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Fox Removes Mexico's UN Ambassador Over Controversial Comments on U.S.

by LADB Staff
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Mexico's UN Ambassador Adolfo Aguilar Zinser has been removed from his post, effective at the start of 2004, reportedly because of a diplomatic misstep in which he questioned the US treatment of Mexico. In a speech at the Universidad Iberoamericana in early November, Aguilar Zinser accused the US government of seeking only a "close relationship of convenience and subordination" with Mexico, while offering preferential treatment to European partners. "[The US] sees us as its backyard," said Aguilar Zinser, who has served in the post since early 2002.

'Forced to swallow camote'
Aguilar Zinser also questioned the excessive pressure from US President George W. Bush's administration on Mexico to back the US in its efforts to gain a UN resolution for its invasion of Iraq in March of this year. Using a phrase common in Mexico in which one party is forcing another to submit to its wishes, the ambassador said the Bush administration was trying to force his government to "swallow camote (sweet potato)."

Mexico, a key player in the Iraq debate because of its position on the UN Security Council, joined a majority of UN countries in rejecting the US resolution (see SourceMex, 2003-04-02). Mexico is about to complete a two-year term on the Security Council, which it began in October 2001 (see SourceMex, 2001-10-01).

The ambassador's statements at the Universidad Iberoamericana proved an embarrassment to the Fox administration, which has been trying to mend fences with the US to improve the political climate to negotiate an immigration agreement with the Bush administration. Still, the comments might have been swept under the rug if they had not come so close to a meeting of US and Mexican cabinet officials in Washington in mid-November.

Aguilar Zinser's statements elicited strong responses from US senior officials. One official described the UN ambassador as an "unguided missile" and said the comments undercut efforts by Foreign Relations Secretary Luis Ernesto Derbez to resume talks with US officials on important topics like immigration.

The UN ambassador's comments also led US Secretary of State Colin Powell to issue a statement denying that the US had treated Mexico as a subordinate. "Never, under any circumstances, would we treat Mexico like it were our backyard or a second-class nation."

The timing of Aguilar Zinser's comments prompted Foreign Relations Secretary Derbez to summon the ambassador to Mexico City, where he was informed that he would be replaced at the beginning of 2004. "I've had a series of meetings today with Ambassador Adolfo Aguilar Zinser in which he
explained the reasons for his statements," Derbez said in a terse statement. "On the basis of this, and conversations with the president, the decision has been made that he will conclude his duties."

Many critics in Mexico, however, accused the US government of pressuring the Fox administration to remove Aguilar Zinser. "It seems to me that the motive for removing him was to placate the US secretary of state," said Deputy Pablo Gomez, head of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) in the Chamber of Deputies. US officials denied any role in the decision. "The designation of diplomats is entirely a function of the Mexican government," said a US State Department spokesperson.

Several members of the Mexican Senate, which has a significant role in foreign-policy matters, questioned the timing of the ambassador's statements, although not necessarily their content. "The statements of Aguilar Zinser were unfortunate, especially the manner in which they were presented," said Sen. Jesus Ortega, PRD floor leader in the upper house. "He has a very important position as a representative of our country." Even though Ortega was among the majority of senators who had urged that Aguilar Zinser be removed, he also supported the content of the UN ambassador's statements. "Colin Powell can say whatever he wants, but the fact is that Mexico is not treated as a true commercial partner or a friend, but as a subordinate," said the PRD senator.

Sen. Silvia Hernandez of the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) was one of the first legislators to call for Aguilar Zinser's removal. "We have to evaluate in what ways he has been effective and in what ways his performance has yielded negative results," Hernandez said a few days before the Fox government decided to remove Aguilar Zinser from his post. Hernandez chairs the Senate committee on North American affairs (Comision de Relaciones Exteriores para America del Norte)

Other influential PRI legislators criticized Fox for not removing Aguilar Zinser immediately. "It is irresponsible to leave him in the post until the end of the year when he does not have the confidence of the president," said Sen. Dulce Maria Sauri Riancho. Some analysts said that, given the circumstances, Derbez had no choice but to remove Aguilar Zinser. "You can't have a Mexican ambassador acting this way," Rafael Fernandez de Castro, the Mexico City-based editor of the Spanish-language edition of Foreign Affairs magazine, said in an interview with the Los Angeles Times.

Still, other analysts wondered whether the decision to remove Aguilar Zinser had been made months ago. "I can't believe that Adolfo had made those statements without knowing the consequences," said political columnist Jorge Fernandez Menendez of the Mexico City daily newspaper Milenio Diario. "This was not a diplomatic lapse." The administration has not yet released the names of possible replacements for Aguilar Zinser, but two names that have surfaced are Mexico's ambassador to Washington Juan Jose Bremer and deputy foreign relations secretary Enrique Berruga.

Central Bank chief governor also in trouble
Another high-profile official, the Banco de Mexico's chief governor Guillermo Ortiz, may also be in trouble because of strong opposition from members of Fox's center-right Partido Accion Nacional.
(PAN) to his reappointment to head the central bank. Ortiz, whose term expires at the end of this year, was originally appointed to the post by former President Ernesto Zedillo (see SourceMex, 1997-12-17). Fox is required to submit his nomination for chief governor of the central bank by Dec. 31 of this year.

The president, who already has said he intends to reappoint Ortiz to the post, can count on strong support from most PRI members. The opposition from more than half the PAN members in the Senate, however, could doom the reappointment. PAN senators, along with the PRD Senate delegation, have accused Ortiz of having played a significant role in developing the controversial bank-rescue program (Fondo Bancario de Proteccion al Ahorro, FOBAPROA) during his tenure as Zedillo's finance secretary. Ortiz's link to FOBAPROA had surfaced previously in Congress, in 1998, when PAN and PRD legislators demanded his removal because of it (see SourceMex, 1998-11-04).

In a meeting with PAN senators in early November, Ortiz failed to convince the legislators that he had little to do with the creation of the program. "Ortiz did not convince us that he did not have anything to do with FOBAPROA," said PAN Sen. Guillermo Herbert. "Therefore, our stance has not changed."

The opposition from a large faction of the PAN senators is so strong that debate on his renomination has spilled over to other economic-related issues. This has prompted the Fox government to ask the PAN senators to refrain from making public statements about their opposition to Ortiz to avoid jeopardizing passage of other initiatives like tax reform. PAN senators reluctantly agreed to this request. "We don't want the administration to say that reforms did not pass because we were making noise [about Ortiz]," said Sen. Alfredo Reyes.

PAN senators have drafted their own list of candidates for chief governor, including current deputy governor Everardo Elizondo and Finance Secretary Francisco Gil Diaz, who served as deputy governor of the Banco de Mexico before taking a post in the private sector in 1997. Elizondo replaced Gil at the central bank (see SourceMex, 1998-01-28). Gil has already said he does not want the post and has endorsed the reappointment of the incumbent. "Ortiz is the best candidate and has done well in the post," said Gil during a visit to London. "You won't see me in that position."

Other members of the Banco de Mexico board of governors also support Ortiz. "I'm optimistic it will be he," said Marcos Yacaman, one of four deputy governors. "He's done an excellent job controlling inflation. You don't change things that are working, you change things that are not working." (Sources: El Sol de Mexico, 11/05/03; Unomasuno, 11/05/03, 11/06/03; La Jornada, 10/15/03, 11/06/03, 11/18/03; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 11/16-18/03; Associated Press, 11/17/03, 11/18/03; Notimex, Reuters, Los Angeles Times, The Financial Times (London), 11/18/03; La Cronica de Hoy, 10/14/03, 10/27/03, 11/14/03, 11/18/03, 11/19/03; The Herald, 10/31/03, 11/13/03, 11/17-19/03; Milenio Diario, 11/05/03, 11/08/03, 11/17-19/03; El Universal, 11/08/03, 11/17-19/03; The Dallas Morning News, The New York Times, The Washington Post, 11/19/03)

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