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Diplomats from Argentina, Costa Rica in the Running for U.N. Secretary-General

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In the race for what has been called the “most difficult job in the world,” that of UN secretary-general, Susana Malcorra of Argentina and Christiana Figueres of Costa Rica are vying for the position. At the end of this year, current Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s two-term mandate will come to an end. Before his departure, the UN Security Council is vetting candidates to decide who will hold the world’s top diplomatic post.

Malcorra, Ban Ki-moon’s former chief of staff, was recently appointed minister of foreign affairs by Argentina’s new president, Mauricio Macri, and is seen as an insider who knows how to work the levers of the UN bureaucracy (NotiSur Dec. 4, 2015, and Jan. 29, 2016). Figueres, who stepped down as head of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in July, is running on the strength of the successful COP 21 conference last December, which delivered the Paris Agreement on climate change (NotiCen, Aug. 4, 2016).

The two Latin American candidates aspire to be the first secretary-general from the region since Peru’s Javier Pérez de Cuéllar served two terms, from 1982 to 1991 (NotiSur June 17, 1994, and Oct. 14, 1994). However, under an informal system known as “regional rotation,” there is a strong possibility that the job will go to a candidate from Eastern Europe, a region that has not yet led the UN. At the same time, a growing chorus has called for the UN to elect a woman for the first time, something that would boost the candidacies of Malcorra and Figueres.

The next secretary-general will face a host of challenges, including the ongoing civil war in Syria, the rise of the Islamic State, scandals over UN peacekeeping operations in Africa, and a flow of migrants that has created the world’s largest refugee crisis since World War II. For Latin America and the Caribbean, the main issue concerns the UN’s role in Haiti’s cholera epidemic (NotiCen, Nov. 18, 2010, and March 28, 2013).

As established by the UN Charter, the election of a secretary-general is somewhat opaque and rests largely in the hands of the five permanent members of the Security Council, the P5, who hold vetoes. However, with a push from the UN General Assembly and civil society groups, this year’s election process has been the most transparent in the world body’s 70-year history, with resumes, public debates, and press conferences shedding light on what is normally a secretive process (NotiCen, Aug. 4, 2016).

Thus far, the UN Security Council has conducted three closed-door straw polls. The Aug. 5 vote resulted in Malcorra polling third and Figueres eighth out of 12 candidates. A third poll, on Aug. 29, showed Malcorra in fifth place and Figueres tied for ninth, this time out of 10 candidates.

Argentina’s insider
Malcorra, 61, spent most of her career in the private sector, first at IBM and later at Telecom Argentina. She ultimately became Telecom’s first female CEO, but her tenure was marred by
bankruptcy proceedings following Argentina’s 2001 economic crisis. In a remarkable career turnaround, however, Malcorra joined the World Food Program in 2004, climbing to the title of chief operating officer and deputy executive director. In 2008, she was appointed head of the Department of Field Support, which oversees UN peacekeeping operations. Finally, in 2012, she was elevated to chef de Cabinet, essentially making her the secretary-general’s principal assistant.

Her insider position is both a positive and a negative, according to UN observer Felix Dodds. “She clearly knows the UN and what needs to be undertaken, having been at the center of it for five years,” he wrote in his blog in August, following the second straw poll. “This, though, may in the end have countries seeing this as a third term for the policies of Ban Ki-moon, and they will have an opinion on that.”

One issue where her insider status may prove a drawback is the outbreak of cholera in Haiti, which is estimated to have killed at least 10,000 people. Following years of accusations that UN peacekeepers deployed to the country after the 2010 earthquake were responsible for the outbreak, the UN finally acknowledged its role in a statement released in August. Malcorra has been questioned publicly on the issue but has declined to comment because of the ongoing investigation, prompting criticism that she has not been sufficiently outspoken about the UN’s responsibility.

While Malcorra has polled well thus far, she will have to persuade the UK not to veto her candidacy over the long-simmering dispute with Argentina over the Falkland/Malvinas Islands (NotiSur, Dec. 14, 2007 and July 17, 2015). In June, Luke Coffey, of the conservative US think tank Heritage Foundation, called on the UK to block Malcorra in a Huffington Post opinion piece. “It is time for the UK to stand up for what is in Britain’s national interest and make it crystal clear that it will veto Ms. Malcorra [sic] candidacy, not only over concerns over the Falkland Islands, but also because her track record serving at the very top of the UN during a scandal revealed her poor character,” he wrote.

The scandal in question concerns serious allegations of UN peacekeepers in Central African Republic molesting children. A Swedish diplomat who raised red flags about the issue was accused by a UN oversight office of “misconduct,” though he was later exonerated. An independent panel convened by Ban Ki-moon criticized Malcorra for a “conflict of interest” after she facilitated a meeting between the oversight office and a UN ethics body—two organizations that should remain separate—on the topic of how to deal with the Swedish diplomat.

In public comments, Malcorra has said that the administration of former President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner “over focused” on the Malvinas question. When her nomination was announced in May, Malcorra professed, “I love this organization. I deeply believe the UN is needed more than ever before.” In August, Ban Ki-moon traveled to Argentina for the opening of a regional office of UN Women and praised Malcorra in public comments, although he refrained from making any official endorsement of the candidate.

Costa Rica’s crusader for climate change

Figueres, 60, comes from a political background. Her father was president of Costa Rica three times and her mother served as Costa Rica’s ambassador to Israel. Figueres herself has spent 35 years in diplomacy, including, most recently, a six-year stint in Bonn as head of the UNFCCC. Although a latecomer to the race—her nomination was the last to be announced, in July—she comes with a significant feather in her cap following the successful outcome of the COP 21 conference in Paris late
last year, which resulted in the landmark Paris Agreement on climate change (NotiCen, Jan. 7, 2016, NotiSur, Dec. 18, 2015, and Jan. 8, 2016).

She has subsequently made climate change a pillar of her candidacy. “Environmental, human rights, and empowering women—if we do that today, we are actually seeding peace for tomorrow,” she said in a telephone press conference with journalists on the day her candidacy was announced.

While she polled a low ninth in the late August vote, observers think her star can still rise. “She is possibly best placed if the regional rotation doesn’t continue to move up the field in the next few straw polls,” Dodds wrote. “She has no great negatives on why countries might not support her, other than perhaps being seen as not yet known for her views on peace and security.”

Indeed, Figueres’ hurdle is a comparative lack of experience on those topics, which are among the most vexing issues the UN faces. The ongoing civil war in Syria is a prime example of what the secretary-general will have to tackle on day one.

When asked about that issue, Figueres was both self-aware and assertive. “I recognize my learning curve is the tough issues of peace and security,” she said at the press conference. “My past six years demonstrate that I am a multilateralist, I am an effective diplomat, I actually can get things done. I would dare argue that the Paris Agreement was one of the most successful negotiations of the UN on a not unimportant and not undifficult task, so I believe I have proven my stripes.”

On the Haiti cholera issue, Figueres said at the July press conference—before the UN publicly admitted to playing a role in the epidemic—that the spread of the disease was a “very, very painful reality of the UN.” She did not go as far as to endorse calls for payouts to victims, however. “The UN is in no position to make personal, individual reparations,” she said. “What the UN can and must do is to make sure there is no further harm in Haiti, eradicate the disease, and make sure this never happens again.”

Having entered the race after Malcorra, Figueres was also asked if she could count on support from the Latin American bloc. However, she deflected that question as irrelevant. “These candidatures have to be understood, not as regional candidatures, they have to be understood as global candidatures,” she said. “The secretary-general is expected not to represent any sub-region or continent, but rather can and must represent humanity.”

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