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Minister Quits to Avoid Political Trial

by LADB Staff
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The administration of President Alfredo Palacio has gone through frequent changes among those in its top posts, the latest precipitated by the resignation of Interior Minister Mauricio Gandara. Gandara faced a political trial for his handling of the mass protests in northeastern oil-producing provinces. The chaos in Palacio's government has made it appear unlikely that the package of "sacred" governmental reforms he is promoting will go forward any time soon.

More than 90 top officials changed in five months

Gandara stepped down on Sept. 8 at the request of the president as parliament members accused him of misconduct during oil-field protests in August. Gandara's resignation headed off a legislative censure, though it did not keep the ex-minister from openly criticizing his former superior. Gandara claimed that Palacio sought to provoke a "Cabinet crisis," with the collective resignation of all his ministers.

Palacio lost his most popular minister when he called on Economy Ministry head Rafael Correa to resign in August and others joined Correa on the way to the exit (see NotiSur, 2005-08-26). The move against Correa antagonized the self-designated "forajidos (outlaws)," whose protests earlier had helped turn former President Lucio Gutierrez (2002-2005) out of power in April of this year.

Left-wing critics of President Palacio say that the purge of his Cabinet and ouster of other high government officials represents the "right-winging" of his administration. Oswaldo Molestina of the Izquierda Democratica (ID) took over Gandara's position, provoking debate within the ID on whether to oust Molestina from its ranks or to embrace the Palacio administration. Molestina had previously been serving as minister of foreign commerce. Gandara's resignation marked the 92nd top official to be replaced in Palacio's term of less than five months.

Top officials in the financial and banking sectors, the Energy and Economic Ministries, and the chief negotiators in free-trade talks with the US, Peru, and Colombia were traded out for new faces, as were heads of government departments in charge of productivity, social security, telecommunications, and science and technology. There were also important changes in the department of social communication and the National Defense Ministry.

In a survey by Cedatos/Gallup, many respondents thought the frequent turnover had negatively affected governability in the country, a resource that was already in scant supply when Palacio took power. Cristian Espinosa, Ecuador's chief negotiator for the Andean Free Trade Agreement (AFTA), currently in its final rounds of talks, was asked to resign early in the Palacio administration. Molestina took over for Espinosa, but since he has been elevated to his new post, undersecretary of foreign trade Manuel Chiriboga has taken the top spot on the negotiating team.
Rumors have persisted that Foreign Relations Minister Antonio Parra Gil faces imminent removal, rumors that he has denied. The minister has been a strong critic of anti-coca fumigations that Colombia was conducting on the border. Human rights organizations praised Parra's stance in favor of Ecuador's sovereignty on the issue. There were announcements that Ecuador would take its complaints about the fumigations to international courts, but Palacio soon said there would be no suit against Colombia. Not only has Palacio's government undergone breakneck turnover in its top positions, it has also faced frequent popular opposition.

Quito daily El Comercio estimates that the country has undergone 19 protests that have paralyzed industry or transit since Palacio's inauguration. Most prominent were the petroleum-field stoppages in the Orellana and Sucumbios provinces that significantly reduced Ecuador's oil-export capacity. Gandara, under criticism for his handling of those strikes, cited the figure of 19 strikes, "one per week" in little more than four months. He warned that the country "could dissolve, a victim of anarchy."

Legislators accused him of facilitating the anarchy by failing to impose order in the striking provinces, where the occupation of petroleum fields slowed the country's exports to a trickle. Palacio has no party affiliation that he can call on for a support base. If skyrocketing oil prices foment strong economic growth for Ecuador and the president develops a more canny political sensibility than he has so far shown publicly, his administration may survive until the 2006 elections. The firing of Gandara is unlikely to hurt him with most sectors, since he was one of the most unpopular figures in the Cabinet. But the turbulence in the administrative staff is hurting Palacio's image, be it abroad, on domestic editorial pages, or in the public mind.

**New minister says no constituent assembly, pushes reforms**

Molestina announced that the administration would back down from its earlier call for an Asamblea Constituyente to reform the Constitution but that it would be trying to present a popular referendum on political reforms in December. Palacio has sought to get a package of reforms through to voters, but the legislature sent his first proposal back to his desk (see NotiSur, 2005-08-05).

"We are not talking about reforming all of the Constitution nor about giving all-embracing powers to some constituents," said Molestina, backing off from Gandara's prior insistence on holding a constituent assembly. He said the government had backed down because the initiative "violates the Constitution whose text does not foresee such a mechanism and because the country is not under a dictatorship that would justify its application."

"It's completely out of place and there is no necessity for an Asamblea because we're not in a dictatorship," said Molestina, admitting that Palacio had previously sought to propose one but backed off after listening to his advisers. While the administration recognized that it was not a dictatorship, some would prefer that it realize that it is a transitional presidency, or, in the words of opponents, a "weak government that lacks time" for its ambitious plans.
But shortly after he took office, Molestina began negotiations with the legislative majority coalition, composed of the ID, Pachakutik, and the Partido Social Crisitiana (PSC), along with Congress president Wilfrido Lucero, to set a date for a popular referendum.

Press reports contrasted Molestina’s willingness to negotiate with Gandara’s "hostile" demands for an Asamblea Constituyente. Palacio hopes to reach a "great national accord" and has characterized the ministers he has removed as seeking to conduct personal electoral campaigns. "Let us renounce any ambition in the next vote," Palacio said to his ministers. The reform package, he said, "cannot be used as a political weapon against anyone...the political reform is sacred."

Editorial writers at El Comercio criticized the effort to reform the Constitution, saying instead that the emphasis should be on repairing the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ), which President Gutierrez dissolved in December 2004 (see NotiSur, 2005-07-29). "The Constitution was broken" then, wrote the editors. "Before a new Constitution, where the need for reform seems like a chronic illness, there still remains a need to renew the national political culture that would teach us to respect the present legal framework."

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