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by LADB Staff

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Political corruption has reared its ugly head again in Mexico with the release of two separate videotapes showing a federal senator and an influential member of the Mexico City state legislature soliciting or accepting bribes. A third videotape was also released of a member of the Mexico City government spending lavishly at casinos in Las Vegas, Nevada. While political corruption has been common in Mexico for generations, the latest incidents have greater significance as the major political parties jockey for position ahead of the 2006 presidential elections.

Videotape shows PVEM leader soliciting bribes

The federal senator who was videotaped taking bribes in Cancun, Jorge Emilio Gonzalez Martinez, is also head of the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM). Gonzalez Martinez, the son of PVEM founder Jorge Gonzalez Torres, is commonly known as "el nino verde" (the green kid) because he was only 29 when he took over the party leadership in 2001. He was key in the party's strategy to promote itself as a youthful and corruption-free alternative to traditional political parties.

In the videotape, Gonzalez offered to use his influence to convince city officials in the resort city to facilitate a construction permit for a business group in exchange for a US$2 million bribe. The bribe was allegedly sought from a representative of a Canadian business group, which was trying to bypass environmental regulations to construct a major resort in Cancun. Gonzalez has easy access to the Cancun government because the city has been governed by the PVEM since 2002 when the party defeated the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in a disputed election (see SourceMex, 2002-02-027).

The incriminating videotape, shown on several national television networks, including MVS television and Televisa, was filmed in secret by Santiago Leon Aveleyra, one of the leaders of the PVEM dissident group Democracia Verde. Leon and other disgruntled PVEM members have accused Gonzalez Martinez of adopting corrupt and autocratic practices in the management of the party and selection of candidates.

In September 2003, a federal electoral court ordered the PVEM to restructure its leadership and hold new leadership elections (see SourceMex, 2003-09-10). Gonzalez did not deny that he had brought up a request for money in the videotape but said he was just pretending to solicit a bribe to confirm rumors about the developer's alleged bad intentions. Just days after the videotape was released, Leon made other allegations against Gonzalez, claiming that the PVEM delegation in the Mexico City legislature (Asamblea Legislativa del Distrito Federal, ALDF) had issued 750,000 pesos (US $68,000) in checks in one month to Gonzalez's housekeeper.

In conjunction with the allegations, Leon and other PVEM dissidents filed a formal complaint with the attorney general's office (Procuraduria General de la Republica, PGR) accusing Gonzalez...
of embezzling party funds. PVEM leaders say government has vendetta against party Gonzalez accused Leon and other dissidents of working with President Vicente Fox's administration and other officials of the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) to discredit him before the 2006 election. "The uncontrolled ambition of the government to destroy the PVEM has no limits," Gonzalez told the Monitor radio network. "The presidential succession is at stake for them."

Gonzalez, who was granted a leave of absence from the Senate after the scandal broke, went as far as to present a complaint before the Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH), accusing the government of entrapment. "We're going to show that there was no irregularity whatsoever," said Gonzalez.

Other PVEM leaders came to Gonzalez's defense, accusing the PAN of holding a grudge against their party for breaking the alliance that helped Fox win the presidency in 2000. "We have had nothing but attacks against the PVEM since we announced that we were breaking our alliance with President Fox," said PVEM Sen. Sara Castellanos.

Interior Secretary Santiago Creel called Gonzalez's and Castellanos' claims "absolutely false," saying the video tapes came to light because of the internal dispute in the PVEM. The PVEM has made effective use of its role as power broker in the last two major elections. In addition to helping Fox win the presidential race in 2000, the PVEM aligned itself with the PRI to help the former governing party expand its plurality in the Chamber of Deputies (see SourceMex, 2000-07-05 and 2003-07-09).

Through its alliances with the major parties, the PVEM was able to gain 17 seats in the 500-member Chamber of Deputies and five of the 128 seats in the Senate. The PVEM and PRI plan to continue their relationship in some state elections this year and in the national presidential race in 2006 despite the scandal. "Our alliances with [the PVEM] remain firm," said Rafael Ortiz Ruiz, director of legal and electoral affairs in the PRI executive committee (comite ejecutivo nacional, CEN).

The PRI-PVEM alliance seems to have survived in many state elections this year, including the key gubernatorial races in Veracruz, Chihuahua, Durango, and Oaxaca. The same is not true in Yucatan, which does not have a gubernatorial race but will elect state legislators on May 16. Carlos Sobrino, the PRI's state president in Yucatan, said the party has decided to dissolve most alliances with the PVEM because of the scandal. The PVEM had not aligned itself with the PRI in all local elections, but the scandal has led to alliances with other parties unraveling. In Baja California Sur, the Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD) opted out of a coalition with the PVEM after the videotape was released.

In Quintana Roo, the state where Gonzalez was caught offering the bribe, the PAN, PCD, and the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) all distanced themselves from the PVEM. Quintana Roo is one of the few states where the PVEM and the PRI do not see eye to eye, especially after the bitter election in Cancun in 2002. "Everything that touches the senator is stained with suspicion and with the mud of corruption," PRD Sen. Carlos Navarrete said in reference to Gonzalez.
Associates of Mexico City mayor also implicated in corruption

Navarrete's statement came just days before the release of other videotapes implicating key PRD members of the Mexico City government in corruption and bribery scandals. The most damaging of the videotapes showed Rene Bejarano, the PRD's leader in the ALDF, stuffing thousands of US dollars into a briefcase and into his pockets.

The incident was recorded in the offices of the business, construction, sports, and publishing magnate Carlos Ahumada Kurtz, who gave the money to Bejarano. The videotape immediately led to the conclusion that Ahumada was attempting to bribe Bejarano to gain more favorable treatment from the Mexico City government, which had already canceled two major paving contracts originally awarded to Ahumada's construction companies.

Ahumada, who disappeared after the incident was shown on national television, wrote a letter to a major Mexico City daily newspaper claiming that the money was not a bribe but an extortion payment to Bejarano. Bejarano acknowledged taking the money in a television interview but said it was a legal campaign contribution. He insisted that he kept none of the money. "I have a modest life," said Bejarano, who has since gone into hiding. "They are not going to find any wealth."

ALDF legislator Leticia Robles Colin, whom Bejarano said was a beneficiary of the campaign contribution, denied receiving any such donation and threatened to file a libel suit against her accuser. The Bejarano videotape came to light just days after another television station showed Mexico City finance secretary Gustavo Ponce gambling in Las Vegas and spending lavishly. Later investigations revealed that Ponce had taken 17 trips to the US city since 2002.

Ponce's expenditures raised some eyebrows because the finance secretary earns a modest salary and cannot afford the huge tips he left at hotels and restaurants in Las Vegas. Mexico City mayor Lopez Obrador also cites plot Mexico City Mayor Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador immediately fired Ponce after revelations that the finance secretary is under investigation in connection with the possible disappearance of 31 million pesos (US$2.8 million). Like Bejarano, Ponce disappeared after the video tape surfaced. "There are people who can't resist the temptation of power, of money," Lopez Obrador said in an interview with Radio Red.

The Bejarano and Ponce incidents have put Lopez Obrador in the difficult position of having to defend his image as an honest official. In a radio interview, the mayor insisted on his personal integrity. "What is important to me is maintaining my convictions, my principles, so I am able to walk down the street with my children and no one can accuse me of being corrupt," he said.

The mayor later hinted that the scandals may have been an attempt by his detractors including the federal investigation agency (Agencia Federal de Investigacion, AFI), the US Federal Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), President Fox, and ex-President Carlos Salinas de Gortari to damage his reputation ahead of the 2006 presidential election. "The only way to get those images and the hotel bills is through the request of an organ of the US government," he said, citing DEA involvement in the taping of Ponce. "Those casinos do not give information to just anybody."
The DEA and the Fox administration denied involvement in any plot against the mayor. Salinas de Gortari made no comment on the accusations. However, some questions arose when PAN Senate leader Diego Fernandez de Cevallos said he knew about the existence of the tapes before they were released. Authorities are investigating Fernandez de Cevallos' role in the release of the tapes because he is also a personal friend of Ahumada.

The Bejarano tape was released by PAN federal Deputy Federico Doring Casar, but he did not make clear how he obtained the tape or who actually did the filming. The source of the Ponce tape has yet to be determined. Lopez Obrador has not declared his candidacy for the 2006 presidential race, saying he will make an announcement sometime in 2005. Still, the Mexico City mayor has enjoyed a wide lead in all major public-opinion polls conducted thus far. The scandals have put a dent in the mayor's popularity. A poll by a major Mexico City newspaper said the percentage of Mexicans who view Lopez Obrador as honest dropped to 30% from 59% previously. "The intention [of the tapes] is to affect the popularity and safety of Lopez Obrador," Mexico City police chief Marcelo Ebrard told the Televisa network.

Political opponents say some of Lopez Obrador's detractors may be members of his own party, including ex-PRD president Rosario Robles Berlanga and other supporters of party founder Cuauhtemoc Cardenas. "Let the Mexico City mayor not be confused," said Doring Casar. "Lopez Obrador's worst enemy is within the PRD." Robles, who also served as mayor of Mexico City, granted the paving contracts to Ahumada that Lopez Obrador later canceled.

This prompted PRD officials to launch an investigation into whether Robles may have had any connections to an attempt to sink Lopez Obrador. Robles denied any such role at a hearing by the PRD executive committee (comite ejecutivo nacional, CEN). At the same hearing, however, ALDF legislator Carlos Imaz Gispert revealed that Ahumada had given Robles an illegal donation of at least 600,000 pesos (US$55,000) for her campaign to become president of the PRD.

Imaz's testimony and the release of the Bejarano videotape created enough negative publicity for Robles to force her and close ally Ramon Sosamontes to resign from the PRD. "I don't want to be a lightning rod for opponents to continue to attack the party," Robles said at a press conference announcing her decision. Robles had already been under fire within the party. In September, she resigned abruptly from her post as party president after facing strong criticism for the PRD's performance in many regions of the country in the 2003 midterm elections (see SourceMex, 2003-09-10).

Robles later had to defend herself against charges that she mismanaged the party finances, causing the PRD to go into deep debt. Cardenas is not under suspicion, although there is no love lost between him and Lopez Obrador. The PRD founder, who recently announced his intention to seek his party's presidential candidacy for a fourth time, has not been shy about criticizing the current mayor. Cardenas was especially hard on Lopez Obrador during a recent controversy involving the high salary paid to the mayor's chauffeur Nicolas Mollinedo, in a case known as Nicogate. Lopez Obrador has defended the payments to Mollinedo, saying that the chauffeur performs other important duties. Lopez Obrador's explanation failed to appease opponents and created the first dents in Lopez Obrador's image as an honest leader.
First lady accused of misusing foundation

Lost in the shuffle of the recent scandals have been major controversies involving the two largest parties, the PAN and the PRI, during the past several years. Both parties were accused of using illegal financing mechanisms to support their presidential races in 2000, but no videotapes surfaced to implicate any individuals. The PRI allegedly financed its campaign by diverting funds from the state-run oil company PEMEX, while the PAN is said to have helped Fox win the presidency by accepting illegal contributions from overseas donors.

After exhaustive investigations, electoral authorities levied hefty fines against both parties (see SourceMex, 2003-03-19 and 2003-03-15). The fines, while limiting the expenditures of both parties in subsequent elections, are still considered merely a slap on the wrist. In a more recent controversy involving the PAN, first lady Martha Sahagun was accused of mismanaging funds in the Vamos Mexico charity, an organization she helped found and which she still leads. The allegations against Sahagun first appeared in the British-based Financial Times, which claimed Vamos Mexico inaccurately stated its financial standing and has not updated its books since 2002.

The article also accused Sahagun of using her position as first lady to promote the foundation while attracting funds away from other charities. Sahagun denied that Vamos Mexico lacks transparency in its bookkeeping. "Keeping transparent accounts is not just my obligation but my conviction," she said in a television interview. "Reports have been submitted to the foundation's assembly, then posted on the Internet for all to see." The first lady did not convince detractors, with the Partido del Trabajo (PT) introducing a nonbinding resolution calling for a congressional investigation of Vamos Mexico. "The president's wife is using public resources for private activities," said PT Deputy Pedro Vazquez, author of the resolution.

Parties said to use anti-poverty programs to buy votes

In other allegations related to this year's state and local elections, the nongovernmental organization Alianza Civica accused all major parties of continuing to pressure recipients of poverty relief aid for votes despite government promises to end the practice.

A study by the organization documented cases in towns and villages in Oaxaca, Coahuila, Mexico State, Sonora, and Yucatan, where local leaders conditioned disbursements for the public-assistance program Oportunidades on support for a particular candidate. Oportunidades provides monthly payments of food and cash to mothers in poor families as long as they and their children meet certain requirements, such as periodic health examinations and regular school attendance for the children.

One deputy director of the Secretaria de Desarrollo Social (SEDESOL) was fired for wearing a bright yellow PRD jersey while distributing assistance in Hidalgo state. Still, SEDESOL officials said this was an isolated case. "It is not SEDESOL personnel who are involved in these irregularities, but rather vote promoters and party militants," said Oportunidades director Rogelio Gomez Hermosillo. "What we have to do is do a better job of informing the people so they won't let themselves be deceived. They need to understand that this program is not related to any party and that their vote is free and secret." The political parties are not the only institutions seeking to control elections.
PAN federal Deputy Juan Angel Ibarra Tamez recently told reporters that drug-trafficking organizations have infiltrated local political organizations to try to sway the results of the municipal elections in their favor. Ibarra Tamez said the drug traffickers are not picky about which party to infiltrate. "From Matamoros to Tijuana, everyone faces the same problem," said Ibarra Tamez, former mayor of the border community of Ciudad Camargo in Tamaulipas state. "That is why we are asking the parties to remain alert and to take great care in choosing their candidates." [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on March 10, reported at 10.97 pesos per US$1.00] (Sources: The Dallas Morning News, 02/26/04; Reuters, 02/24/04, 03/03/04; The Washington Post, 03/04/04; Associated Press, 02/23/04, 02/25/04, 03/03/04, 03/06/04; The New York Times, 03/06/04; The Chicago Tribune, 03/08/04; Inter Press Service, 03/08/04; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 02/24/04, 02/25/04, 02/27/04, 03/01-05/04, 03/08/04, 03/09/04; Notimex, 02/25/04, 02/29/04, 03/04/04, 03/05/04, 03/08/04, 03/09/04; Milenio Diario, 02/26/04, 03/01-04/04, 03/08/04, 03/09/04; El Universal, 02/24-26/04, 03/02/04, 03/04/04, 03/08-10/04; La Cronica de Hoy, 02/24/04, 02/26/04, 03/01-04/04, 03/08-10/04; Spanish news service EFE, 02/25/04, 02/26/04, 03/02-04/04, 03/06/04, 03/08-10/04; La Jornada, 02/25/04, 02/26/04, 03/02-04/04, 03/08-10/04; Unomasuno, 02/26/04, 03/01/04, 03/02/04, 03/04/04, 03/08-10/04; The Herald-Mexico City, El Sol de Mexico, 02/26/04, 03/02-04/04, 03/08-10/04; El Financiero, 03/03/04, 03/04/04, 03/08-10/04; El Independiente, 03/08-10/04)