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Four Major Parties Agree on Comprehensive Political, Electoral Reform

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Four Major Parties Agree on Comprehensive Political, Electoral Reform

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In late July, President Ernesto Zedillo and representatives of Mexico's four major parties formalized a broad agreement to enact comprehensive political and electoral reforms in Mexico. The agreement was reached after more than 18 months of difficult negotiations among the Interior Secretariat (SG), the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), and three opposition parties: the National Action Party (PAN), the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD), and the Labor Party (PT).

In a press conference on July 25, Interior Secretary Emilio Chuayffet Chemor announced that the SG and the four parties had reached agreement on 32 separate points. The agreement will now be used by the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate to draft proposals for a series of constitutional and electoral reforms to be considered during its next full session. A key point of agreement is the reduction of presidential powers in future elections. A major step in this regard is the separation of the federal electoral institute (Instituto Federal Electoral, IFE) from the SG. Under the agreement, the head of the institute will now be chosen by a majority vote in the Chamber of Deputies.

The new agreement will replace the existing system, in which the Interior Secretary has been the highest authority in the IFE. Other significant agreements reached by negotiators include:

Reforms to campaign financing

Legislators will establish a ceiling for election-related expenses. In addition, the agreement creates a mechanism for an increase in public funds for political campaigns to replace private donations.

Changes in the composition of the Chamber of Deputies

No political party will be allowed to have more than 300 representatives in the lower house. Under the existing system, parties are allowed up to 315 representatives. The limits will be enforced through a proportional selection of representatives from each party based on percentage of total votes won in an elections. The agreement also specifies a difference of no more than 8% between a party's numerical representation in the Chamber of Deputies and the direct support attained in the elections.

Direct election of a mayor for the Federal District

Until now, the mayor of the capital has been appointed by the president. Under the agreement, the first mayoral election in Mexico City has been scheduled for 1997. In fact, the various political parties had previously agreed on this point, but this is the first time the concept of a Federal District election has been written into a legally binding agreement.

Other changes in the Federal District

The agreement restructures electoral precincts and provides for direct election of the Mexico City attorney general, who until now was appointed by the executive.

New role for the Supreme Court in nationwide elections

The high court will receive the power to review the constitutionality of electoral laws and deal with violations of such laws. The reforms will also strengthen the role of the electoral tribunal (Tribunal Federal Electoral, TFE).

President Zedillo, who pushed for the reforms, praised the commitment of the leaders of the four parties in setting aside their differences to reach a consensus. Indeed, the PAN had withdrawn from negotiations on several occasions because of disagreements with a number of proposals offered by the PRI. For its part, the PRD has generally supported PRI-led initiatives during the negotiations, but threatened to withhold support for the final agreement because of last-minute changes SG officials made to the wording of the final text without consultation with PRD representatives. "United in plurality, we take a step toward the democracy that all Mexicans deserve and need," Zedillo said. He emphasized that the broad consensus among the various negotiators set the latest agreement apart from previous attempts at political reform. "This is a substantive, definitive step toward perfecting our democracy," Zedillo said. "There is no legitimate reason to fear the democratic process."

Leaders of the other political parties agreed with the assessment, but cautioned that the process of reform has only begun. "This is, without doubt, a significant step," the party leaders said in a statement. On the other hand, the leaders acknowledged that the efforts toward greater democratic process "will not end with this agreement." "This agreement represents a substantive change because we have created a mechanism to eliminate the vestiges of authoritarianism," said outgoing PRD president Porfirio Munoz Ledo. "Still, only time will tell if this represents a definite change." PAN President Felipe Calderon Hinojosa was also guarded in his praise for the agreement. "Constitutional reform does not necessarily mean we have arrived at the democratic regime that all Mexicans yearn for," said Calderon. "We need to see that the often vast difference between norms, laws, and what actually happens in practice is eliminated."

The PRI has held the presidency and tight control over the legislature since 1929. The party also held a tight grip on state houses until 1989, when Ernesto Ruffo Appel of the PAN won the governor's race in Baja California. Since then, the PAN has won three other governorships and the mayoral posts in several major cities, including Guadalajara and Monterrey. To a lesser extent, the PRD has made small inroads in some local elections, but has failed to gain the same support as the PAN. PAN and PRD leaders have expressed hope that the reforms could lead to more transparent elections in the 1997 congressional races, which would improve the chances for both parties to increase their representation in the Chamber of Deputies. Deputy Humberto Roque Villanueva, the PRI majority leader in the Chamber, expressed optimism that the proposal could bring about the changes needed in Mexico's political system. "With these reforms, we will be more than half way toward a complete democracy," Villanueva said. Members of two key committees in the Chamber have already begun to review the agreement signed by party leaders to draft legislation to codify the new electoral changes.

According to the daily newspaper Excelsior, the legislators have already discovered several areas that must be ironed out to draft text for legislation. Still, sources in the Chamber suggest that the differences are not insurmountable. "We can iron out those disagreements," said Deputy

Saul Gonzalez Herrera of the PRI, who chairs the committee on the interior and constitutional matters (Comision de Gobernacion y Puntos Constitucionales). Members of opposition parties in the committee Deputies Alejandro Zapata Perogordo of the PAN and Leonel Godoy and Jesus Zambrano of the PRD also expressed optimism that the differences will be bridged. "At this point, the PAN is not proposing any modifications to the proposal, only clarifications," said Zapata. "We do not want to create the opportunity for false interpretations of the agreement." Among the key disagreements is the question of whether former mayors of Mexico City, who were appointed by the executive, will be allowed to run for office in the new scheme. The PRI supports this measure, which is opposed by the PRD and the PAN. (Sources: La Jornada, El Financiero, Novedades, 07/26/96; El Financiero International, 07/29/96; Excelsior, 07/26/96, 07/29/96, 07/30/96; The News, 07/26/96, 07/31/96)

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