Labarga Becomes First Florida Chief Justice
To Succeed Himself in More Than a Century

TALLAHASSEE – In 2014 Jorge Labarga became the first person of Hispanic descent to lead Florida’s judicial system as its chief justice. On July 1 he will become the state’s first chief justice to succeed himself in that office since the end of the Civil War.

The other members of the Florida Supreme Court chose Labarga to serve a second two-year term as chief justice and administrative head of the state judicial branch starting in July.

“It is a privilege to serve the people of Florida,” Labarga said. “My second term will continue the work started during the first – especially the efforts of the Access to Civil Justice Commission and implementation of both our new long-range plan and the first comprehensive statewide communications plan developed for the state courts system.”

Only the second Cuban-American appointed to Florida’s high court, Labarga, 63, came to Florida as an 11-year-old after the Cuban revolution. He graduated from Forest Hill High School in West Palm Beach and, from there, earned his bachelor’s degree in political science in 1976 from the University of Florida. Labarga remained at the university to attend law school and received his law degree in 1979.

No Florida chief justice has succeeded himself in office since Charles H. DuPont at the end of the Civil War. Elected chief justice in 1860, DuPont served during the war and then succeeded himself in 1865 when the federal government forced the state to adopt a new constitution that, among other things, gave the governor power to appoint the chief justice with approval of the state senate.
Labarga also will become the first person to serve more than a single term as chief justice since the late Justice B.K. Roberts held the post for a third non-consecutive term from 1971 to 1973. This was at a time when scandals at the Supreme Court interrupted the normal succession. Roberts also served as chief justice from 1953 to 1955 and again from 1961 to 1963.

Roberts was one of eight justices since 1845 who served more than one non-consecutive term as the state’s chief justice. Only DuPont and Labarga have been chosen for consecutive terms. Thus, only nine of the 55 chief justices before Labarga served multiple terms in the post.

The Court has long followed a custom of rotating the chief justiceship to the next most senior member who has not yet held the post. In this case, Justice James E.C. Perry normally would have received the rotation in 2016, but he will be forced into a constitutionally mandated retirement only a few months later and chose not to stand for election.

In Florida, chief justices are elected by the other justices – not appointed by the executive, as happens at the United States Supreme Court. All current members of the Court have served as chief justice except Perry.

In February 2012, the Court amended its Rules of Judicial Administration to permit a chief justice to serve successive terms provided the total does not exceed eight years. In an opinion at the time, the Court said that this amendment was meant “to strengthen the Chief Justice’s leadership role and allow for needed continuity in leadership.”

Before he became a justice on the Supreme Court seven years ago, Labarga served as a trial judge in Palm Beach County, presiding over civil, criminal and family court cases.

Labarga is the state’s 56th Chief Justice since Florida was granted statehood in 1845.

Labarga’s web biography is at:
http://www.floridasupremecourt.org/justices/labarga.shtml

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