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Mexico: Chamber Of Deputies Approves Limited Electoral Reform Legislation

by John Neagle
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On Oct. 17, the Chamber of Deputies approved an electoral reform bill described as extremely limited by critics. In a surprise move, the rightist National Action Party (PAN) supported the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) version of the reform bill. In effect, the PAN abandoned its longtime demands for major electoral changes aimed at ending six decades of PRI dominance. According to Copley News Service, many PAN supporters were outraged. Leftist politicians accused PAN of participating in an "unholy alliance" with the PRI to keep the left from power. The 50-year-old PAN has been pressuring the government for electoral reform for years. Its campaign for reform intensified in the last 10 months since its 1988 presidential candidate Manuel Clouthier launched a hunger strike shortly before Christmas last year to insist on immediate and fundamental changes. Clouthier, who died in a car accident earlier this month, ended the fast after President Carlos Salinas de Gortari pledged to begin a congressional debate on electoral reform. On Aug. 28, the debate began in a special session of a multiparty electoral reform commission. The discussion was characterized by acrimony: both PAN and the leftist opposition insisted on a complete overhaul of the electoral system. PRI legislators offered a bill including a change that would effectively guarantee the party a continued majority in Chamber of Deputies, even if it won only slightly more than a third of the national vote. Consequently, the PRI would gain proportionately more seats in the Chamber than its proportion of the direct vote. Under the Mexican constitution, a two-thirds majority in the 500-seat Chamber of Deputies is necessary to pass new legislation. The PRI needed the support of 70 other congresspersons to obtain the two-thirds majority. At 1:40 a.m. Oct. 17, the Chamber voted, and PAN unexpectedly joined the PRI to pass the ruling party's bill "in general form" by a vote of 347 to 70, with one abstention. Most of the remaining 82 deputies walked out prior to the vote, protesting that despite all talk about electoral reform by PAN, PRI and everyone else, nothing had fundamentally changed. The bill's approval by the Senate is almost certain, since the PRI has 60 seats, compared to four held by the leftist opposition Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), and none by PAN. Unidentified leftist politicians cited by Copley suggested the PAN was "paying the bill" for its gubernatorial victory in Baja California state earlier this year. Some opposition politicians suggested PAN had compromised with the PRI in negotiating the outcome of the Oct. 15 local elections in Sinaloa state. Prior to publication of official results scheduled for Oct. 19, the PRI was claiming to have won all 18 mayoral races in the state, while PRI insisted it had won at least the state capital, Culiacan, and the resort city of Mazatlan. (Basic data from Notimex, 10/17/89; Copley News Service, 10/18/89)

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