its progenitor.

He told the media that Chavez's railing was disrespectful not only to Hondurans but to other friendly nations including the US. But on the specific issue of legislative ratification of the proposal, he allowed that it "can have many good things, but no objective is achieved with rudeness and insults." Weeks passed, and with them Micheletti's discourse evolved. He was more nuanced.

He made further distinctions, saying that signing up for Petrocaribe was, for instance, a separate idea, and a good one, one that would bring "fresh money for hydroelectric projects, for agriculture." As for ALBA, Micheletti said he did not want Honduras to be lured down a path it had no intention of following.

He was concerned about the military commitments that attend membership. If the agreement would bind the country to support any of the member countries in armed conflict, that would not work for him. "We are pacifists. We don't want problems among family," he said. "I believe that we must think about what we do in order to develop ourselves."

The wheat from the chaff

Contingencies of a certain kind were off the table, the presumptive candidate told reporters. "I am in disagreement whenever and wherever it contains a political, ideological, or military element. Totally in disagreement," he said. "But, if it is economic support, of teachers, doctors, soft loans, as is the offer from Venezuela at this moment, of giving us 1% [loan interest] to strengthen agriculture, that they have offered 100 tractors, there we are in total accord. But it mustn't contain anything military."

Although he drew a sharp line when it came to going to war for ALBA, Micheletti was a good deal more flexible when it came to politics.

After Bolivia kicked out the US ambassador (see NotiSur, 2008-09-19), President Zelaya showed support for Bolivian President Evo Morales by keeping the new US Ambassador to Honduras Hugo Llorens waiting a full week before accepting his credentials. That, said Micheletti, was pretty much all right with him. "He's not the first ambassador who comes to Honduras and delays five or ten days to present his credentials," he said, noting that some have waited as long as a month. It was only because it was a US ambassador who had to wait that so much has been made of it.

Fear had been expressed both in and out of the government that Zelaya's snub was made at a bad time and could jeopardize Hondurans living in the US under Temporary Protected Status (TPS). Micheletti took it in stride. "I don't believe that the North Americans are going to do something like that, to let a simple encounter end TPS for 75,000 Hondurans," he said. On the afternoon of Oct. 9, Micheletti delivered for his president.

The Congreso Nacional passed much as so many of its deputies said it would not the declaration of adhesion the administration had sent up. The opposition Partido Nacional (PN) abstained en bloc, with deputy chief of delegation Antonio Rivera Callejas making clear that this was exclusively the responsibility of the PL. Unificacion Democratica (UD) Deputy Cesar Ham, however, was quick to make his party's support known.

During the three hours of debate leading to the vote, rumors surfaced, and were denied, concerning all manner of inducements from the president for the favorable outcome. Micheletti was not even there. The session was presided over by second vice president of the legislature Victor Sabillon, while Micheletti was out convalescing from throat surgery necessary to his continued active campaigning.

Here's the deal

The declaration encompasses another earlier one between Honduras and Venezuela on food security. It authorizes the executive to contract a line of credit with the Banco Nacional de Desarrollo Economico y Social de Venezuela (BANDES). The line of credit would send US\$30 million to the Honduran Banco Nacional de Desarrollo Agricola (BANADESA) to provide funds to small and medium-sized agriculturalists, including the very smallest subsistence farmers. BANADESA would get the funds at very low rates, and lend them accordingly.

To finance housing for the poor, Venezuela commits under the agreement to buy US\$100 million in Honduran bonds, also at favorable rates. These funds as well would be used to supply credit to the economy's informal sector. The Banco Central de Honduras would be trustee of these funds, the executive would regulate their use, and a legislative committee named by the president of the Congress, Micheletti in this case, would provide oversight. The accord also formalizes the donation of 100 tractors. These are Veniran machines, made by a Venezuela

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