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PRI Legislators Offer Controversial Restrictions for Presidential Candidates

by LADB Staff

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Some members of the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) are leading efforts in both houses of Congress to tighten requirements for candidates seeking election as Mexico's president. The proposals have been presented in the context of political and electoral reforms, which the Congress will be considering in coming weeks. The two PRI proposals would reverse changes in the Mexican Constitution to ease nationality requirements. Those changes, approved 10 years ago, removed the requirement that the parents of a candidate be born in Mexico. The changes allowed Fox, whose mother was born in Spain, to become a presidential candidate.

Proposal would reverse changes implemented in 1994

The proposals offered by Sen. Oscar Canton Zetina and Deputy Jose Alarcon would modify Article 82 of the Constitution to once again require that both parents of a candidate be born in Mexico. Canton readily acknowledged that he introduced the proposal in part because of his opposition to some of Fox's policies, especially his proposals to open the energy sector to foreigners. "[Fox] was the child of foreigners, and therefore does not have nor will ever have any commitment to the homeland," said Canton, one of the few PRI members to vote against the proposal by former President Carlos Salinas de Gortari to amend Article 82 to its current state.

Senators from other parties criticized Canton's proposal. "I believe that the changes that were made 10 years ago represented an advance," said Sen. Diego Fernandez de Cevallos, coordinator of the conservative Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) in the upper house. "I believe that [Canton's] initiative represents a step backward from an open and modern Mexico." Sen. Jesus Ortega, coordinator of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) in the Senate, described Canton Zetina's proposal as unnecessary. "The current requirements are sufficient for anyone seeking to become Mexico's president," said Ortega.

Alarcon's proposal also spells out other qualifications for anyone seeking the presidency, including the requirement that the candidate have a college degree obtained at least 10 years before becoming a candidate and that he or she present evidence of good physical and mental health. "We have to guarantee that a president be a person who is sufficiently prepared and qualified," said Alarcon.

Proposal also seeks to discourage independent candidacies

Another controversial requirement in the proposals presented by the PRI is that any candidate seeking the presidency be affiliated with a political party. This requirement appears to be directed especially at former foreign relations secretary Jorge G. Castaneda, who recently announced his intention to run for president in 2006 as an independent candidate.

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"There is a huge body of people out there who don't identify with any party, and they are angry, they are disappointed, and they are disgusted with the three large existing parties," said Castaneda. "People want a citizen's alternative. I'm a spokesperson for all the people who are fed up."

Castaneda drew some support from former presidential candidate Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, who questioned the closed electoral process in Mexico. "Our electoral legislation should open the possibility for candidates who do not have a party affiliation or who are not nominated by their party to participate in the elections," said Cardenas.

Cardenas, who represented the PRD in three presidential elections, may have an ulterior motive for supporting independent candidacies. He recently resigned from all major posts in the party in a bitter philosophical dispute with party president Leonel Godoy and other members of the executive committee, and he may end up seeking the presidency outside the PRD.

Cardenas has not resigned his party membership, however, and has said he intends to seek the presidency in 2006 as a member of the PRD. For now, he continues to present himself as a viable alternative to Mexico City Mayor Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, whose popularity has been tainted by a huge political scandal involving some members of his party (see SourceMex, 2004-03-10).

Some PRD members took Cardenas' resignation in stride. "It does not deepen any division," said PRD Sen. Raymundo Cardenas. "It merely makes more or less clear the path on which the competition will proceed: Sr. Cardenas is going to seek the nomination from the level of the rank and file, because he thinks the leadership is already backing Andres Manuel [Lopez Obrador]." (Sources: El Financiero, El Independiente, El Universal, 03/29/04; The Herald-Mexico City, 03/26/04, 03/30/04; Milenio Diario, 03/26/04, 04/02/04; El Sol de Mexico, El Universal, Unomasuno, Spanish news service EFE, 04/06/04; La Jornada, 03/29/04, 04/02/04, 04/07/04; La Cronica de Hoy, 03/29/04, 04/12/04)

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