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Political Crisis Ends, Maduro Registers

by LADB Staff

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The National Assembly voted unanimously Feb. 22 to approve Ricardo Maduro's registration as a presidential candidate for the Partido Nacional (PN) in the November elections. The move appeared to end the 16-month political crisis caused when the governing Partido Liberal (PL) tried to block his candidacy with the claim that he was not a Honduran citizen (see NotiCen, 2000-11-29, 2001-02-08). The Assembly approved a committee report that reasserted the constitutional provision that anyone born in another country to a Honduran parent is Honduran.

Maduro was born in Panama, but his mother was Honduran. Maduro has said all along that the PL leadership had invented the issue, noting that the question of his nationality never came up when he was appointed to head the Banco Central de Honduras, or when he was elected to the Assembly and the Parlamento Centroamericano (PARLACEN).

Recent polls show Maduro, who is president of the PN's executive committee, leading all other presidential contenders. CID-Gallup poll results released Feb. 26 indicated that Maduro would win the election, defeating PL candidate Rafael Pineda Ponce, president of the Assembly. Opponent Pineda Ponce breaks impasse In a surprise move, Pineda Ponce led the Assembly to its vote and ended his party's challenge to Maduro.

Explaining his about-face, Pineda Ponce said it was for national reconciliation, to restore public confidence in national institutions, and to avoid confrontations. There were also reports that the decision came after he exacted a pledge from the PN to support a Liberal bill to enfranchise Hondurans living abroad. Taking the moral high road, Pineda Ponce told the Assembly that "a politician thinks about the next elections, a statesman thinks about future generations."

As for his party's long struggle to disqualify Maduro, he said there was "no other motive than to guarantee the integrity of the law, to defend the institutions of the Republic and the legitimacy of the electoral process." However, Pineda Ponce did not entirely abandon the challenge to Maduro. He said that the Constitution was "imprecise" on defining nationality. "That imprecision...leaves open the option of registering Maduro, for one time only, as a presidential candidate."

The congressional decision ending the crisis does not prevent the PL from using nationality in the campaign. One campaign strategy under consideration is for the PL to ask voters to choose between one who is "genuinely Honduran" (Pineda Ponce) and one is not. Questions raised about US involvement Political experts consulted by the daily La Prensa said the congressional decision was the only way for both parties to end the political crisis. But the sudden turnabout by Pineda Ponce and the PL has raised a question about outside pressures.

Alfredo Landaverde of the Partido Demócrata Cristiano de Honduras (PDCH) charged that the US negotiated the congressional solution at a meeting Feb. 19 in the embassy residence between US

Ambassador Frank Almaguer and leaders of both parties. According to La Prensa, Almaguer told the leaders that the crisis was causing concern among the donor nations giving aid for recovery from the 1998 Hurricane Mitch. He also suggested that a confrontational campaign could affect future aid, said La Prensa.

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