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Opposition Offers Controversial Rebuttal to President Zedillo's State Address

by LADB Staff

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The controversy surrounding President Ernesto Zedillo's fifth annual State of the Union address on Sept. 1 provided a glimpse of the bitter campaigns anticipated for the 2000 presidential and congressional elections. Zedillo's speech, essentially a list of his administration's political and economic achievements during the past five years, received a stinging rebuttal from Deputy Carlos Medina Plascencia of the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), who spoke on behalf of the opposition coalition in the Chamber of Deputies.

Medina described the address as "empty rhetoric." Medina's open attack on Zedillo's speech shocked most observers, who expected the opposition parties to politely listen to the president's speech and save any criticism for media interviews afterward. That was the case in 1998, the first full year of an opposition majority in the lower house, when Deputy Porfirio Munoz Ledo of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) presented what was considered a mild response to Zedillo's speech.

In this year's speech, Zedillo recited a list of achievements in education and health care, but his primary focus was on the macroeconomic gains attained during his five years in office. The president said the tight monetary policies followed by his administration allowed Mexico to emerge from the crisis that followed the peso devaluation in 1994. "Thanks to responsible decisions...the crisis was surprisingly short for many Mexicans," said Zedillo. He said his administration's ability to tame inflation, curb deficit spending, and stabilize the peso provided the needed confidence for foreign investors to return to Mexico.

Zedillo said these policies would remain in place for the rest of his term in office to avoid the economic chaos that has followed every presidential transition in Mexico since 1976. "We will continue to employ the tools of economic policy with an unwavering sense of responsibility and discipline," Zedillo said, "and we will also make the economic traumas of previous changes of administration a thing of the past."

Response disputes "rosy" portrayal of economy

In his rebuttal, Medina took issue with Zedillo's rosy picture of the Mexican economy. The PAN leader acknowledged that the president succeeded in bringing some "equilibrium" to public finances, but he scolded Zedillo for minimizing the administration's failure to eradicate poverty. "The desperation of millions of human beings drowning in inevitable poverty...doesn't leave room for a rhetoric made totally empty and ineffective by its use and overuse every year in this same ritual," Medina said.

Medina's statements are supported by statistics released by the Secretaria de Desarrollo Social (SEDESOL) just a few days before Zedillo's address. The SEDESOL report confirmed that the

number of Mexicans living in extreme poverty has increased to 26 million, compared with 14 million when Zedillo took office in 1994. SEDESOL did not make any recommendations, but after the report was released, Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) Sen. Porfirio Camarena called on the government to reverse some of the policies that have contributed to increased poverty. These include eliminating the government foodstuffs agency (Compania Nacional de Subsistencias Populares, CONASUPO) and other entities that primarily served the poor.

During the speech, Zedillo also boasted of the electoral reforms implemented during his administration, which he said led to "the cleanest elections ever" in several states in the past five years. Since Zedillo took office, opposition parties won gubernatorial races in Baja California Sur, Baja California, Nuevo Leon, Tlaxcala, Aguascalientes, Nayarit, Zacatecas, and Queretaro states.

But the opposition parties accused the PRI of committing fraud in other state elections, particularly the gubernatorial race in Guerrero state in February of this year (see SourceMex, 1999-02-10). Zedillo said his administration would ensure clean elections for the PRI's primary in November of this year and for the presidential and congressional elections in 2000. "Our citizens can be confident that...their votes will be free, and they will be respected," he said.

At the same time, Zedillo conceded that his government has failed to root out corruption, even among some members of the PRI. "The impunity of individuals who break the law continues to be a painful aspect of our reality," the president said.

Zedillo questioned on financing of 1994 campaign

Opposition legislators roared in disbelief when the president said that no public funds were diverted for his presidential campaign. The PRI is having to respond to allegations that the defunct bank-rescue fund (Fondo Bancario de Proteccion al Ahorro, FOBAPROA) was used to launder contributions to the campaigns of Zedillo and Tabasco Gov. Roberto Madrazo in 1994 (see SourceMex, 1999-06-09).

In his rebuttal, Medina accused Zedillo and the PRI of refusing to provide the documents that would prove that the governing party misused FOBAPROA for electoral purposes. "The government is refusing to supply the information that the Chamber of Deputies has legally requested," said Medina. Opposition legislators also chided Zedillo for ignoring other important unresolved matters, such as the four-month strike at the Universidad Autonoma Nacional de Mexico (UNAM) and the ongoing conflict in Chiapas. "He did not respond at all to our concerns," said PRD president Sen. Amalia Garcia.

The unprecedented attack on a president's State of the Union address led PRI legislators to seek to strip Medina of his leadership post in the Chamber of Deputies. PRI leaders criticized Medina for rude and partisan behavior in what is meant to be a decorous occasion, with only a "concise and concrete" response from the presiding member. "We are going to ask for the removal of Carlos Medina from the presidency of this body for having violated internal rules and for responding with provocation to the State of the Nation address," said Deputy Arturo Nunez, coordinator of the PRI delegation in the lower house.

As expected, the PRI effort to remove Medina failed because of the opposition's majority in the lower house of Congress. Members of the PAN, PRD, the Partido del Trabajo (PT), and Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM) joined forces to defeat the PRI-sponsored measure by a vote of 241 to 195. Some observers said the opposition's reaction to Zedillo's speech was only part of the growing pains that Mexico must face in its transition to democracy. "It's a pleasure...to be able to air differences on public issues," economist Carlos Elizondo Mayer-Serra told The Los Angeles Times.

The weekly news magazine Proceso said Medina's criticisms of Zedillo are similar to statements made by the four candidates running in the PRI's presidential primary on Nov. 7. The four candidates, who were scheduled to hold their first debate Sept. 8, have been engaged in a bitter campaign, particularly front-runners Francisco Labastida Ochoa and Roberto Madrazo Pintado (see SourceMex, 1999-08-18). "[The four candidates] have denounced in one way or another the [neoliberal] economic model initiated by Miguel de la Madrid, continued by Carlos Salinas de Gortari, and reaffirmed by Ernesto Zedillo," said Proceso.

The opposition's rebuttal appears to have gained strong acceptance among Mexican voters. In a public-opinion poll conducted by the daily newspaper Reforma, only 46% of respondents rated Zedillo's speech as good or very good. In contrast, 75% of respondents gave the same ratings to Medina's response.

Despite the criticism of his policies, however, Zedillo continues to enjoy strong support among voters. In a poll taken by Reforma before the State of the Union address, 66% of respondents rated the president favorably. This compares with only 31% in December 1995, during the height of the economic crisis. Some analysts said the noncontroversial nature of Zedillo's speech was a reflection of the president's term in office.

Political scientist Maria Amparo Casar of the Centro de Investigacion y Docencia Economica (CIDE) said Zedillo has taken a hands-off approach to governing to the point where he has little control over the leadership in the PRI. In addition, said Casar, the president has been reluctant to compromise or to seek any political alliances with Congress on key issues such as Chiapas, the UNAM strike, and privatization of the electrical industry. (Sources: Agence France-Presse, 09/01/99; Associated Press, Reuters, 08/31/99, 09/01/99, 09/02/99; El Universal, 09/01/99, 09/02/99; The Washington Post, The Dallas Morning News, The New York Times, The News, San Antonio Express-News, El Diario de Yucatan, 09/02/99; Spanish news service EFE, 09/03/99; Los Angeles Times, 09/04/99; Proceso, 09/05/99; Novedades, 09/02/99, 09/07/99; La Jornada, 09/02/99, 09/03/99, 09/07/99; El Economista, 09/07/99; Excelsior, 09/02/99, 09/03/99, 09/07/99, 09/08/99)

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