

10-15-1997

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Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Legislators Push for Greater Autonomy For Human Rights Commission." (1997). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/3804>

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Legislators Push for Greater Autonomy For Human Rights Commission

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 1997-10-15

In mid-October, the Chamber of Deputies took steps to ensure greater protection of human rights in Mexico. In a bill presented to the full Chamber, Gerardo Acosta Zavala of the Partido del Trabajo (PT) proposed to reform four articles in the Mexican Constitution. In essence, the legislation proposes full autonomy for the Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH), thus turning the agency into a human rights ombudsman. According to Deputy Acosta, the initiative would make the CNDH accountable to the legislature rather than to the executive branch.

Under the current structure, the executive branch exerts full control over the operations of the CNDH, which has led to charges that the Commission has ignored or covered up human rights violations in Mexico (see SourceMex, 08/06/97). "The Vienna Declaration approved in the World Conference on Human Rights in 1993 suggested that the ombudsman be appointed and dismissed by the legislative branch," said Acosta.

The proposal is expected to gain approval in the government-affairs committee (Comision de Gobernacion y Puntos Constitucionales). The measure would then go to the full Chamber of Deputies for a vote. According to legislators from the opposition Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) and the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), CNDH president Mireille Roccatti will be summoned to testify before the Chamber in the next several weeks.

In the Senate, members are considering their own proposals to strengthen the human rights protection agency. "Unfortunately, President Ernesto Zedillo and the CNDH deny the existence of any systemic violations of human rights," said PRD Sen. Auldarico Hernandez. He stressed that the government and independent organizations must place a much higher priority on protecting civil rights. "If we do not take this step ourselves, we will face constant pressure from international nongovernmental organizations," said Hernandez.

In response, President Zedillo has proposed the creation of a special government commission of cabinet officials to provide greater cohesiveness to his administration's efforts to address human rights complaints. Members of the Chamber of Deputies and Senate said, however, that although this was a positive step, it was inadequate. The best solution, they said, would be to give the CNDH greater autonomy.

Amnesty International report details violations in Mexico

The moves in both branches of the legislature coincided with a controversial visit to Mexico by members of Amnesty International (AI). In a report published in late September, AI criticized the "worsening human rights situation" in Mexico, and it made 17 recommendations to President Zedillo. AI secretary general Pierre Sane had planned to deliver the report to Zedillo personally.

However, Sane claims the government canceled a scheduled meeting with the president, which was planned for Sept. 23. "This shows that they are not interested in sustaining a dialogue to avoid the growing violations of human rights in Mexico," he said. Among other things, the report cited abuses by law-enforcement agencies against private citizens and an increase in attacks on journalists. AI said the numerous cases that have occurred this year include arbitrary detentions, widespread torture, extrajudicial executions, forced disappearances, and failure to punish government officials accused of violations.

Responding angrily to the report, Zedillo said the AI statement "does not coincide" with reports compiled by the CNDH. During a trip to Europe in early October, Zedillo was forced to defend the decision not to meet with Sane. "He came to Mexico intending not to see me and to create a scandal," said Zedillo. "I am profoundly offended." According to Santiago Onate, Mexico's ambassador to London, AI executives had expressed interest in meeting with Zedillo, but they never submitted a formal request. "If there was a breakdown in communication, it was on their part," Onate told Proceso.

Meanwhile, deputy foreign relations secretary Juan Rebolledo said guerrilla uprisings and political assassinations in recent years have resulted in increased attention on Mexico. "It's a situation in which more cases of human rights abuses are being reported, both real and untrue," Rebolledo said in an interview with the Miami Herald. However, AI spokespersons said Mexico's biggest problem is its failure to take action against elected officials, military personnel, and law-enforcement officers who practice torture and engage in other human rights violations. "In Latin America, there has already been an economic reform and a political reform," said Morris Tidball, AI's director of Latin American programs. "Now, Mexico and other countries in the region must enact reforms to institutions, especially the justice system." (Sources: Reuter, 09/24/97; El Universal, Los Angeles Times, 09/25/97; Associated Press, 09/25/97, 09/29/97; Miami Herald, 09/29/97; Novedades, 09/25/97, 10/08/97; La Jornada, 09/25/97, 09/29/97, 10/08/97, 10/09/97; Excelsior, 09/29/97, 10/07/97, 10/09/97; Proceso, 09/28/97, 10/05/97, 10/12/97; The News, 09/26/97, 10/09/97, 10/15/97)

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