

12-18-1996

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Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Governing Party Shakes Up Leadership Ahead of Mid-Term Elections." (1996). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/3673>

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Governing Party Shakes Up Leadership Ahead of Mid-Term Elections

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 1996-12-18

Faced with the possibility of losing its majorities in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate in the upcoming mid-term congressional elections in July 1997, the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in mid-December announced a major shakeup in its party leadership. The most visible change was the Dec. 15 election of PRI legislative leader Humberto Roque Villanueva as party president, replacing Santiago Onate Laborde. Roque Villanueva is considered one of President Ernesto Zedillo's closest allies.

In addition to Roque's election as party president, the PRI also incorporated 106 new members into its national political council, which will focus entirely on developing strategy for the 1997 elections. According to political observers, Onate Laborde was pressured into resigning by PRI leaders who were extremely displeased with the party's relatively poor performance in municipal and state elections during the past several months. The latest blow came on Nov. 10, when the PRI lost several key municipal and legislative elections in Coahuila, Mexico, and Hidalgo states to the two major opposition parties (see SourceMex, 11/13/96). As a result of those elections, the PRI lost control of the Coahuila and Mexico state legislatures.

PRI leaders were especially displeased with election results in Mexico state, since most of the losses occurred in communities surrounding Mexico City. Elections in that state were widely seen as a measuring stick to gauge the PRI's performance in the first-ever mayoral election in Mexico City in July 1997. Since 1995, the PRI has also lost important municipal, legislative, and gubernatorial races in the states of Baja California, Jalisco, and Guanajuato. Even in states where the PRI retained control such as Aguascalientes, Chiapas, Guerrero, Veracruz, and Michoacan the party has lost some of its grip. In addition to the party's recent electoral misfortunes, the PRI was also faced with growing dissent within its ranks.

In November and December, several long-time party loyalists resigned from the PRI. The most prominent defector was Sen. Layda Sansores of Campeche, who left the PRI to join the opposition Democratic Revolution Party (PRD). Sansores immediately secured the PRD's gubernatorial nomination for Campeche. Two other federal legislators also defected. Deputy Alejandro Rojas left the party to become an independent member of the Chamber of Deputies, while Deputy Maria Virginia Betanzos abandoned the PRI in favor of the PRD. In recent months, three former governors Dante Delgado, Francisco Luna, and Luis Ducoing also demonstrated their discontent with the PRI by resigning from the party.

Nevertheless, opposition leaders called the change in PRI leadership a "purely political" move intended to make Onate the scapegoat for the PRI's performance in recent elections. Both PAN president Felipe Calderon Hinojosa and his PRD counterpart Andres Lopez Obrador suggested Roque Villanueva's appointment represents a further hardening of the PRI's determination to win

the 1997 elections "at all costs." Calderon and Lopez Obrador were referring to the PRI's adamant opposition to limits on campaign spending for the upcoming elections. The PRI's insistence on relatively high campaign expenditures doomed talks with opposition parties on electoral reforms in November. As a result, the PRI-dominated federal legislature passed a watered-down version of electoral reforms reached by leaders of the PRI, PAN, PRD and the Labor Party (PT) earlier in the year (see SourceMex, 11/06/96 and 11/20/96).

For his part, Roque Villanueva promised to return the party to the populist roots that provided its past strength. Under Roque's leadership, the PRI is expected to resume its traditional emphasis on nationalism and to increase attention to social justice, two of the main themes in the PRD's platform. "Historically our party has been receptive to the changes that society demands, and we know how to interpret these calls and adapt to new circumstances with new actions," Roque Villanueva told the 277 members of the PRI's national political council.

Roque is also expected to continue the PRI's support of Zedillo's pro-business agenda, partly to counter some of the gains the PAN has made in urban areas. PAN mayors currently govern 10 out of Mexico's 12 largest cities. "We will continue as a party that is inclusive and centrist," said Roque. "We will not succumb to the defects of either the left or the right." Roque Villanueva also warned that an opposition-dominated legislature could limit President Zedillo's ability to govern effectively, which could scare foreign investors and have a negative impact on the Mexican economy. "Voters would oppose this scenario," said Roque, "because the repercussions would be felt principally in the pockets of workers." (Sources: El Economista, 12/03/96; Associated Press, United Press International, 12/15/96; Excelsior, 12/11/96, 12/15/96, 12/17/96; La Jornada, 12/10/96, 12/11/96, 12/16/96, 12/17/96; Novedades, 12/03/96, 12/10/96, 12/16/96, 12/17/96; The News, 12/10/96, 12/12/96, 12/16/96, 12/17/96; El Universal, 12/03/96 12/10/96, 12/16-18/96)

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