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Mexico's Long-Awaited Political Reform May Be A Case Of "Too Little, Too Late"

by Guest

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By John Ross

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Ever since his inauguration in December 1994, President Ernesto Zedillo has repeatedly promised "a definitive reform" of the nation's decaying political system, which he hopes will become one of the crowning achievements of his administration. However, in his effort to negotiate reforms, Zedillo has had to weather insults and walkouts from disenchanted leaders of the two largest opposition political parties. In one incident, the president was even forced to remove his close friend Esteban Moctezuma as interior secretary to pursue the reforms (see SourceMex, 07/05/95). Shortly after taking office in January 1995, Zedillo took the first step in his zealous pursuit of economic reform, creating the foundation for a tentative agreement by reaching a deal with the opposition Democratic Revolution Party (PRD).

In return for its acquiescence, Zedillo promised the PRD that Governor Roberto Madrazo of Tabasco state, whose election was marred by widespread fraud, would soon be removed. Madrazo is a leader of the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). This agreement with the PRD and the initial hopes of achieving political reform collapsed when PRI loyalists in Tabasco learned of the agreement. In angry protests in the state capital of Villahermosa, the Tabasco PRI members staged massive street demonstrations, burning cars and beating PRD supporters while local law enforcement officials stood by. At that point, then interior secretary Moctezuma was forced to junk the political-reform accord. The Villahermosa riot not only derailed Zedillo's effort to attain political reform, but also called into question the president's ability to control his own party.

Eventually, Zedillo was forced to take drastic action, removing his friend Moctezuma as interior secretary. In Moctezuma's place, Zedillo named Mexico state governor Emilio Chuayffet, who previously served as head of the federal electoral institute (Instituto Federal Electoral, IFE). Chuayffet, who is considered an effective deal-maker and is sometimes dubbed "the political president of Mexico," succeeded in jump-starting the stalled talks, luring the PRD back to the bargaining table with hints that Madrazo's days were numbered. However, despite the success in attracting the PRD back to the talks, Chuayffet has yet to deliver on Zedillo's promise to remove Madrazo as Tabasco state governor.

The first major breakthrough for Zedillo's political reform efforts occurred on April 15, 1996, when the administration and leaders of three political parties, including the PRI, announced agreement on a 21-page package that lists 79 adjustments to current electoral law and 28 amendments to the Mexican Constitution. The initial agreement was reached after 15 months of often bitter negotiation

among the PRI, the PRD, and the minority Labor Party (PT). The tentative accord includes some radical proposals. Among the most important are promises to separate the IFE from control by the executive branch of government, hold direct elections for the mayor of Mexico City, limit campaign expenditures to the equivalent of one peso per voter, provide equal access to the media through the establishment of an all-political television channel, create criminal penalties for electoral fraud, ease restrictions on coalition candidacies, elevate the referendum process to national status, extend the vote to three million Mexican citizens living in the US, and allow parties other than the PRI to incorporate the national colors in their emblems.

However, the PRI-PRD-PT accord lacked credibility because negotiations were concluded without the participation of the right-center National Action Party (PAN), which now governs four states and 11 provincial capitals, including three of the four largest cities in the country. The PAN, which had participated in preliminary discussions on political reform, walked away from negotiations in late 1995 to protest electoral fraud in the town of Huejotzingo, Puebla state, in November of that year. The PAN won the Huejotzingo municipal presidency by 900 votes, but had the victory snatched away by the PRI after a state electoral tribunal nullified results from PAN-won precincts. PAN officials were so angered by the tribunal's decision that party officials filed a formal complaint against the PRI with the human rights commission of the Organization of American States (OAS). "Huejotzingo contaminated political reform," PAN congressional leader Ricardo Garcia Cervantes told reporters at that time.

After months of wrangling, PRI officials who were intent on bringing the PAN back to negotiations ordered Huejotzingo's PRI mayor to step down from the post. The Puebla state legislature then voted PAN member Heriberto Ramirez Ceron to occupy the town's city hall. The decision succeeded in convincing the PAN to return to the negotiations. But party officials emphasized that negotiations would have to involve a true reform of the Mexican political system. "We insist on the true reforms that this country lacks, not just of laws, but of deeds and political practices," said PAN president Felipe Calderon, who was elected to the post earlier this year. According to Carlos Ramirez, editor of the weekly political commentary *La Crisis*, the PRI at times appears to be "lost" and "unable to function" without some sort of an alliance with the PAN. Indeed, former president Carlos Salinas de Gortari who narrowly defeated rival Cuauhtemoc Cardenas in the 1988 presidential elections had forged a strong alliance with the PAN to marginalize the PRD during his term in office. Cardenas ran under the banner of the National Democratic Front, the PRD's predecessor. He later challenged Zedillo in the 1994 elections. Ironically, the PAN's 100-day boycott of the reform talks produced creative bedfellows.

Staking his political legacy on passage of the reform package, the PRD's outgoing president Porfirio Munoz Ledo has made exaggerated statements to reporters, saying he considers 1996 "the last chance" for reforming the state. However, the Mexican Congress has four times approved some sort of political reform legislation during the past decade. Munoz Ledo's enthusiasm for the latest effort to enact political reforms has led to charges within PRD ranks that the party is being used by Zedillo, much as Salinas wooed the PAN to be a willing accomplice in previous PRI-led "reforms." Indeed, the PRD voting bloc in the Chamber of Deputies gives Zedillo the necessary two-thirds majority needed to modify the Mexican Constitution, just in case the PAN again withdraws from participation.

On the other hand, Munoz Ledo is a lame-duck president who will soon complete his term as head of the PRD. Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, the leading candidate to replace Munoz Ledo in elections scheduled for July, heads the militant Tabasco contingent. If elected, Lopez Obrador is certain to demand Madrazo's head in return for the PRD's support for political reform legislation. Additionally, Lopez Obrador has made it clear he strongly dislikes the PRI-PRD bargaining equation. "Negotiations between an elephant and an ant are never fruitful," said Lopez Obrador during the start of his campaign for PRD president in April. And, despite the lengthy laundry list of reforms, some critics have described the package of reforms as cosmetic. "These adjustments allow the PRI to remain in power," said Paulina Fernandez, an adviser to the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN).

Fernandez, who made the comments in a recent article published in the daily newspaper *La Jornada*, said the Zapatistas view electoral reform as being only one facet of the reform of the Mexican state itself, with particular focus on "the exercise and the distribution of power." Another issue troubling continued PRD backing of the political reform accord is the still-unresolved conflict with the EZLN in Chiapas. Long prison sentences handed down by a Chiapas federal judge to two accused Zapatistas on April 2 have triggered threats by the EZLN to break off peace talks with the Zedillo government, which had been scheduled to resume in June. "If there are no conditions for peace in Chiapas, then there are no conditions for political reform in Mexico City," said PRD legislator Adriana Luna Parra. For Zedillo, passage of the reforms and economic recovery are the two key factors in the PRI's election chances in 1997. "But economic recovery is endangered if there is no political reform," said analyst Ricardo Aleman of *La Jornada*.

The post of Mexico City mayor which many consider one of the most powerful positions in the country will be at stake in the 1997 elections. Loss of either the Congress or the capital, or both, would create an unprecedented situation in Mexican politics for Zedillo. No Mexican president has ever governed without such control. If this becomes the case for Zedillo, a weak chief executive who is sometimes tagged "the management consultant to the nation," analysts suggest the president might be forced to rely on heavy handedness, such as from the military, to survive.

Meantime, any political reform agreement must be submitted to a soon-to-be-convened extraordinary session of the nation's Congress. However, for all the ballyhoo and bluster that has accompanied "political reform," the actual package may be arriving "a day late and a dollar short" since the reforms must be codified into law by July to be in place for the crucial 1997 mid-term federal elections. The PAN's reintegration into the talks is sure to draw negotiations out long past the anticipated July passage, which means they may not be applicable in time for the 1997 elections. Meantime, the PAN has emphasized four themes that must be addressed during the negotiations: federalism, independence of municipalities, enforcement of the rule of law, and application of justice.

Additionally, support for the reform process among the Mexican public is nebulous at best. For example, a recent IFE survey of 3,500 voters indicated that roughly one-half of those responding to the poll believed that present electoral laws are adequate and only needed to be enforced. Even more disturbing was the fact that the vast majority polled roughly 75% did not associate "political reform" with "change." The IFE explained this surprising finding by citing a "lack of credibility in

the political actors." Ironically, the survey showed that 40% of respondents did not even know what the IFE was.

Concurring with the survey results, PRD Deputy Marco Rascon said, "People do not think that social change is going to come through elections anymore." Rascon lamented that the PRD has placed all its hopes on a reform package that now seems out of sync with political realities. Meantime, the EZLN's fourth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle, issued on Jan. 1, 1996, again addressed the lack of credibility in Mexican politics. In that document, the Zapatistas created a "political" front that would stand outside the party system and not compete in the electoral process. For the EZLN, true "political reform" means not just fiddling with the electoral apparatus but calling a constitutional congress and writing a new constitution, to "refund" the state.

The EZLN and its advisors have sought to advance their concept of political reform at the second round of ongoing peace talks in San Andres Sakem'chen de los Pobres, Chiapas, but the government has been reluctant to listen. Under the rubric of negotiations focusing on "democracy and justice" issues, the rebels and their corps of advisors have presented multiple proposals for the reform of the state at a "table" that mirrors those of other negotiations held among the mainstream political parties. However, according to the EZLN, government negotiators have been so deaf to the Zapatista positions that one EZLN advisor delivered her presentation in sign language. With a trace of irony, Marco Antonio Bernal the government's chief negotiator in the talks with the EZLN justified his reticence to accept the Zapatista proposals for national political reform by explaining that such proposals are dead-ended. "Political reform is reserved for the political parties," Bernal said.

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