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LADB Staff

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Honduras' Vice President Regains The Right To Run; Elvin Santos Is Partido Liberal Presidential Candidate

by LADB Staff

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Elvin Santos' political power play has paid off, and he is now not just a legal candidate in Honduras' upcoming presidential elections, he is the leading candidate. Santos was President Mel Zelaya's vice president. Because he had held that position, a succession of courts and the Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE) had all ruled him ineligible to run for, or be, president of the republic (see NotiCen, 2008-12-11). Undeterred, Santos mobilized his faction within the Partido Liberal (PL) and ran a surrogate, Mauricio Villeda, in his place. Every voter in Honduras was in on the plot, and a majority of them handed him the nomination over Zelaya's pick and presumed favorite, Roberto Micheletti. Micheletti is no stranger to gamesmanship, either. When Santos came to the Congress to resign his vice presidency in the hope of lifting the taint, Micheletti, as president of Congress, had the doors locked. Santos and his entourage tried vainly to break the doors down as police stood idly by. Villeda's acceptance speech was a step-aside speech, the victor declaring his continued loyalty to Santos and his assurance that "he has my resignation the moment he decides." He did not decide right away. Instead, according to reports, Santos embarked on a program of deep deal making with the factions and individuals who could make his vice presidency go away and provide consensus within the PL. On Dec. 18, a succession of things happened, all of them breaking Santos' way. Villeda forewent his candidacy. The Congress, acting before a midnight deadline, accepted Santos' resignation. And, best of all, TSE president Augusto Aguilar announced that Elvin Santos had been duly inscribed as official candidate of the winning Elvencista faction of the PL and, ergo, of the Partido Liberal in toto. Santos hailed it all. He gave his full approval even to the rules that impeded his plans. "What is behind the renunciation of the vice presidency," he said, "is a clear message to the political class that one must give up any circumstance that might cause the Honduran people to believe that someone is in possession of privilege." He went on to "honor every one of the Liberals who participated in the battle" in any way, shape, form, manner, or means. Both Santos in his letter of resignation and the Congress in its formal acceptance after a one-hour delay for a committee to draft it recognized that, in the end, machinations aside, it was what the people voted for: "A clear vote of the electorate for him to assume the official candidacy of president of the republic for the Partido Liberal of Honduras." Underlying all this legally was a Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) decision that reverts the governing constitutional articles to the original text prior to 1982 reforms, the effect of which is to delink the vice president from exemption of eligibility if the incumbent has not served as acting president for six months prior to the election. The election is scheduled for next November. Santos pays a price. But if it was the Constitution that let it happen, it was the deals, say observers, that made it happen. Elvencistas who expected plum positions throughout the next government and the power to choose members of institutions in the state apparatus were dismayed that their candidate had bargained away some of the fruits of victory. Some of the lowest hanging fruit is gone, CSJ magistrates and the attorney general position, for instance. These could be clawed back if, as suspected, the next Congress is loaded with Elvencistas. But, for the moment, and until next year, the rival who locked the door, Micheletti, retains considerable might. Against tradition, Micheletti will remain president of the PL's central executive council. Micheletti and

Santos met Feb. 27 to discuss power sharing that would lead to a closing of ranks in the party. The two chose their nominees to various committees and left room for members of other factions to participate. These would normally have been Santos' sole decisions, said analysts. But as he shares power, Santos has the satisfaction of knowing there is as of now a fairly high probability that he will continue to have power to share. Polls show him leading his Partido Nacional (PN) adversary Porfirio Lobo Sosa by a comfortable margin. Lobo fell to Zelaya in 2005, and he is straining at his chains for a rematch. A mid-February CID Gallup poll for La Prensa showed Santos with the upper hand, 39% to 34%. Lobo has the edge in Tegucigalpa, but Santos has the rest of the country. When respondents were asked who, regardless of their own preference, they thought was going to be the next president, Santos' lead widened to 11 points, 45% to 34%. The campaign has already shown signs of turning nasty. Santos has accused Lobo of copying his plan for governance they are both conservative and also said Lobo has refused to sign a nonaggression pact. "I have proposed to Pepe Lobo in the presence of the Catholic and Protestant churches that we sign an ethical nonconfrontation pact for this campaign, but what we have received are attacks to denigrate," he told reporters.

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