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USAID Offers Controversial Proposal to Help Strengthen Mexico's Congress

by LADB Staff

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A US government proposal to assist Mexico to strengthen its congressional infrastructure and promote a multiparty system has set off a controversy among Mexican legislators. The five-year program, described in a document published by the US Agency for International Development (USAID), would provide US\$3 million to the Mexican Chamber of Deputies and Senate to develop a legislative budget office and help train congressional aides to handle such responsibilities as legislative research and drafting bills.

The USAID would provide the funds to Mexico through the program designed to promote democracy. This is the first time the Mexican government has been targeted for such a program because of the strong Mexican opposition to foreign interference in their country's political affairs. In the past, however, the US has provided direct assistance to nongovernmental organizations to observe elections or monitor human rights. Among other things, the program would help legislators develop a federal budget. "[Mexican] legislators want to develop the capacity to participate in the budget-development process in an independent, responsible, and informed manner," the USAID document said.

The USAID said assistance is being requested by legislators and some nongovernmental organizations in Mexico. A USAID spokesperson told reporters a private consultant, rather than the US government, would manage the training program for the Mexican Congress.

Mexican legislative leaders deny they requested aid. As expected, the joint committee (Comision Permanente) of the Senate and Chamber of Deputies, along with leaders of the five major political parties, immediately denied that the Mexican Congress had requested aid from the US government. "We have never accepted nor would we accept any type of assistance to perform the tasks that are reserved solely for Mexican legislators," said a statement signed by leaders of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and the opposition Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM), and Partido del Trabajo (PT).

Deputy Porfirio Munoz Ledo, leader of the Chamber of the Deputies, told reporters he was not aware of any foreign funds for operations of the finance office of the lower house. However, some legislators acknowledged requesting funds from USAID. PAN Deputy Leonardo Garcia Camarena said members of the administrative-affairs committee (Comision de Administracion) met with US officials during a recent visit to Washington to request assistance to create a specialized unit to deal with public finances. Committee members had traveled to the US to acquire a computer system to upgrade the recording process of floor votes in the Chamber of Deputies.

Garcia Camarena made the comments in an interview with the daily newspaper *Novedades* shortly after news of the USAID funds was first reported by *The Boston Globe* newspaper. The interview was published before the statements from the *Comision Permanente* and the leaders of the five political parties. In the interview, Garcia Camarena emphasized that technical assistance provided via USAID "should not be cause for concern or anxiety," as long as legislators ensure that the program does not infringe on matters reserved exclusively for Mexicans. "We welcome the acquisition of any new information, processing system, or model that would enrich our country's legislative mechanisms," said Garcia Camarena.

Legislators propose controversial political reforms

The controversy over the USAID funds came amid other proposals to reform the Mexican electoral system and the structure of the legislature. In early July, 17 PRD and PRI legislators offered a proposal to eliminate 200 proportional seats in the Chamber of Deputies, which are distributed based on the percentage of the vote received by each party. To qualify for allocation of proportional seats, a party must garner at least 2% of the popular vote. PRI Deputy Hector Castaneda Jimenez, a principal proponent of the plan, said eliminating the proportional seats would save 40% of the cost of operations for the Chamber of Deputies.

The PAN and PRD leaderships are unlikely to support the plan, since proportional seats allocated after the 1997 federal election allowed the four opposition parties to form a coalition to control the Chamber of Deputies during the current legislative session (see *SourceMex*, 07/09/97). Without the proportional seats, the PRI would have 162 seats, compared with 138 for the PAN, PRD, and the PT. The PVEM would not be represented in the lower house. A second controversial proposal offered to legislators in July would amend the Mexican Constitution to allow members of the Chamber of Deputies and Senate to serve more than one term.

The plan, offered by the PAN leadership, would allow two successive six-year terms for senators and three three-year terms for deputies. Under current law, members of the Senate can only serve one six-year term, while deputies can only remain in office for one three-year term. PRI and PRD leaders said their parties would be willing to at least consider the PAN proposal, which would not change the provision that limits the president to one six-year term. The ban on re-election was imposed after Gen. Porfirio Diaz was removed from office in 1917, after a dictatorship that spanned three decades. (Sources: Reuters, 07/08/98; *The Boston Globe*, *Excelsior*, 07/21/98; *The New York Times*, 07/22/98; *Novedades*, 07/10/98, 07/22/98, 07/23/98; *El Universal*, 07/22-24/98; *La Jornada*, 07/24/98)

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