6-4-1993

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Venezuela: Congress Appoints Interim President

by Erika Harding
Category/Department: General
Published: Friday, June 4, 1993

Less than two weeks after Carlos Andres Perez was suspended from the presidency by the Senate, an interim president has been selected by congress. Ramon J. Velasquez a highly-respected independent senator, lawyer and journalist who has served under both the ruling Democratic Action (Accion Democratica, AD) party and opposition (Comite de OrganizacionPolitica Electoral Independiente, COPEI) administrations was chosen on June 4 to serve as Venezuela's temporary head of state. Velasquez's appointment received the backing of leaders from the military, private enterprise, the Catholic Church, and the media. After he is sworn in on June 8, Velasquez will serve out the remainder of Perez's term (Feb. 2, 1994), unless Perez is found not guilty in the fraud case pending against him, in which case he could be restored to office. Perez was suspended from the presidency on May 21 in order to face trial by the Supreme Court on charges of embezzlement (for previous coverage, see NotiSur 05/21/93.) Reports in the local and foreign press indicated that Velasquez accepted the appointment on the condition that the congress grant special powers allowing him to rule by decree. Velasquez denied that he had made such a request. However, he did acknowledge that the AD and COPEI parties had guaranteed him exceptional powers in order to confront the serious economic difficulties facing the country. In addition to appointing a new cabinet, Velasquez will also have to oversee a change in the military high command. In July, Defense Minister Gen. Ivan Dario Jimenez and other top military leaders will pass into retirement upon completion of thirty years of military service. Velasquez's appointment ended a week of political tensions and uncertainty stemming from the fact that Venezuela, like Brazil, had no legal precedent for suspending an active president from office in order to stand trial. Venezuela, unlike Brazil, however, has no post of vice president. Following the unanimous Senate vote to remove Perez's presidential immunity and proceed with a trial, congressional president Octavio Lepage immediately took over as interim president. However, a political and legal battle ensued when Lepage and his AD party supporters argued that he should serve for "at least" 90 days. The 90-day term was based on the AD's interpretation of a "temporary presidential absence," defined in the constitution as illness or travel outside the country. But the COPEI party argued that Perez's suspension constitutes an "absolute" absence, and as such, the head of congress was entitled to serve in the interim capacity for a maximum of 30 days. Following a wave of public protests against the AD, accompanied by rumors of possible intervention by the military to resolve the crisis, a broad spectrum of political forces agreed to back the election of Velasquez. Meanwhile, Perez has vowed to launch a high-profile campaign to prove his innocence. In his first televised appearance since the Senate vote, on May 24 Perez scoffed at the charges that he misused government funds. "What would I do with all this money? I am already 70 years old. Do I need it to keep me company in my grave?" He continued, "It would be absurd for me to resign. That is what they wanted all along and to do so would be to accept everything they are saying about me as true." Perez added that he remains confident his innocence will be proven in the courts and that he will be reinstated with full presidential powers within weeks. At the same time, Perez tacitly acknowledged recent reports that some of the funds linked to the embezzlement case were channeled to the presidential campaigns of Violeta Chamorro in Nicaragua, Jean Bertrand Aristide in Haiti and Jaime Paz Zamora in Bolivia. "My life has always been on the line for these struggles [for democracy], and not just for
Venezuela but for Latin America. My name is known everywhere" for these efforts, he said. Reports of Perez's assistance in these presidential campaigns surfaced in a recent story published by Spanish daily newspaper El Pais. On May 24, Nicaraguan Presidency Minister Antonio Lacayo confirmed the reports regarding the 1990 elections in Nicaragua, telling reporters that Perez indeed provided financial support to Chamorro's campaign, although he declined to specify the amount of the aid.

(Sources: Associated Press, 05/22/93; Deutsche Press Agentur, 05/24/93; Inter Press Service, 05/21/31, 05/22/93, 05/24/93, 05/25/93; United Press International, 05/26/93; Notimex, 05/23/93, 05/24/93, 05/31/93; Spanish news service EFE, 05/21/93, 05/25/93, 05/26/93, 06/01-04/93; Agence France-Presse, 05/21-26/93, 06/02-04/93)