

2-11-1998

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Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Governing PRI Faces Growing Internal Dissent, Other Political Problems." (1998). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/3860>

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Governing PRI Faces Growing Internal Dissent, Other Political Problems

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 1998-02-11

Several crises could have negative political repercussions for the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in gubernatorial elections this year and in the presidential election in the year 2000. The first crisis erupted in Puebla in late January, when Gov. Manuel Bartlett Diaz pushed a plan through the PRI- controlled state legislature to change the formula for allocating federal funds to municipalities. The plan would distribute funds based on need rather than on population.

The plan angered state legislators from the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), which holds mayoral seats in many large cities in Puebla state. PAN legislators accused Bartlett of violating the Mexican Constitution and devising the plan to buy votes for upcoming state and federal elections. PAN fought hard for provisions in the 1998 budget to increase funding and financial autonomy for state and municipal governments.

The center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) also accused Bartlett of placing political ambition ahead of the state 's needs. PRD and PAN mayors plan to take the issue to the Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nacion, (SCJN). The Puebla case is symptomatic of a power struggle within the PRI. Bartlett, a member of the party's hard-line faction, has frequently criticized the neoliberal policies of President Ernesto Zedillo and his predecessors.

The governor makes no secret of his presidential ambitions and has said he should have been the party candidate in 1988 rather than ex-president Carlos Salinas de Gortari. The Puebla controversy, plus stagnation in peace talks with the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) in Chiapas, has jeopardized Zedillo's efforts to negotiate political and electoral reforms with opposition parties.

PAN leaders, including party president Felipe Calderon Hinojosa and former presidential candidate Diego Fernandez de Cevallos, say the satisfactory resolution of the Puebla controversy is a prerequisite for PAN support for talks on political reform. "If Zedillo wants to find consensus with the opposition parties, he will have to resolve these problems," said PAN federal Deputy Juan Miguel Alcantara Soria.

PRI divisions evident in Zacatecas state

In early February in Zacatecas state, Deputy Ricardo Monreal resigned from the party when it selected federal Deputy Antonio Olvera Acevedo rather than him as gubernatorial candidate for that state. Monreal's resignation is a major setback to the PRI because he was second in command of the PRI delegation in the Chamber of Deputies. Moreover, 10,000 PRI members in Zacatecas who support Monreal threatened to leave the party. Monreal said several national PRI leaders, particularly former Zacatecas governor Genaro Borrego Estrada, were behind Olvera's selection. Borrego is director of the Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social (IMSS). Zacatecas is one of four PRI-

governed states that will hold gubernatorial elections in July and August. The others are Durango, Veracruz, and Aguascalientes. Chihuahua, governed by the PAN, will also elect a new governor.

Monreal said he would launch a national campaign to end the PRI's longstanding practice of designating a candidate through the traditional "dedazo," rather than opening the selection to the rank and file. Initially, Monreal said he would run as an independent, representing a coalition of parties. Monreal is unlikely to become a coalition candidate, however, since the PAN and the Partido del Trabajo (PT) both have their own candidates. But he is likely to become the PRD candidate, since Sen. Amalia Garcia and other prominent party members have withdrawn their candidacies to allow Monreal to run under their banner. Many PRI members in the Chamber of Deputies supported Monreal's decision to leave the party and blamed party president Mariano Palacios Alcocer.

In a letter to Palacios Alcocer, 100 PRI deputies demanded that he resign because of his attacks on Monreal's character. Deputies said Palacios Alcocer was behind a campaign to link Monreal with drug traffickers. In Durango, the selection of Sen. Angel Guerrero Mier as the PRI candidate for governor also caused major discontent among party loyalists in the state. Sen. Samuel Aguilar and former state prosecutor Maximo Gamiz said the arbitrary selection of Guerrero Mier split the party and could pave the way for an opposition victory. The opposition is likely to run a coalition candidate supported by the PAN, PRD, and Partido del Trabajo (PT).

Political columnist Pedro Jose Alisedo said the PRI could face a fractured party in several elections this year. "I would not be surprised to see the same situation repeated in Veracruz, where several prominent PRI members have declared their candidacy for governor," said Alisedo. One of those candidates, Sen. Gustavo Carvajal Moreno, has already warned the party not to select the candidate via the "dedazo."

Carvajal said a "lack of dialogue" in the selection would force him to "distance himself" from the party. Ignacio Morales Lechuga, a former PRI member, resigned from the party in late 1997, citing "philosophical" differences. Morales Lechuga is expected to gain the PRD gubernatorial nomination in Veracruz. Mexico City Mayor Cardenas accuses predecessor of corruption The PRI also has problems in Mexico City. In early February, PRD Mayor Cuauhtemoc Cardenas issued a scathing report accusing his predecessor, Oscar Espinosa Villarreal, of massive mismanagement and corruption. The report said Espinosa diverted city funds for his own political gain and his administration misplaced, destroyed, or falsified financial records to hide such acts.

Cardenas said an investigation of Espinosa's financial mismanagement has been hampered by the disappearance of accounting ledgers and the alteration or destruction of other relevant records. The mayor said key departments such as economic development, health and social development, and finance were missing important records and documents when he took office. Cardenas said he found evidence that Espinosa's office had ordered the removal of many of these documents. "In some cases, government computers were left completely devoid of all information," said the Cardenas report. "In very few cases is there adequate documentation of programs, plans, and projects in progress, and there are almost no follow-up materials."

The report said the Espinosa administration left the city with a debt of 12 billion pesos (US\$1.4 billion). While some of the debt was from legitimate expenses, another portion was the result of misused city funds. "It is apparent that the previous government was not directed toward serving the public, but rather toward abusing power," the report said. The report added that the Espinosa administration paid 2 million pesos (US\$237 million) in bribes to about 100 journalists to write favorable stories. In addition, it said Espinosa employed 54 "advisers" in the press office, but none had an official job description.

Espinosa, who was appointed federal tourism secretary in December, has kept a low profile since the Cardenas report. Espinosa's only comment to reporters was that the report is a "politically motivated" attack on his administration. "I will clarify the matters that need to be clarified," said Espinosa. Charges of corruption against a PRI-led government have been common in recent years, but this is the first time an elected official of an opposition party has initiated an investigation.

Espinosa Villarreal is also under investigation for corruption and mismanagement while director of government lender Nacional Financiera (NAFIN). A committee in the Chamber of Deputies is analyzing NAFIN practices from 1991 through 1993, when the bank lost 20 billion pesos (US \$2.4 billion) because of bad loans. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Feb 11, reported at 8.43 pesos per US\$1.00] (Sources: Reuter, 01/27/98, 02/01/98; Spanish news service EFE, 02/03/98, 02/05/98; El Diario de Yucatan, 01/29/98, 02/06/98; Proceso, 02/01/98, 02/08/98; Notimex, 02/05/98, 02/09/98; Excelsior, 02/04/98, 02/09/98; The News, 01/28-30/98, 02/02/98, 02/05/98, 02/09/98; Associated Press, El Financiero International, 02/09/98; Novedades, 01/28-30/98, 02/02/98, 02/03/98, 02/05/98, 02/09/98, 02/10/98; El Economista, 01/29/98, 02/04-06/98, 02/09/98, 02/10/98; Excelsior, 01/29/98, 01/30/98, 02/04-06/98, 02/09/98, 02/10/98; El Universal, 01/28/98, 02/05/98, 02/06/98, 02/09-11/98; La Jornada, 01/28-30/98, 02/03/98, 02/04/98, 02/10/98, 02/11/98)

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