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Chilean Insulza to Head OAS

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Jose Miguel Insulza of Chile's ruling Concertacion coalition and a Partido Socialista (PS) member has won the election to head the Organization of American States (OAS), filling the vacancy that has been open since Miguel Angel Rodriguez had to step down in October of last year. The lawyer and current interior minister in the administration of Chile's President Ricardo Lagos won 31 of a potential 34 votes from OAS member nations after Mexican Foreign Minister Luis Ernesto Derbez withdrew when it became evident he had lost the support necessary to stay in the race. Peru and Bolivia would not vote for Insulza because of regional disputes, while Mexico withheld its vote over the loss of its candidate.

Consensus for Insulza after competitors drop

The OAS election process has been frozen since October, with regional north-south divisions becoming clear during five tied votes between Insulza and Derbez in April. El Salvador's former President Francisco Flores (1999-2004) withdrew as a candidate on April 7, leaving the race to Derbez and Insulza. Each of five successive ballots on April 11 resulted in a 17-17 tie, with Caribbean and South American countries generally backing Chile and Central and North American countries backing Mexico. Unable to get past the stalemate, the OAS rescheduled the election for May 2 (see NotiSur, 2005-04-14). The postponement left room for a third contender to enter the race as a consensus candidate, but none emerged.

Peru's former President Valentin Paniagua (2000-2001) considered a run as did Peruvian Foreign Minister Manuel Rodriguez, but neither got timely backing from the administration of President Alejandro Toledo. Foreign Minister Derbez, the apparent US favorite after Flores' candidacy failed, withdrew the Friday before the vote.

Canadian Pierre Pettigrew had also, at that point, withdrawn his name from the running, eliminating the possibility that a serious third contender would break the Chile-Mexico impasse and emerge as the consensus candidate for the post.

A major turning point in the impasse was Paraguayan President Nicanor Duarte's decision to pull Paraguay's support for Derbez and give it to Insulza. Thus began the end of the Derbez campaign.

The governments of Brazil and Venezuela, in addition to the Chilean government, asked regional leaders to put their support behind Insulza. The organization has been without a permanent head since October 2004 when former Costa Rican President Rodriguez (1998-2002) had to resign as OAS secretary-general and return home to face charges that he accepted bribes during the privatization of the country's telecommunications monopoly (see NotiCen, 2004-10-14).
The support Insulza finally achieved brought 31 countries together, leaving the candidate three countries short of unanimity. Mexico abstained from the vote, with the government of President Vicente Fox angered by its candidate's failure, as did Bolivia, which has had a long-running dispute with Chile regarding access to the Pacific (see NotiSur, 2004-01-23).

In April, Bolivian Foreign Minister Juan Ignacio Siles was censured in the House of Deputies for talking about the possibility of armed conflict between the two countries regarding water from the Silala River. Peru cast a blank ballot, unwilling to support Chile because of allegations that the country delivered arms to Ecuador during a border war between Ecuador and Peru in 1995 (see NotiSur, 2005-04-08).

Tensions between Chile and Peru also increased following a number of incidents:

- a Chile-owned airline screened an in-flight video that Peruvians found derogatory toward their country;
- two Chilean graffiti artists were arrested in Peru for painting on historic Inca ruins in Cuzco last December; and disputes that continue regarding coastal-territory rights (see NotiSur, 2004-10-08).

As President Toledo struggles against a hostile Congress to remain in office, the OAS may soon have to deal with political instability in Peru. President Fox visited Peru and Bolivia in the days after the May 2 vote, promising to help Bolivia pressure Chile for access to the Pacific and signing gas-purchase agreements in La Paz.

**US loss and a leftward shift?**

In the days after the vote, South American newspapers broke stories that the US put its weight behind Insulza after Derbez had lost Paraguay, pressuring Mexico to end its run for the seat. This may have left the image that the US ultimately backed a winner, but Insulza's win marks the first time that the US's original hand-picked candidate did not triumph. Flores, favored by the US partly because of El Salvador's small troop commitment in the US occupation of Iraq, had to drop out because of lack of support, and Derbez, serving under the business-friendly Fox regime, could not hold on either.

The US later admitted that it played a role in pressuring Derbez to drop out. This led to observations that Insulza reflects another of the increasing number of populist candidates who are gaining top leadership posts throughout the region.

"The election of Insulza is a small earthquake at the OAS," says Kenneth Maxwell, a senior fellow at the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies at Harvard University. "Insulza's election should get Washington's attention above all because it demonstrates that inattention has consequences. The US badly misread the game at the OAS and misplayed its cards." Yet Insulza is far from radical. He has served in the Lagos administration where Chile's primary governmental focus has been to maintain strong internal economic growth and build external trade ties.
Under the Concertacion coalition government, there have been moves to expose the abuses and crimes committed under the dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990) and to modify some of the constitutional structures that gave disproportionate strength to Pinochetista political sectors (see NotiSur, 2004-11-19, 2004-10-22), but economic growth rates and social stability have been primary. Criticism has come from leftist Chileans that not enough is being done to name and prosecute torturers and repressors from the dictatorship.

One of the defining moments of Insulza's tenure showed his attention to state sovereignty, something that may resonate strongly through Latin America. In 1998, as England arrested Pinochet for human rights crimes and made moves to extradite him to Spain, Insulza sought to have the former strongman extradited home, saying Chilean courts were strong enough to try him (see NotiSur, 1999-06-11, 1999-03-26, 1998-10-23).

It was an interesting stance for someone who had been forced into exile in Mexico for years during Pinochet's regime, but the minister repeated that the "principle, not the person" was the issue. "Chile has a judicial power capable of judging Pinochet," he said. The stance cost him his job, and he did not return to federal office until Lagos took power and made him interior minister.

**Experience in building trade ties**

In 1981, Insulza was exiled to Mexico by the military government. In 1990, he returned home and took a number of jobs, including director of multilateral economic affairs in the Foreign Relations Ministry. In 1994, he became undersecretary of foreign relations under President Eduardo Frei (1994-2000), becoming foreign minister later that year. He gained the nickname "Panzer" in political circles for his political weight and influence. His main activity was building economic links for Chile, as well as modernizing and professionalizing the ministry's operations.

In 1996, he brought Chile in to the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR) and the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) group. He also worked toward creating a free-trade zone between MERCOSUR and the European Union (EU), an effort that subsequently faltered because of European agricultural subsidies (see NotiSur, 2004-10-15). Insulza now has an even larger challenge than rehabilitating democracy in his home country: he must attempt to assist 34 nations in maintaining and enhancing their governments. He says he will do this in a neutral manner, something Bolivia's and Peru's governments doubt.

Furthermore, the OAS, rarely a hemispheric heavyweight, is weakened after the resignation of Rodriguez and the divisive campaign to replace him. Many had hoped that Rodriguez would be able to renovate and streamline the OAS, giving the body greater effectiveness and regional weight. That task now falls to Insulza.