

2-12-2003

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Agriculture Crisis Could Create Difficulties for Fox, PAN in July Elections

by LADB Staff

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Published: 2003-02-12

President Vicente Fox's center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) could face difficulties in the upcoming congressional and presidential elections because of the federal government's perceived lack of support for the agriculture sector. The elections, scheduled for July 6, will feature races for all 500 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, eight gubernatorial posts, and several positions in state and local government.

The elections include races in the country's three largest cities: Guadalajara, Monterrey, and Mexico City. Fox has made no secret of his desire to have the PAN win a plurality of seats in the Chamber of Deputies, but analysts say the president has not given voters any reason to vote for his party.

The PAN, which holds 205 of the 500 seats in the lower house, could lose some ground if the opposition parties succeed in turning the election into a referendum on the performance of the Fox administration in the first half of its term, especially its inability to solve the country's agricultural crisis.

The former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) are hoping to increase their numbers in the Chamber of Deputies at the expense of the PAN, which would give the two parties more clout in opposing Fox's policies during the last three years of his administration. The PRI currently holds 209 seats in the lower house, while the PRD holds 54.

The PAN could also lose ground in the gubernatorial elections, with four of the contested seats Queretaro, Morelos, Guanajuato, and Nuevo Leon currently governed by members of the party. Three other states with governor's races in July Mexico state, Colima, and Campeche are governed by the PRI. The remaining key race scheduled for July is the mayoral post, equivalent to a governorship, in the Federal District, comprising Mexico City. The PRD has governed the Mexican capital since the post became an elected position rather than an appointment in 1997 (see SourceMex, 1997-07-09).

Key gubernatorial and municipal elections are also scheduled for later in the year, with the PRI-led states of San Luis Potosi and Sonora electing a new chief executive on Sept. 7. These races will be followed by gubernatorial races in PRI-led Veracruz and Tabasco on Oct. 12 and in PAN-governed Jalisco on Nov. 9.

NAFTA renegotiation becomes key campaign issue

The PRI and the PRD are attempting to make the agriculture crisis a cornerstone of the upcoming elections. One strategy is to point to the Fox administration's poor record of funding agriculture

programs and to criticize the administration for not defending the interests of Mexican farmers against foreign competition.

A rallying point for the two opposition parties is the administration's refusal to renegotiate the agriculture sections of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), particularly given the elimination of tariffs that went into effect on Jan. 1, 2003 (see SourceMex, 2002-12-04, 2002-12-18 and 2003-01-09). "With the purpose of winning a majority in the Chamber of Deputies, the PRI has proposed through its platform and in speeches by various candidates to channel more money to the rural sector in exchange for votes," the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma said in a special pre-election analysis.

The article said the PRD's strategy to win votes from agriculture and campesino constituencies is to push for the renegotiation of the NAFTA agriculture section. The party has proposed that the agreement be modified to place more weight on Mexico's disadvantageous competitive position in agriculture relative to the US and Canada. "To save Mexico, we have to save our agriculture sector," PRD president Rosario Robles Berlanga said at a PRD rally. "We will push with all our strength our demand that the government revise the agriculture section of NAFTA."

The PRD has joined with agriculture organizations, which have organized demonstrations in Mexico City and around the country to express their discontent with the state of Mexican agriculture. "We are seeking policies that would place a premium on agriculture as a motor of domestic development and on nutritional self-sufficiency," said Alberto Gomez, one of the leaders of the newly formed coalition El Campo no Aguanta Mas.

On Jan. 31, El Campo No Aguanta Mas joined forces with the debtors rights organization El Barzon and the Congreso Agrario Permanente (CAP) to organize a massive protest in Mexico City. The event drew more than 60,000 participants from around the country, many of whom were residents of communal farms or subsistence farmers.

Among other things, the protesters demanded the renegotiation of the agriculture sections of NAFTA and the resignation of Agriculture Secretary Javier Usabiaga. "Today the entire agriculture movement is marching under a single banner: renegotiation of the farm chapter (of NAFTA), a new farm policy, and a new deal for the countryside," said Victor Suarez, another leader from El Campo No Aguanta Mas.

The agriculture organizations say opening Mexico's market to agricultural imports is worsened by the heavy subsidies the US provided its farmers through the Farm Bill approved in May 2002 (see SourceMex, 2002-05-22). The administration has ruled out renegotiating NAFTA, arguing that reopening the agreement could create larger problems than those that would be resolved. The government's steadfast refusal to seek a renegotiation of the agreement has been widely interpreted as a lack of interest in resolving the problems facing agriculture, which could create problems for the party in the July election.

Fox's commitment to agriculture questioned

Fox has not helped the PAN cause with his contradictory statements on whether agriculture is even in a crisis. "There is no crisis in agriculture," Fox initially told board members of the government lender Nacional Financiera (NAFIN). "In the last two years, (agriculture) has grown faster than the general economy, whose fundamentals are solid." Fox came under strong criticism for this statement, forcing the president to amend his position a day later and acknowledge the widespread poverty among families that depend on subsistence agriculture. "I fully understand that the primary, most profound human problem we have in Mexico is that of the rural sector," he said. "Despite our economy's progress, thousands of families from the countryside and in Indian communities live in conditions of poverty."

The president's initial denial of an agriculture crisis played into the hands of the opposition parties, who said this was evidence of the administration's lack of interest in the sector. "Just look at the demonstrations on the streets, the people are taking over the avenues to demand that the government resolve the problem," said Sen. Enrique Jackson Ramirez, a PRI leader in the upper house.

Still, some PAN leaders defended Fox, accusing Jackson and other PRI leaders of using the farmers' protests for political gain. PAN president Luis Felipe Bravo Mena blamed agriculture's structural problems on the PRI, which for seven decades assisted only those farm groups that supported the party. "The party only used the agricultural sector to organize its support in the rural areas," said Bravo Mena. "This was at the expense of promoting efficient production."

While Fox and members of his Cabinet have ruled out renegotiating NAFTA, they have promised to re-evaluate the impact of the agreement on Mexico and to look at other factors affecting the slump in the agricultural sector.

In mid- February, the president organized a forum of government officials, political leaders, and agriculture groups to address the problem and forge a national rural agreement among all participants. He took the opportunity to announce that his government was prepared to spend 117 billion pesos (US\$10.67 billion) on agriculture programs, which he claimed was the "largest agriculture budget in history."

Some analysts say negotiations on a national rural agreement could be difficult because of the diverse proposals presented not only by various farm groups but by different Cabinet departments in the Fox administration. "There are no homogenous positions," said nationally syndicated columnist Miguel Angel Granados Chapa. But he suggested that the forum was very important to unify divergent positions in a very fractured agriculture movement.

The bottom line for some agriculture organizations is whether the Fox government is willing to discuss reopening NAFTA or propose a viable alternative to help Mexican farmers better compete with foreign imports. "Vicente Fox and members of his government have to find the mechanisms to help agriculture, including revising NAFTA," said columnist Luis Linares Zapata of the Mexico daily newspaper La Jornada.

Early polls point to competitive congressional races

While the agriculture question could affect voter preferences in the July election, very early public-opinion polls showed the PAN holding its own against opponents in the congressional races. One telephone poll by the Instituto de Mercadotecnia y Opinion (IMO) showed the PRI with slightly more than 33.4% of support, compared with 30.1% for the PAN and 15% for the PRD. The remaining participants supported minor parties or were undecided. This is only the first of several polls expected to be released in coming months.

IMO president Cesar Morones cautioned that results were based on voter sympathies toward a particular party in the various congressional districts. In most cases, parties have yet to elect or select candidates for the directly elected and at-large seats. "These tendencies could change based on the actual candidates that represent each party," said Morones.

The results coincide with a projection by the daily newspaper Milenio Diario in January, which indicated that the PRI would win 209 seats in Congress, followed by 190 for the PAN, 87 for the PRD, 10 for the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM), and four for the Partido del Trabajo (PT). This analysis, however, was based on data collected in November 2002.

The PAN's fortunes in local and gubernatorial elections in July and later in the year are less certain, with early polls showing PAN candidates trailing their PRI opponents in gubernatorial elections in Nuevo Leon, Morelos, Jalisco, and in the Guadalajara mayoral race.

The PAN also appears to be losing strength in Fox's home state of Guanajuato and in Queretaro, where the party once had comfortable leads in public surveys. "Thirteen key elections, six for governor, represent a fundamental test for the PAN this year," political columnist Roberto Zamarripa said in the daily Reforma in mid-January. "There are danger signs in many races that could well be lost by the party."

A saving grace for the PAN is that its two principal rivals, the PRI and the PRD, also carry some major negatives going into the summer and fall elections. The PRI has been unable to shake off its association with the campaign-financing scandal in the 2000 presidential election, where funds from the state-run oil company PEMEX are alleged to have been illegally channeled into the campaign of the party's candidate Francisco Labastida (see SourceMex, 2002-01-30). The scandal has affected many prominent PRI politicians, including Deputy Carlos Romero Deschamps, who is also the leader of the petroleum workers union (Sindicato de Trabajadores Petroleros de la Republica Mexicana, STPRM).

The Mexican Congress has initiated procedures to expel Romero and other PRI legislators alleged to have participated in the misappropriation of PEMEX funds for the Labastida campaign (see SourceMex, 2002-09-18 and 2002-10-19). The PRI goes into the midterm elections again as a divided party, with various factions fighting for nomination. "The designation of candidates for Congress has become a mine field for [party leader] Roberto Madrazo, who is pressured by governors, groups, and organizations all clamoring for access to power," said Salvador Garcia Soto, a political columnist in the daily newspaper La Cronica de Hoy. T

The PRD also continues to suffer from infighting and factionalism. Additionally, many rank-and-file members are displeased with the decision of party leaders to impose candidates for Congress rather than open up the process to a vote by party membership. "The members who took the step of registering as candidates for the federal Congress had not anticipated that party leaders would reserve seats in 256 districts, leaving only 44 open to a popular vote," said the daily newspaper El Universal.

"The PRD was founded with talented exiles from the PRI and democratic-leaning members of the traditional left," said PRD Sen. Demetrio Sodi de la Tijera. "Now the intellectuals, the academics, and the progressive business leaders are gone, leaving the party in the hands of political operatives." [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Feb. 12, reported at 10.96 pesos per US\$1.00] (Sources: Revista Proceso, 02/09/03; CNI en Linea, 01/20/03, 02/02/03, 02/05/03, 02/06/03, 02/10/03; Associated Press, 01/31/03, 02/05/03, 02/06/03, 02/10/03; El Universal, 01/31/03, 02/05-07/03, 02/10/03; Epoca, 02/03/03, 02/10/03; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 01/30/03, 02/06/03, 02/07/03, 02/11/03; Milenio Diario, 01/31/03, 02/03-07/03, 02/11/03; Notimex, 02/04/03, 02/10/03, 02/11/03; Spanish news service EFE, 02/05/03, 02/10/03, 02/11/03; La Cronica de Hoy, 01/29/03, 02/03-05/03, 02/07/03, 02/10/03, 02/12/03; La Jornada, 01/30/03, 01/31/03, 02/04-07/03; 02/11/03, 02/12/03; Reforma, 12/31/03, 01/13/03, 01/30/03, 01/31/03, 02/04/03, 02/06/03, 02/10-12/03; El Financiero, 02/05-07/03, 02/10-12/03)

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