

11-9-2000

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Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Honduran Parties Accept Arbitration to End Crisis Over Presidential Candidates." (2000).
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Honduran Parties Accept Arbitration to End Crisis Over Presidential Candidates

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Honduras

Published: 2000-11-09

One year before the next presidential election, Honduras has been thrown into a political crisis regarding the eligibility of a popular candidate of the opposition Partido Nacional (PN). The crisis stems from an attempt by the governing Partido Liberal (PL) to block Ricardo Maduro of the PN from running in the presidential elections next year. Polls show Maduro leading over all other possible contenders in the 2001 race.

In September, Liberals claimed Maduro was ineligible to run because he did not meet the constitutional requirement that a president must be Honduran by birth. Maduro, who was born in Panama, says his mother is Guatemalan but acquired Honduran citizenship through her mother. Maduro argues that the Constitution considers Honduran anyone born of at least one parent who was a Honduran citizen. He also points to his tenure as president of the Banco Central and as a Honduran deputy in the Parlamento Centroamericano (PARLACEN). Both posts have the same nationality requirement as the presidency of Honduras, he said.

Maduro claims that behind the attempt to block his candidacy are PL leaders banker Jaime Rosenthal, National Assembly president Rafael Pineda, and PL president Jorge Arturo Reina all potential presidential candidates.

Electoral tribunal invalidates candidacy

As the argument dragged on, the Tribunal Nacional de Elecciones (TNE) ruled in early October that Maduro's status would have to be settled before it could allow his participation in the PN nominating process Dec. 3.

The PN counterattacked, charging that Liberal contenders Pineda Ponce and Rosenthal did not qualify under the nationality rule either. Pineda was born in Guatemala. Nationalists went so far as to denounce Pineda before the TNE for having changed his name. Rosenthal was born in Honduras but of foreign parents. Soon, the media noted that few current or potential candidates for high office could qualify because of foreign birth and mixed parentage resulting from immigration policies instituted in the nineteenth century that attracted immigrants from the Ottoman Empire, Nazi Germany, and elsewhere.

The PN threatened to drop out of the election if Maduro were not allowed to run. PN leaders also said they might resort to civil disobedience. Political observers began saying the situation could lead to violence and an interruption in the electoral process, threatening the nation's stability. With the political system in crisis, Juliette Handal, president of the business organization Consejo Hondureno de la Empresa Privada (COHEP), questioned the viability of the judicial branch. "There is no juridical authority because there is no credible and reliable justice system," she said. Various civic organizations and the Catholic Church proposed arbitration through an ad hoc tribunal.

On Nov. 3, President Carlos Flores and leaders of the five political parties signed an agreement aimed at ending the crisis. The agreement (Acuerdo Patriotico) came after the dispute turned to threats of reprisals and after representatives of donor countries asked the government to find a peaceful and transparent solution. Flores was clearly concerned about the international fallout of the crisis and the possible negative effect on donors and investors.

After a meeting with Pineda, US Ambassador in Tegucigalpa Frank Almaguer told reporters that a peaceful resolution was fundamental to foreign investment. The core of the agreement is to have the five party leaders and four "notables" designate a panel of independent jurists to review the Maduro case and issue an opinion on the nationality requirement. All five parties agreed to abide by the opinion.

Partido Liberal searches for nominee

Meanwhile, the Liberals are tied up in internal disagreements about their candidates for the 2001 elections. Some of the major disputes among party factions are over candidates for mayoral posts, and one of the candidates has been directly affected by the Maduro controversy.

Assembly Deputy Luz Ernestina Mejia was pushed aside in her bid to become the PL nominee for mayor of Tegucigalpa after she publicly disapproved of the party's attempt to keep Maduro out of the presidential race. [Sources: Reuters, 10/30/00; Spanish News Service EFE, 10/10/00, 11/04/00; El Tiempo (Honduras), 11/04/00; Notimex, 10/25/00, 10/29/00, 10/30/00, 11/01/00, 11/02/00, 11/06/00; La Prensa (Honduras), 10/15/00, 10/20/00, 10/26/00, 10/28/00, 10/31/00, 11/01/00, 11/03/00, 11/05/00, 11/06/00, 11/07/00]

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