

1-3-1996

President Ernesto Zedillo Announces Controversial Cabinet Changes

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "President Ernesto Zedillo Announces Controversial Cabinet Changes." (1996). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/3536>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in SourceMex by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

President Ernesto Zedillo Announces Controversial Cabinet Changes

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 1996-01-03

On Dec. 29, President Ernesto Zedillo announced the fifth cabinet reshuffle of his short tenure in office. Among the changes is a controversial decision to appoint Arsenio Farell Cubillas a close ally of former president Carlos Salinas de Gortari to head the comptroller's office (Secretaria de la Controlaria Nacional de la Federacion y Administracion, Secodam). Farell replaced Norma Samaniego, who was in the midst of an investigation into the financial affairs of Raul Salinas de Gortari, the brother of ex-president Salinas. Raul Salinas is accused of using high-level positions in government to illegally amass US\$100 million in secret bank accounts in Switzerland and other countries in Europe and the Americas. Some of the allegations also tie Raul Salinas to prominent Mexican narcotraffickers (see SourceMex, 12/06/95).

The new charges of corruption against Raul Salinas come on top of previous allegations that the former president's brother masterminded the assassination of Jose Francisco Ruiz Massieu, a high-level official of the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in October 1994. In fact, Raul Salinas was already in federal custody, awaiting trial in the Ruiz Massieu case when the new charges brought by Secodam and the Attorney General's Office (PGR) were announced. However, Farell's appointment to replace Samaniego has created strong skepticism that the full extent of corruption alleged against Raul Salinas and other members of the family, including the former president himself, will ever be known. As expected, Farell's appointment to head Secodam attracted immediate protests from members of opposition parties and independent legislators in the Chamber of Deputies.

"Now, with Farell, it is going to be practically impossible for us to get the information," said Deputy Adolfo Aguilar Zinser, an independent legislator. "It is clear that we will face extraordinary obstacles to carry out the investigation." This charge was echoed by Juan Guerra, a deputy for the opposition Democratic Revolution Party (PRD). "I think Farell is being moved into the comptroller's office to cover up the tracks of the ex-president and his brother in the illicit enrichment scandal," said Guerra.

Farell served as labor secretary and as head of the controversial government security commission under Salinas, and he remains very close to the president. Some political commentators suggested that Farell was chosen for the post to heal a split between Salinas and Zedillo and within the PRI itself. A major source of the conflict has been Zedillo's willingness to publicly blame ex-president Salinas for the devaluation of the peso in December 1994. Farell is said to have played a key role in trying to sooth a public dispute between Salinas and Zedillo early in 1995, hosting a dinner for the two after Salinas ended a brief hunger strike in March. Salinas has not only expressed strong resentment against Zedillo for linking him directly to the peso devaluation, but is also said to be very angry at the President for approving the arrest of his brother Raul in the Ruiz Massieu case.

Indeed, some political columnists suggest that as part of the truce between the current and former president, Zedillo agreed to back down on his vigorous investigation of the Salinas family. "Raul Salinas has heard in prison that his family has received guarantees of no further persecution," said columnist Jose Urena in the daily newspaper La Jornada. Urena, however, gave no further details of the alleged guarantees. Some political columnists suggest that Farell's appointment to Secodam, while easing tensions within the PRI, will also further erode Zedillo's credibility. "This is a monumental error," said prominent columnist Miguel Angel Granados Chapa. "Apart from signifying a revalidation of the Salinas system, there seems to be no logic in his appointment."

Despite all the criticisms, the Zedillo administration attempted to cast a positive light on Farell's appointment. "The new head of Secodam, with his ample knowledge of the law and ample government experience, will expedite the modernization of the federal government and take stronger and more efficient action toward preventing and combating corruption," the administration said in a prepared statement. The controversy over Farell's nomination as head of Secodam appeared to overshadow Zedillo's appointment of economist Jesus Reyes Heroles to head the Energy Secretariat (SE), replacing Ignacio Pichardo Pagaza. Unlike the Farell case, this appointment was met with very little opposition, and in fact was applauded by opposition legislators because of Pichardo's departure from office. Pichardo, who was considered a member of the so-called "dinosaurs" or "old guard" of the PRI, will be reassigned to a yet-to-be-determined diplomatic post.

Reyes Heroles, who leaves his post as director of the national public works bank (Banco Nacional de Obras Publicas, BANOBRAS), obtained a degree in economics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). According to an official statement, Reyes will "oversee the expansion and modernization of Mexico's energy sector." Among other things, Reyes will play a key role in the privatization of the country's petrochemical plants, which are currently operated by the state-run oil company PEMEX.

Among other minor changes announced by Zedillo in the December cabinet reshuffle was the appointment of Carlos Almada Lopez as his chief government spokesperson, replacing Carlos Salomon Camara. This was partly seen as a move by the president to spruce up his image. Salomon was widely criticized for rocky relations with the Mexican news media. Meantime, Samaniego, who left the post as head of Secodam, was named as a special adviser to Zedillo. With the changes announced in late December, Zedillo has replaced almost one-half of his original cabinet.

The most prominent departure was Jaime Serra Puche as finance secretary, who received a large share of the blame for the devaluation of the peso (see SourceMex, 02/08/95). Another major departure last year was that of Zedillo's close ally Esteban Moctezuma, who left the post of interior secretary in mid-1995. According to political analysts, Moctezuma had proven 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 resignation in mid-1995 of then-public education secretary Fausto Alzati also proved to be a major embarrassment to the Zedillo administration. Alzati was forced to leave his post after admitting he lied about his educational background.

The departures of Moctezuma and Alzati were announced in July of last year (see SourceMex, 07/05/95). Political analysts suggest that the latest cabinet changes announced in December are expected to greatly benefit Interior (Gobernacion) Secretary Emilio Chuayffet Chemor, who is close to many of the appointees. "Chuayffet must be smiling from ear to ear," said Reforma columnist F. Bartolome. "His team and influence are expanding in the midst of the current administration." Indeed, Zedillo's new spokesperson, Carlos Almada, is a close ally of Chuayffet. Almada left a high-level post in the Interior Secretariat (Secretaria de Gobernacion, SG) to take over his new post. (Sources: Agence France-Presse, 12/30/95; Excelsior, Reforma, Reuter, 12/30/95, 12/31/95; La Jornada, 12/30/95, 01/03/96)

-- End --