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Commission Approved to Monitor PRI Expenditures in 2000 Elections

by LADB Staff

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In a landmark vote, the four opposition parties in the Chamber of Deputies approved a measure to create a special legislative commission to monitor the expenditures of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in the 2000 presidential election. The commission, which would function from January to August 2000, would ensure that PRI governors and party officials do not divert public resources toward the campaign of presidential candidate Francisco Labastida.

Opposition parties say the commission is needed to guarantee that the PRI does not resort to the longstanding practice of bribing voters with building materials, food, and other items on election day. They say the practice surfaced this year in several gubernatorial elections, particularly in bitterly contested races in Guerrero, Quintana Roo, and Mexico state (see SourceMex, 1999-02-10, 1999-02-24, 1999-07-07).

The measure was promoted by the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) and the conservative Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) but also received strong support from the Partido del Trabajo, the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM), and two independent legislators.

PRI members say initiative is unconstitutional

As expected, the 208 PRI members in the Chamber of Deputies voted against the initiative. They said the measure violates the Mexican Constitution, which assigns the right to monitor elections to the Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE). The PRI, which lacks the muscle to overturn the measure at the legislative level, is expected to bring the matter before Mexico's highest court (Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nacion, SCJN).

The opposition parties, however, said the authors of the measure took extreme care not to supersede the powers entrusted to the IFE to enforce electoral laws. Rather, the 30-member commission will only have the power to present and hear complaints regarding campaign-spending violations committed by the governing party. The commission will include 14 members of the PRI, seven each from the PAN and the PRD and one each from the PT and the PVEM. PRI legislators denounced the legislation as a "political ploy" by the PAN and the PRD to create a mechanism to contest the results of the 2000 presidential election.

Enrique Jackson, a PRI leader in the lower house, accused opposition parties of attempting to turn the Chamber of Deputies into a "national center of suspicion," by encouraging citizens to present complaints. "The PRI should welcome the legislation if the governing party truly has no intention of using public resources for electoral purposes," said PRD legislative leader Pablo Gomez. Members of the finance committee (Comision de Hacienda) in the lower house also raised the issue during a meeting on the 2000 budget with deputy secretaries from the Secretaria de Hacienda y Credito Publico (SHCP).

The legislators proposed creating a working group to examine line items in the budget that appear to have "electoral motives." PAN Deputy Felipe de Jesus Cantu asked the SHCP officials to explain why the budget proposal presented by Zedillo seeks significant increases in certain expenditures for the Secretaria de Desarrollo Social (SEDESOL) and the Secretaria de Gobernacion (SEGOB). Cantu said the request for SEDESOL expenditures is about 3.5 billion pesos (US\$372 million), ten times higher than the 350 million pesos (US\$37.2 million) allocated in the 1999 budget.

The PRI, which is expected to face a competitive presidential election on July 2, 2000, has also been accused of controlling media coverage of electoral campaigns. The major television networks, Televisa and Television Azteca, have frequently presented the position of PRI candidates in a favorable light, while ignoring those of opposition rivals.

PRI accused of censoring movie critical of governing party

Critics say the bias of the PRI has also involved suppressing materials considered harmful to the party. For example, the government-affiliated Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografia (IMCINE) canceled the screening of the movie *Ley de Herodes* in Mexico City because the film, set in the 1940s, openly portrayed corruption within the PRI. "While this is not the first time that political corruption has been portrayed in Mexican cinema, there had never been a direct mention of the PRI," said columnist Patricia Vega of the daily newspaper *La Jornada*.

IMCINE director Eduardo Amerena told newspapers the movie showing was suspended because of "technical difficulties," including a broken projector. There were questions of whether Amerena was acting on instructions from someone higher in the PRI hierarchy. The Zedillo administration, however, denied any role in the decision and condemned the action. "This sends a terrible message," an administration spokesperson told *The Washington Post*. "A political decision to censor a film goes against six years of the president's position on the media and freedom of expression."

This is the second time IMCINE has attempted to interfere with the showing of the movie. *Ley de Herodes* almost missed its debut at a film festival in Acapulco in November, when the film institute tried to cancel a showing. Because of strong public pressure, IMCINE eventually allowed the movie to be screened. The movie had been scheduled for a major opening in Mexico City during the first week of December.

But IMCINE decided to quietly release the film at two theaters and then abruptly cancelled the showing at one location, citing the "broken projector." An out-of-focus version was shown at the second location. The movie's producer Luis Estrada said authorities tried to convince him to delay the release of *Ley de Herodes* until after 2000. "[The government] considered it very dangerous to release the movie at this moment," Estrada told *La Jornada*.

Estrada said he was not surprised that members of the PRI would feel uncomfortable with his film. "I thought it might cause some trouble because lots of people would see themselves reflected in the mirrors we've set up in the movie," said Estrada. "But I didn't think they would try to sabotage the film." [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Dec.

15, reported at 9.40 pesos per US\$1.00] (Sources: Reuters, La Jornada, 12/07/99; Novedades, Excelsior, Reforma, El Universal, 12/10/99; The Washington Post, 12/14/99)

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