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With Costa Rica at Its Helm for First Half of 2013, SICA Moves Toward Reform

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The Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana (SICA) has come a long way since its origin in the 1950s and, in a drastically different regional political scene, is now in need of undergoing thorough change to be efficient, transparent, and equitable.

So said the regional bloc’s leaders in the Joint Declaration they signed at the end of the ordinary summit meeting on Dec. 13, 2012, in Managua, the Nicaraguan capital. They ratified that position in their resolution closing their special meeting on Jan. 27.

SICA’s origin dates back to Oct. 14, 1951, when, at the end of a lengthy meeting of Central America’s foreign ministers in San Salvador, the Salvadoran capital, the Carta de San Salvador was signed launching the Organización de Estados Centroamericanos (ODECA).

Back in ODECA’s early days, Central America was ruled mostly by military dictators—such as Guatemala’s Carlos Castillo Armas (1954-1957) or Nicaragua’s Anastasio "Tacho" Somoza García (1936-1956)—or presidents harassed by the military, as in the case of Honduran President Julio Lozano (1954-1956), who was first forced to resign after staging a coup, and later the Army deemed him illegitimate and immediately annulled his election victory.

Two of the dictators—Castillo Armas and Somoza—were killed by lone gunmen, the first by Romeo Vásquez, a member of the Presidential Guard, inside the Presidential Palace; the second—who started a dictatorial, corrupt dynasty that ruled for almost half a century—by Rigoberto López, a local poet, during a social event in León, Nicaragua’s intellectual center.

By the time ODECA was created, Costa Rican President José Figueres (1948-1949, 1953-1958, 1970-1974), after leading a brief armed revolution sparked by an election fraud, had abolished the country’s Army in 1948, a unique event for the region at the time. Figueres also co-founded the now ruling social democrat Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN).

**SICA in need of overhaul**

The Salvadoran-based regional integration bloc was reinforced by a new treaty—the second Carta de San Salvador—signed in 1962 by the area’s presidents. Twenty-nine years later it underwent a major change.

On Dec. 13, 1991, during a new summit meeting, the Protocolo de Tegucigalpa was signed in the Honduran capital, creating SICA and giving the revamped bloc a new legal-political framework focused on economic, political, social, and other aspects, and seeking integral regional development (NotiCen, Dec. 18, 1992).

Internal wars were then being waged in Nicaragua (1982-1990), El Salvador (1980-1992), and Guatemala (1960-1996), claiming hundreds of thousands of lives, conflicts which came to an end
after the presidents of these three countries, plus those of Costa Rica and Honduras, signed the Procedimiento para Establecer la Paz Firme y Duradera en Centroamérica in Guatemala in 1987.

The also Salvadoran-based SICA was established as the institutional framework for regional integration and began functioning Feb. 1, 1993, with the fulfillment of regional integration as a means to make Central America a region of peace, liberty, democracy, and development, based on respect and protection and promotion of human rights.

Ten summit meetings and more than a hundred structural bodies later, SICA is in need of change to free itself from part of a massive, mainly uncoordinated bureaucracy and thus enabling it to enter an era of transparency and efficiency. So said the region’s leaders in their two latest meetings, and they told their foreign ministers to come up with proposals to that effect by May.

During their 40th regular meeting in Managua on Dec. 13, SICA’s heads of state and governments agreed to "instruct the foreign ministers to carry out a deep, thorough evaluation of all [the bloc’s] bodies, councils, and secretariats," according to Point 14 of the 20-item Joint Declaration they signed.

The ministers are to "submit, in no later than five months, the pertinent reforms that guarantee efficiency, transparency and equitable participation...of every SICA member country" in the organization’s structure, added the leaders.

Nicaragua then handed the bloc's six-month, rotating presidency over to Costa Rica, for this year’s Jan. 1-June 30 semester.

During a meeting of Latin American and Caribbean heads of state in Santiago, Chile, SICA leaders agreed on Jan. 27 that, "in order to fulfill...Point 14" of the Managua declaration, they would "commission the foreign ministers to put into motion a road map and prepare a proposal to be taken up by the presidents’ meeting."

SICA’s leaders also agreed "to reiterate the appropriateness that the said evaluation process and proposal of reforms be based on the basic Central American principles contained in the corresponding legal instruments and the guidelines set during the presidents’ meeting" in Managua.

Costa Rica to lead reform efforts

Before the SICA meeting in Santiago, Costa Rica’s President Laura Chinchilla told a press conference at the Casa Presidencial last month that the country was ready to promote reform of the regional system. "We are pretty enthusiastic with the presidency of SICA, because one of the issues we agreed on, toward the end of the previous presidency [Nicaragua’s], was to include a topic that will allow us...to develop reform during this presidency," she said.

The first SICA ministers’ meeting with Costa Rica at the helm took place in San José on Jan. 22, forty days after the Managua summit and five days before the Santiago gathering of leaders. After the opening ceremony, work groups headed by different ministers were organized, each to discuss a specific regional issue, with reform as one of the outstanding topics.

Costa Rica’s Foreign Minister Enrique Castillo said a major priority was "the reform plan to strengthen the system. All we’re trying to do is to get SICA to be more efficient so its benefits reach the people."
Readying itself for the regional presidency, "Costa Rica has been working for months on an analysis of SICA’s present structure, and we’ve found that there are many deficiencies, that there are many areas that are not producing good results," Castillo told reporters after the opening of the one-day meeting in San José.

"The system is perhaps at a good point, but what happens is that it hasn’t finished maturing," the minister said. "It’s making progress, but it’s making progress very slowly, and at this point in time, it lacks transparency and efforts to be more effective."

"There’s not enough transparency in the handling of resources and in management…so, we’re going to propose a set of reforms during the coming months," Castillo said. "I don’t mean to say there’s misuse of resources, but there’s lack of transparency…at all levels, and we want to introduce transparency and accountability."

"A thorough review must be made, as the presidents ordered [in Managua], of the entire system…all the bodies," Castillo said, adding, as an example, that "there is an exaggerated number of bodies —more than 130 bodies in the integration system—and nobody knows what they do. There are no reports, there’s no auditing to tell us how everything is, how one could make the system transparent, and show what the budget of each one of those bodies is."

"Costa Rica is going to work, first, in drawing up some drafts which will later be submitted to the foreign ministers for polishing and, some months later, submitted to the [next] presidential meeting," the official explained.

"The proposal can be drawn up in six months," said Castillo, who warned, "For the reforms to be approved and produce effects means a lengthier process."

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