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Costa Rica's President Oscar Arias Unfit To Lead Regional Integration, Says Nicaragua's President Daniel Ortega

by LADB Staff

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In a move that would have broken with institutional rules, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, current pro tem president of the Sistema de Integración Centroamericana (SICA), sought to bypass Costa Rica and instead hand over control of the organization to Guatemala. The office rotates every six months, with Costa Rican President Oscar Arias in line to take over July 1. But President Ortega said he is fed up with Arias' failure to show up at meetings and with his outspoken disdain of SICA. Costa Rica is something of a regional outlier. The country does not belong either to the Corte Centroamericana de Justicia (CCJ) or to the Central American Parliament (PARLACEN). Costa Rica has also rejected the CA-4 immigration initiative that Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua have signed, and it has not ratified the Convenio Marco de la Unión Aduanera Centroamericana, the customs union. Ortega takes these facts to mean Costa Rica does not support integration. Ortega's choice of Guatemala to succeed Nicaragua owes to Panama being next in line after Costa Rica. Panamanian President-elect Ricardo Martinelli does not believe in SICA either. He has promised to pull out of PARLACEN after his July 1 inauguration. Also, it has been reported that Ortega wanted to show support for Guatemala's President Alvaro Colom while he is under intense pressure because of the Rosenberg murder of which he has been accused (see NotiCen, 2009-05-14). Explaining Ortega's rationale, Nicaragua's deputy foreign minister Manuel Coronel Kautz told reporters in late May, "We can't afford to put Central American integration at risk. There's a lot at play right now." He added, "This is also about effectiveness; we are worried about Costa Rica's past of mostly rejecting the integration process." Arias, the reluctant integrationist Arias has made no excuses for his avoidance of SICA summits. "My experience is that these meetings are not good. The agendas are not made to address the principal problems facing Central American countries," he told the press, but at the same time he bristled at the threat he would be passed over for the leadership position. His Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores issued a rejoinder to the Coronel statement that read, "Costa Rica regrets the disrespectful, inappropriate, and hostile language in statements made by the high Nicaraguan government official." What Costa Rica found most harsh was Nicaragua's demand that it "give immediate and real indications of its will, involving itself effectively and fully in the system, and for President Oscar Arias himself to participate actively in the meetings of the chiefs of state and government of SICA." Costa Rica was concerned, as well, about the effect the presidency issue might have on association-agreement negotiations under way with the EU. Foreign Minister Bruno Stagno explained, "In principle, we who are negotiating this [agreement] are members of SIECA (Secretaría de Integración Económica Centroamericana), which is an economic subsystem. I believe in principle the [two] should not overlap." For many analysts, the succession drama is an Arias-Ortega thing. The two have been at each other for years, ever since their first presidencies in the 1980s. The differences have much to do with present-day political differences and alliances as well. Arias is no part of the leftward swing in the region, and, when it comes to alliances with South America, it is well established that, insofar as there is a rivalry between Presidents Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva of Brazil, Ortega is in the Chavez camp and Arias in Lula's (see other story in this edition of NotiCen). The succession

question was resolved when Guatemala asked Nicaragua to respect the established order. "We are a country that respects institutionality," said Guatemala's Vice-President Rafael Espada. "SICA makes decisions by consensus and they must be respected." This occurred after Costa Rican and Guatemalan foreign ministry officials had clarified matters between them. Stagno said the issue had been discussed with President Colom and "it remains clear that Guatemala as well as Costa Rica are countries respectful of the existing norms."

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