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Fox Nominates Foreign Relations Minister Derbez for Top OAS Post

by LADB Staff

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In a surprise announcement, President Vicente Fox nominated Foreign Relations Secretary Luis Ernesto Derbez Bautista as a candidate for the post of secretary-general of the Organization of American States (OAS). Fox offered Derbez's name when seven Central American nations were unable to agree on a consensus candidate to replace Costa Rican Miguel Angel Rodriguez, who resigned after only two weeks in office (see NotiCen, 2004-10-14).

The Central American countries believe their region is entitled to another turn at running the 34-member organization because Rodriguez's tenure in office was so short. The problem is that the one Central American candidate to emerge as a possible replacement, former El Salvador President Francisco Flores (1999-2004), lacks unanimous support. Leading the opposition is Honduran President Ricardo Maduro (see NotiCen, 2004-12-02).

Fox's decision to throw Derbez's hat into the ring came as a surprise because administration officials, as recently as late October, were quoted as saying that Mexico did not intend to nominate anyone for the OAS post. The officials made those statements to quell rumors that the Fox government was considering nominating former President Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000). Derbez had also dropped some hints that he was considering seeking the 2006 presidential nomination for his party, the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN).

The daily newspaper El Universal said Derbez requested that Fox nominate him to the OAS post after recognizing that his chances of winning the nomination were almost nil against heavyweights like Interior Secretary Santiago Creel Miranda and former congressional leader and energy secretary Felipe Calderon Hinojosa. "

Administration sources said Fox immediately accepted Derbez's proposal and ordered his staff to draft a letter explaining Mexico's intention to support Derbez to lead the OAS," said El Universal. In announcing the nomination, Fox emphasized that Derbez is well-respected in the US and Latin America and would bring new energy to the post. "He is credible, he is respected, and, from my point of view, he is a great leader who will bring a wonderful dynamic to the Organization of American States," Fox said.

Derbez, who earned a doctorate in economics from Iowa State University, spent 14 years working for the World Bank in Washington. Administration sources said another selling point for Derbez is that Mexico has never held the top leadership post in the OAS since the organization was created 56 years ago. The OAS secretaries-general have come from Colombia, Chile, Uruguay, Ecuador, Argentina, Brazil, and Costa Rica. "We believe that Derbez has good possibilities of creating a consensus among the majority of the 38 member nations," said an administration spokesperson.

Derbez faces stiff competition

Derbez's nomination complicates the selection of the next secretary-general of the OAS, which by tradition has chosen its leaders through consensus. The Mexican foreign relations secretary would be one of three high-profile candidates, each with his own constituency. Among the countries that have announced support for Derbez are Canada, Belize, and Paraguay. Derbez's strongest potential rival is Chilean Interior Minister Jose Miguel Insulza, who appears to have obtained the backing of Brazil, Argentina, and other South American countries. "Most South American nations are supporting Jose Miguel," Chilean President Ricardo Lagos said in a radio interview. "We feel we have a good chance of winning."

The Mexican decision to run Derbez came as a surprise to Chile, which said there was no mention of this during recent consultations between the two countries. "We were a little surprised by the announcement of [Derbez's] candidacy," Lagos told a Chilean newspaper.

Similarly, Flores remains in the running because of strong support from US President George W. Bush's administration. The Fox government had considered the possibility that the US would back Derbez, but the Bush administration has been adamant in its support for Flores. The Bush government is said to favor Flores because of his support for the US invasion of Iraq, which Mexico opposed (see SourceMex, 2002-11-06 and 2003-02-26).

Bush administration officials deny that this is the principal motivation, pointing instead to their commitment to the OAS being led by a Central American. "The United States position has been for some time, and continues to be, support for a consensus candidate from Central America, preferably a former president," said the US State Department.

Some analysts said the Fox administration might be putting itself in a difficult position because Derbez's candidacy might create some tensions with the US. "We have not resolved what kind of relationship we want with the US," said Lorenzo Meyer, an analyst at Colegio de Mexico (COLMEX) who specializes in US-Mexico relations. Flores is hoping to garner support from neighboring Central American nations.

Although their support for the former Salvadoran president is weak, countries like Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Panama are adamant that the next OAS secretary-general come from the isthmus. "We respect Mexico's right [to nominate Derbez], but the Central American countries already have our candidate," said Salvadoran President Tony Saca.

Domestic reaction to Derbez mostly negative

Derbez's appointment received mostly negative reactions in the Mexican press, although there were some positive comments. Among those supporting Derbez was prominent syndicated columnist Miguel Angel Granados Chapa, who said the foreign relations secretary has enough international stature and administrative capability to end the crisis that has prevailed at the OAS since Rodriguez's resignation in October.

Other political observers questioned Derbez's qualifications to lead the multilateral organization. Analyst Raymundo Riva Palacio, in a column published in the Mexico City daily newspaper *El Universal*, said Derbez has a poor track record in both the Secretaria de Economia (SE), which he headed in the early period of the Fox government, and in the Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE). "His principal contribution at the SE was to ignore the flight of dozens of maquiladora plants to Asia," said Riva Palacio.

Derbez was accused of talking tough but taking no action while China lured maquiladora facilities away from Mexico with unfair tax incentives (see SourceMex, 2002-07-17 and 2002-11-13). Critics said Derbez continued the policies implemented by his unpopular predecessor Jorge Castaneda when he moved to the SRE (see SourceMex, 2003-01-15). "With the policies of total surrender to the US under this government and the bad rapport that Derbez has with his Latin American counterparts, I see this candidacy as very difficult," said Riva Palacio.

Similar statements came from political columnist Sanjuana Martinez, who writes for *Agencia de noticias Proceso* (apro). "While lobbying for the post, he should have received a strong endorsement from the US," said Martinez. "Instead, he found to his great surprise that the government of US President George W. Bush does not favor him." Joel Hernandez, another political columnist for the daily newspaper *El Universal*, suggested Chilean candidate Insulza might be more popular in Mexico than Derbez. "Insulza is an old friend of Mexico, having lived here while in exile because of his opposition to the regime of dictator Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990)," said Hernandez.

Hernandez said Insulza might be more qualified for the post than Derbez, having served in various high-profile capacities such as interior minister and general secretary for the Chilean president. "But the basis for his prestige was constructed through his performance as foreign relations minister for his country," said Hernandez.

The Mexican Congress offered weak support for Derbez's candidacy, but directed the lion's share of its criticism at Fox. "The Fox government has once again embarked on a foreign policy of personal interests and not of state," said Deputy Samuel Aguilar Solis, coordinator of international issues for the opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Aguilar accused the administration of proposing Derbez without holding informal consultations with key members of Congress and without ensuring wide support in the hemisphere for its candidate. Aguilar said, however, that the PRI stands ready to support Derbez if Fox is able to consolidate support from a majority of OAS members and puts forth a viable proposal of reform for the organization.

The possibility that Derbez may leave the SRE has brought speculation about his replacement. The most frequently mentioned names are deputy secretaries Geronimo Gutierrez and Miguel Hakim. Others say Fox may take the opportunity to make a political appointment, handing the job to outgoing PAN president Luis Felipe Bravo Mena or Mexico's Ambassador to Washington Carlos de Icaza. (Sources: Reuters, 12/07/04; Notimex, 12/07/04, 12/08/04; *La Cronica de Hoy*, *The Herald-Mexico City*, 12/08/04, 12/09/04; *El Diario de Yucatan*, 12/09/04; *El Financiero*, 12/07/04, 12/10/04; Spanish news service EFE, 12/07/04, 12/09/04, 12/11/04; *Agencia de noticias Proceso*, 12/07/04, 12/08/04, 12/13/04; *El Siglo de Durango*, 12/13/04; *El Universal*, 12/07-10/04, 12/13/04, 12/14/04; *La*

Jornada, 12/08/04, 12/09/04, 12/13/04, 12/14/04; Associated Press, 12/14/04; La Crisis, 12/08-10/04;
12/15/04)

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