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## Opposition Parties Present Official Response to President's State Address

by LADB Staff

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In a historic turn of events, on Sept. 1, a coalition of opposition parties presented the first-ever official response to a Mexican president's annual State of the Union address. The response was delivered by Porfirio Munoz Ledo of the Partido de la Revolucion Democractica (PRD) in his capacity as newly elected leader of the Chamber of Deputies. The speeches from both President Ernesto Zedillo and Munoz Ledo were presented before the current members of the Chamber of Deputies and Senate, Zedillo's cabinet, and most of the country's 31 governors.

The speeches marked the symbolic start of the new legislative session, which for the first time in modern history will not be dominated by the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). In the recent July 6 elections, the PRI won 239 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, while the four opposition parties the PRD, the Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), the Partido del Trabajo (PT), and the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM) together won 261 seats (see SourceMex, 07/09/97).

The opposition parties used their newfound majority to end PRI dominance of the Chamber by forming a coalition to work on common issues, including a reduction in the value-added tax (impuesto al valor agregado, IVA) and changes to the protocol governing the State of the Union address (see SourceMex, 08/13/97). After negotiations between the coalition parties and the Secretaria de Gobernacion (SG), President Zedillo agreed to stay to listen to the official response from Munoz Ledo.

### *PRI legislators had threatened to boycott speech*

Opposition insistence on a higher profile on the occasion of the State of the Union address had angered members of the newly elected PRI coalition. According to the PRI, the demand violated the Constitution, which gives the president the right to determine the format of his speech. To express its displeasure, the PRI delegation boycotted the first working session of the Chamber of Deputies, held two days before the State of the Union address. In that session, representatives from the four opposition parties elected Munoz Ledo as legislative leader.

Calling the session an "illegal act," the PRI delegation threatened to form a parallel congress. It also threatened to boycott Zedillo's speech, which, according to PRI leaders, would have forced the president to cancel his address because of a lack of quorum. The opposition, in turn, accused the PRI of deliberately creating a crisis. "It is pure fiction that there will be an alternate Chamber of Deputies," Munoz Ledo told reporters. "The PRI members will injure the nation and create an image of a crisis that doesn't exist."

Pressured by Zedillo, however, the PRI members agreed to iron out their differences with the opposition, thus allowing the speech to proceed. According to some political observers, the

resolution of the dispute was a small triumph for Zedillo, who wanted to avoid an impression of political gridlock that could have shaken financial markets. Apparently, PRI legislators agreed to the president's request to avoid a constitutional crisis. Meanwhile, the pre-address conflict somewhat overshadowed the content of the speeches. In his address, Zedillo offered a broad defense of his attempts to fight rising crime, create jobs, and increase spending on social programs. He also presented many familiar themes, including pledges to defend the rights of Mexican immigrants in the US, to push for expanded trade with more countries, to fight drug trafficking, and to seek constitutional reforms to strengthen the judicial system and ensure that criminals are punished.

On a more controversial note, Zedillo said he will continue using the military in the fight against drug trafficking, even though some high-ranking officers have been implicated in the drug trade (see SourceMex, 08/06/97). According to Zedillo, the armed forces have proven to be an effective tool in the fight against the drug cartels. On the economic front, Zedillo called on the new members of the Chamber of Deputies to support the country's current economic direction, although he expressed willingness to discuss modifications to particular programs. Among other things, the president pledged to create 1 million new jobs annually and to push for gradual salary increases. He cautioned, however, that significant economic improvements will not occur overnight. "Assuming we are able to achieve an annual GDP growth of 5%, we would still need 20 years to double the per capita salary that Mexicans are earning this year," the president said.

### *Zedillo, Munoz Ledo pledge cooperation*

Finally, the president pledged to work closely with the newly elected Congress. "The vote of the Mexican people has given this legislature a plurality," said Zedillo. "I have full confidence that the executive and legislature will have a mature, constructive relationship." In his speech, Munoz Ledo also was somewhat conciliatory, offering to seek common ground with Zedillo and the PRI. He said that opposition parties will strive to make "rational and efficient decisions" that help preserve economic stability, stimulate productive investments, and maintain the confidence of the financial markets. "It was the will of the voters that all deputies and senators, regardless of party affiliation, place a high priority on representing the nation as a whole," said Munoz Ledo.

On the other hand, he also warned that all government policies will be subject to review during the upcoming legislature, and he stressed that neither the executive nor the legislature should forget the mandate of the voters in the July 6 election. "The people voted in favor of economic and social policies that create opportunities for higher salaries, the expansion of the domestic market, and a solution to the ongoing problems of overdue debt," said Munoz Ledo. According to Munoz Ledo, opposition legislators propose to raise these issues at a national forum, which would be sponsored jointly by the legislative and executive branches. "Knowing how to govern is also knowing how to listen and knowing how to correct mistakes," said Munoz Ledo.

Prior to the two speeches, the five parties in the Chamber of Deputies presented their individual positions regarding the legislative agenda for the coming session. A common theme of all parties was the need to place a high priority on fighting poverty in Mexico. "The legislative branch should establish the legal mechanisms that impede disproportionate price increases, defending the interests of those who have less," said PVEM Deputy Jorge Emilio Gonzalez. PRD Deputy Pablo Gomez Alvarez said some of these problems can be overcome if the government redirects its

priorities. In particular, he criticized recent moves by the Zedillo administration to rescue toll highways, which he said only benefit a handful of wealthy companies (see other article in this edition of SourceMex).

### *Critics say Zedillo failed to address crucial themes*

Zedillo's focus was on economic themes, and some political analysts said he failed to touch on key issues during his address. Some critics, for example, said the president offered no concrete plan for dealing with such problems as poverty and armed conflict in the states of Chiapas and Guerrero. "It sends a bad signal to Congress," said former deputy Juan Guerra Ochoa, who served on the legislative-sponsored Comision de Concordia y Pacificacion (COCOPA). COCOPA acted as an intermediary between the government and the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) in Chiapas. Guerra Ochoa said a reform-minded Congress might interpret Zedillo's "very notable silence on the question of Chiapas" as a sign his administration is not interested in resuming negotiations with the Zapatistas.

On the other hand, PRI officials countered that Zedillo's acceptance of an opposition response to his address was more significant than anything he could have said in his speech. "There should be no doubt Zedillo and the nation's leaders are seriously and responsibly facing a new reality," said PRI Sen. Mario Vargas Aguiar. "Even though I am a loyal member of the PRI, I can admit that the will and demand of the Mexican people has finally been served." According to the daily newspaper La Jornada, the administration was not only recognizing the legitimacy of opposition parties in government but also the distinct roles of the executive and legislative branches in formulating policy.

"This interaction can take place without clashes, paralysis, institutional crisis, or ungovernability, but rather in a spirit of diversity and discussion," La Jornada said in an editorial. "This is a necessary step to forge accords that are truly national in nature." (Sources: Proceso, 08/24/97; The Dallas Morning News, El Universal, Associated Press, 09/01/97, 09/02/97; Reuter, El Nacional, Miami Herald, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, 09/02/97; El Economista, 08/26/97, 09/02/97, 09/03/97; Novedades, 08/27/97, 08/28/97, 09/01-03/97; La Jornada, 08/27/97, 09/01-03/97; New York Times, Excelsior, 09/01-03/97; The News, 09/02/97, 09/03/97)

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