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Interior Secretary's Departure Latest Crisis for President Zedillo's Government

by LADB Staff

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The resignation of Esteban Moctezuma Barragan as head of the powerful Interior Secretariat (Secretaria de Gobernacion, SG) renewed concerns about President Ernesto Zedillo's leadership ability and raised some questions whether he will be able to serve his full six-year term, which expires in the year 2000. According to an official announcement, Moctezuma left the post to become a special adviser to the president's new "federalism" program, which aims to decentralize the power of the executive branch and redistribute responsibilities to the legislative and judicial branches and to local and state governments.

Political analysts acknowledged that Moctezuma was ineffective in dealing with a number of crisis situations affecting the government, such as the lack of progress on talks with the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) in Chiapas and the failed efforts to reach agreement with the two largest opposition parties on political reforms. The two parties, the National Action Party (PAN) and the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) have refused to enter into negotiations with the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) unless the government seriously addresses charges of fraud in recent elections in Tabasco and Yucatan states.

Columnist Francisco Cardenas Cruz of the daily newspaper El Universal said Moctezuma's departure was predictable, since the former interior secretary lacked the political skills and experience to handle the job. Two other resignations were also attributed to misjudgments by Zedillo in selecting his cabinet in December. Jaime Serra Puche resigned as finance secretary after mishandling the devaluation of the peso, while Fausto Alzati was forced from his post as public education secretary after admitting that he lied about his college degrees. On the other hand, columnist Carlos Ramirez of the daily business newspaper El Financiero suggests Moctezuma may have been able to stay on as head of the Interior Secretariat had he not decided to assume negotiations during June with the farmers and consumers organization El Barzon, which was seeking a more comprehensive restructuring of debt for small- and medium-sized agricultural producers and business owners. According to Ramirez, the concerns raised by El Barzon were a matter to be handled by the Finance Secretariat (SHCP), and not the Interior Secretariat.

"Moctezuma's justification was that he wanted to avoid a future political problem," said Ramirez. "What Moctezuma did was to open a point of vulnerability for the Zedillo administration, since El Barzon is now channeling its complaints through the Interior Secretariat." Moctezuma was replaced by Mexico state Governor Emilio Chuayffet Chemor, who is considered an experienced and savvy politician and a firm negotiator but is also a member of a faction of the PRI known as "dinosaurs" because of their resistance to political reform. Nevertheless, Chuayffet has in the past enjoyed good relations with various factions of the PRI and with some members of opposition parties, which analysts say is a good sign as far as negotiations on political reform is concerned. Still, Moctezuma's resignation reinforced the perception of Zedillo as a weak president, since during

June, the president had staunchly promised to resist pressures to make changes in his cabinet. "The resignation of the president's main confidant should be viewed as a sign that Zedillo's presidency has totally lacked direction during his seven months in office," said El Financiero's Ramirez.

Similarly, prominent columnist Miguel Angel Granados Chapa describes Moctezuma's removal as "self mutilation" for the Zedillo administration. "This is an unmistakable sign of weakness," he said. "Just a few weeks ago, Zedillo seemed to be gaining the upper hand," said analyst Sergio Sarmiento of the daily newspaper Reforma. "Now it looks like he's losing control. I think we're moving very close to ungovernability." The questions surrounding the administration have even led to some theories that Zedillo may not be able to serve his full six-year term. "Can the president survive?" asked political analyst Denise Dresser. "Every week a new scandal breaks and every week the president seems less capable of dealing with it."

Meantime, it remains to be seen how effective Chuayffet will be in his new position, since the problems facing the government seem insurmountable. For example, new obstacles have appeared for the government in talks with the EZLN in Chiapas. In a communique dated June 30, the EZLN renewed its demand for national political reforms. The statement accused the PRI of "resorting to election fraud, selective crime, mass assassinations, repression, and the militarization of national life."

Among other things, the Zapatista statement criticized the recent murders of a judge and prosecutor in Mexico City who had investigated the government-declared bankruptcy of the capital city's bus company, saying they are further proof of the repressive atmosphere in Mexico. The statement also mentioned the killing of 17 peasants in Guerrero state during June, which opposition leaders have described as a "massacre." State officials, all members of the PRI, claim the peasants attacked a police detachment first at a roadblock, which prompted security forces to fire indiscriminately into the crowd. The peasants were participating in a march to protest local corruption, and the PRI's alleged abuse of power in Guerrero state.

Additionally, the EZLN criticized the federal government's failure to address charges that the PRI won gubernatorial elections in Tabasco and Yucatan states through fraud and vote-tampering (see SourceMex, 06/14/95). "Only a profound democratization of national life will enable the country to emerge from the crisis," said the statement signed by EZLN leader Subcommander Marcos.

For their part, government negotiators have retained a hard line, insisting that the government will not negotiate any matters with the EZLN that do not pertain directly to indigenous communities in Chiapas. The lack of agreement on this issue does not bode well for the negotiations. The last round of peace talks ended June 11 with no agreement on the deployment of rebel fighters and some 25,000 federal troops in Chiapas. Tensions in Chiapas are also fueled by a decision by the Zedillo administration to expel three foreign Roman Catholic priests from the country, accusing them of inciting peasant land invasions in Chiapas. The priests denied the charges and suggested the deportations were a warning to Bishop Samuel Ruiz of San Cristobal de las Casas, whom the government has accused of siding with the EZLN. (Sources: Agence France- Presse, 06/28/95, 06/29/95; El Financiero, Uno Mas Uno, 06/29/95; El Norte, El Universal, 06/29/95, 06/30/95; El Nacional, Reforma, 06/30/95; Associated Presse, 07/04/95)

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