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Political Parties Chose Presidential Candidates

by LADB Staff

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As the major political parties choose presidential candidates for the next general election, the electoral process remains in crisis because of attempts by the governing Partido Liberal (PL) to block its most dangerous adversary in the Partido Nacional (PN) from entering the race. In its Dec. 3 internal party primary, the PL elected Rafael Pineda Ponce as its presidential candidate for the November 2001 elections. Pineda is currently the president of the National Assembly. The Tribunal Nacional de Elecciones (TNE) announced that Pineda won 40.3% of the vote, beating out six other candidates. The victory automatically makes him head of the PL.

The opposition PN held its internal vote late because of the crisis brought on by the governing party's claim that the PN's leading candidate, Ricardo Maduro, was ineligible to run for the presidency. The PL alleged that Maduro was not an Honduran citizen (see NotiCen, 2000-11-09). Polls showed that Maduro would get up to 70% of the primary vote and that he would likely win the November election. A PN win would deal a heavy blow to the Liberals, who have won four of the five presidential elections held since Honduras became an electoral democracy in 1982. PN leaders and some independent observers warned that, by prolonging the crisis, the PL risked violence and ungovernability.

Maduro's Arriba Honduras faction of the PN has asked the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) to remove TNE president Lisandro Quesada from the case, arguing that he lacks impartiality. Quesada has said the TNE would not register Maduro until the PL withdrew its objections to his candidacy. While the Liberal-dominated TNE refuses to settle the Maduro matter, it has made no effort to verify the nationality of Pineda, who the PN says was born in Guatemala. Jurist Pablo Valladares announced Dec. 26 that he would file a suit early in 2001 challenging Pineda's eligibility to run for office.

Valladares claims Pineda has not supplied the TNE with the original of his birth certificate and the copy he offered was falsified. Meanwhile, no resolution is in sight. A commission, which the parties agreed to set up in a pact (Pacto Patriótico) signed last November, was supposed to make the final determination on Maduro's nationality. But from the start, the commission was doomed to fail. The two Honduran members of the commission selected as the third member a Spanish jurist, Julio Gonzalez Campos, who is a respected member of the Tribunal Constitucional de Espana.

The PL rejected Gonzalez Campos with the argument that he was "too honorable and unimpeachable" to take part in the sordid controversy. "He is one of the most honest, capable internationalists in Europe," and should not get mixed up in domestic Honduran politics," said PL president Jorge Arturo Reina. Following Reina's lead, the Liberal member of the commission, Judge Ramon Valladares Soto, withdrew his support for Gonzalez Campos. He said that to involve Gonzalez Campos in the Maduro affair "would be to risk damaging his image."

Gonzalez Campos served in 1992 as a mediator in the border dispute between Honduras and El Salvador and may participate in settling the dispute between Honduras and Nicaragua over the Caribbean maritime boundary (see NotiCen, 2000-01-27). The argument by Reina and others that the Spanish jurist "is too good for us," is based on the premise that his participation in the political crisis would render him unacceptable as an objective mediator in future international disputes. Gonzalez resigned from the commission Nov. 13, saying that Reina's statement and adverse media comments made it impossible for him to serve.

Governing party refuses to accept commission report

The commission, composed of the two Honduran jurists and a Brazilian replacing Gonzalez Campos, issued its report Dec. 1, proclaiming that Maduro was a Honduran citizen and constitutionally qualified to take part in the election. The TNE should proceed with his registration, said the report. Under the terms of the Pacto Patriotico, the parties agreed to accept the commission's ruling and pass it on to the TNE. But Pineda said the report had no constitutional or legal standing and was simply the opinion of a commission with "good intentions." Reina and Quesada expressed similar views.

The TNE ignored the report and maintained its refusal to register Maduro. Maduro supporters then staged a demonstration Dec. 6 outside TNE headquarters resulting in a confrontation with police that left six people injured. The violence helped deepen the crisis when the Partido Democraata Cristiana de Honduras (PDCH) announced that its representative on the TNE, Lucas Aguilera, would abstain from voting on the Maduro issue. Aguilera said the PDCH feared increasing violence and did not want to participate until the issue was settled by the two parties themselves.

On Dec. 8, Maduro said he was pulling out of the race. He was replaced by Luis Cosenza, an ally in the Arriba Honduras faction, who promised to renounce his candidacy in favor of Maduro at the proper time. With the nationality issue still unsettled, the PN proceeded with its party primary Dec. 17. Cosenza won with 75% of the 800,000 votes. Then, at the party convention Feb. 3, 128 party leaders unanimously selected Maduro after Cosenza stepped aside and put the presidential nomination in the hands of the convention. In this complicated maneuver, Cosenza remains the official PN presidential candidate while the party tries to get Maduro registered with the TNE.

Maduro said he would demand that the TNE "respect my well-recognized rights, my contributions to the nation, and furthermore, my deep Honduran roots." PN sources told Notimex that the vote by acclamation expressed the party's desire that Maduro lead the ticket, and that his registration with the TNE would be the final act transferring the candidacy to him.

Human rights advocate to run

Before the two major-party candidates emerged, Ramon Custodio announced his candidacy. Custodio is the founder and past president of the nongovernmental human rights organization Comite para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos (CODEH). In August 1999, Custodio left CODEH and formed the Pueblo Unido movement. He said he would lead the Pueblo Unido ticket with support from various independent groups in the next presidential election. The PDCH, the Partido

Inovacion y Unidad Social-Democrata (PINU), and the Unificacion Democratica (UD) will also participate in the November elections. These smaller parties do not have primaries because they have no factions disputing the nomination.

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