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LADB Staff

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Opposition Parties Gain Control of Key Committees in Chamber Of Deputies

by LADB Staff

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The governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI)- -which has traditionally controlled Mexico's legislative agenda has lost its battle to preside over certain key committees in the Chamber of Deputies. In late September, leaders of the four major opposition parties announced a plan to allocate leadership of the Chamber's committees to all of the five parties represented in the lower house.

The opposition bloc, led by the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) and the center- right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), adopted its own plan after negotiations with the PRI collapsed. Sources close to the negotiations said the talks collapsed after the PRI refused to back down from its demands to either chair the key budget and planning committee (Comision de Programacion, Presupuesto y Cuenta Publica) or to preside over a total of 32 committees.

After the PRI withdrew from negotiations with the opposition bloc, the leaders of the PRD, PAN, Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM), and Partido del Trabajo (PT) drafted a plan to allocate 27 chair positions to the PRI and 32 to the four opposition parties. As expected, the plan offered by the opposition bloc was approved in the Chamber of Deputies by a vote of 259 to 234, with all the negative votes cast by PRI legislators. The opposition parties hold a combined total of 261 of the 500 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, compared with PRI's 239.

Speaking at the session, PRI legislative leader Arturo Nunez reminded members of the opposition parties that just although they formed a coalition they did not have a mandate from the Mexican people. "The citizens of Mexico did not vote for an absolute majority but a plurality of different political voices," Nunez said. "It would be improper to ignore the voice of the 11.5 million citizens who voted for the PRI."

Other PRI leaders threatened to "retaliate" against the opposition parties during the allocation of committee assignments in the Senate and in various state legislatures under the control of the governing party. In the July 6 elections, the PRI managed to retain control over the Senate because only one-fourth of the seats were up for election. The PRI controls 77 seats in the Senate, compared with a total of 51 seats held by the four opposition parties.

PRD to chair influential budget and planning committee

According to the weekly news magazine Proceso, the opposition parties will attempt to use their control of the budget and planning committee to influence President Ernesto Zedillo's budget proposals. In the past, the Zedillo administration, which must present its 1998 budget proposal to the Chamber by mid-October, counted on automatic approval by a PRI-led budget committee. "The members of the PRI do not understand that the opposition parties are the ones best suited to review the federal budget and public expenditures," said Porfirio Munoz Ledo, coordinator of the PRD

delegation in the Chamber of Deputies. According to Munoz Ledo, the committee will be chaired by PRD Deputy Ricardo Garcia Sainz, an ex-director of the Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social (IMSS). Garcia Sainz, a former PRI member, has been particularly critical of Zedillo's economic policies.

Similarly, political observers said the PRI's move to seek 32 chair positions was an effort to keep the PRD from gaining control over the agriculture and social development committees, which successive PRI administrations have traditionally used to push through key social development legislation. For their part, leaders of the opposition bloc said the distribution process was fairly equitable, since the PRI would still have a much larger number of committee assignments than any of the four opposition parties. Under the plan, the most important committees were distributed fairly evenly among the PRD, PAN, and the PRI. The PRD was assigned 14 chair positions, including the committees dealing with budget and planning, agriculture, energy resources, and social development.

PAN to preside over domestic-affairs committee

Similarly, the PAN received 14 chair positions, presiding over committees responsible for such areas as trade and commerce, mass communications, industrial development, tourism, and domestic affairs. PAN Deputy Santiago Creel Miranda, who played a key role in the formation of the opposition bloc, is among those seeking to chair the powerful domestic-affairs committee (Comision de Gobernacion y Puntos Constitucionales). Under the plan presented by the opposition bloc, the PRI was assigned the chair of 27 committees, including those dealing with such key areas as finance, national defense, communications and transportation, justice, labor, and agrarian reform.

The PVEM and PT each will chair two committees. As expected, the PVEM will preside over the natural resources and environment committee, while the PT will lead the housing committee. PRI faces some internal dissent among legislators. While the PRI is battling with the opposition parties regarding control of the Chamber of Deputies, it is also facing strong internal dissent. In a setback in mid- September, PRI Deputy Sergio Valdes Arias defected to the PRD. The move left the PRI with 238 seats in the lower house and allowed the opposition bloc to increase its numbers to 262 seats.

In addition to Valdes's defection, the PRI is facing growing dissent among its ranks in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. In early September, a group of 14 PRI senators announced they were forming an independent bloc called Grupo Galileo. The senators led by Eugenio Ruiz Orozco, Francisco Davila, and Humberto Mayans Canabal said they are not seeking confrontation with the party leaders or the executive. Still, the dissident senators acknowledged that members of Grupo Galileo reserve the right to vote against PRI initiatives. Sen. Davila said the creation of Grupo Galileo is intended to stimulate greater debate of legislative initiatives among PRI senators. "We are pushing for the PRI delegation in the Senate to adopt legislative positions by consensus whenever possible," Sen. Davila told the daily newspaper El Universal. Grupo Galileo made its presence known in the Senate during testimony by Communications and Transportation Secretary Carlos Ruiz Sacristan.

Sen. Mayans criticized President Zedillo's administration for moving forward with privatization of railroads and other infrastructure. "Foreign capital is gradually taking over the national wealth,

which the people of Mexico have accumulated over many generations," Mayans said. In the Chamber of Deputies, a group of seven PRI legislators also announced they were forming an "independent-minded" coalition similar to Grupo Galileo. The group in the lower house, dubbed Grupo Critico, includes former PRI senators Angel Guerrero Mier and Ricardo Monreal. In a statement, Grupo Critico said members will seek major changes in the "anti-democratic practices" of the PRI in the Chamber of Deputies. Political observers said the emergence of dissident groups could force the PRI to change its mode of operation. "This could be a sign that the PRI will start acting like a regular political party," said political scientist Lorenzo Mayer in an interview with the English-language daily newspaper The News.

The clamor for change within the PRI was especially apparent at a recent meeting of the party in Mexico City, where several factions expressed strong dissatisfaction with the party's decision to appoint PRI president Mariano Palacios Alcocer through the traditional "dedazo," rather than hold elections. Palacios replaced Humberto Roque Villanueva, who is widely blamed for the PRI's relatively poor performance in the July 6 elections. Still, some observers question whether the PRI is capable of instituting the necessary changes to remain a viable player in the changing political landscape. "The PRI's crisis has become irreversible and only a radical structural reform will allow the party to survive," the magazine Siempre said in an editorial in its Sept. 25 edition. (Sources: Associated Press, 09/22/97; Siempre, 09/25/97; Reuter, 09/24/97, 09/26/97; Proceso, 09/21/97, 09/28/97; El Universal, 09/10/97, 09/23/97, 09/26/97, 09/29/97, 09/30/97, 10/01/97; La Jornada, 09/11/97, 09/23-26/97, 09/29, 09/30/97, 10/01/97; El Economista, 09/22/97, 09/23/97, 09/25/97, 09/26/97, 09/29/97, 09/30/97, 10/01/97; The News, 09/22-24/97, 09/30/97, 10/01/97; Excelsior, 09/23-26/97, 09/29/97, 09/30/97, 10/01/97; Novedades, 09/24/97, 09/26/97, 09/29/97, 09/30/97, 10/01/97; El Nacional, 09/25/97, 09/30/97, 10/01/97)

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