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LADB Staff

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Animosities Between Fox, PRD Evident at Annual State-of-the Nation Address.

by LADB Staff

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The bitter feud between President Vicente Fox's administration and the Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) took another nasty turn during the annual state-of-the-nation address, when a handful of legislators from the center-left party broke with protocol to heckle the chief executive repeatedly. The animosity of the PRD legislators toward Fox was symptomatic of the angry and sometimes tense relations between the president and the center-left party during the past several months.

The PRD legislators acknowledged their disruptions of Fox's speech were intended as a protest against the administration for what they view as relentless efforts to discredit Mexico City Mayor Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, widely viewed as a front-runner in the presidential race in 2006. Lopez Obrador has accused the Fox government and key members of the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) of organizing a campaign of entrapment to bring him down.

The mayor and his supporters say the PAN, with support from the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), is behind the release of several videotapes showing Mexico City officials receiving bribes (see SourceMex, 2004-03-10, 2004-04-21, 2004-05-12). The PRD is also angry with the Fox administration for having initiated the procedures to oust Lopez Obrador for an alleged violation of the Mexican Constitution. The mayor has been charged with ignoring several court orders related to a dispute regarding expropriation (see SourceMex, 2004-05-26).

The Congress has the power to determine whether Lopez Obrador can be ousted but has not set a date when such a vote will take place. The Mexico City legislature (Asamblea Legislativa del Distrito Federal, ALDF), dominated by the PRD, attempted to stop the ouster by filing a motion with Mexico's highest court (Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nacion, SCJN).

In a ruling handed down in early September, the SCJN threw out the challenge by the ALDF, saying the Congress was within its legal and political rights to proceed with the vote on the ouster. But the SCJN also said that the courts would have to determine whether Lopez Obrador actually violated the Constitution. The PRD legislators said their interruptions of Fox's speech were also intended to call attention to what they viewed as "distortions" in the president's discourse. "We were simply expressing the viewpoint of the people," said PRD Deputy Emilio Serrano, who represents Mexico City.

Serrano noted that vocal expression was the only way to show disagreement with Fox's speech because the PRD had agreed not to use any signs during the speech. Changes coming to annual address The PRD faction that led the disruptions was also displeased that a proposal to change the format for the presidential address was disallowed by the Senate. Under the proposal, approved in

the lower house in April of this year, the president would be required to listen to responses to his speech from the various opposition parties rather than departing immediately after delivering the address (see SourceMex, 2004-04-24).

The Senate voted against the change in late August, allowing Fox to follow the procedures employed in the past. Still, key senators said they are open to discussing changes in the format of the annual presidential speech for future years. "[The state-of-the-nation address] is an obsolete ceremony related to a different political model," said PAN Sen. Juan Jose Rodriguez Prats. "We have to revise and modify it."

The tactic to frequently interrupt the president's speech may backfire against the PRD, however, with widespread public disapproval noted regarding the disruptions. A public-opinion poll by the private consulting company Delfos Comunicacion found that 87% of respondents disapproved of the tactic used by the handful of PRD legislators. Many respondents said they remembered the speech more by the disruptions than by any disagreement they may have had with the content.

Concerns were also expressed that the disruptions disparaged the institution of the presidency. "Neither the president of Mexico nor society deserve this irresponsible and disrespectful attitude on the part of a group of legislators," said the employer's association Confederacion Patronal de la Republica Mexicana (COPARMEX). The disruptions, however, did reflect a strong unease with the Fox presidency. This was the first time in modern times that massive demonstrations against the president's policies were held in the Mexican capital in conjunction with the state-of-the-nation speech.

The largest protest was organized by employees of the social security institute (Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social, IMSS) and other labor groups angered by the move by Fox, the PAN, and the PRI to modify the retirement benefits for government employees to save the agency from bankruptcy (see SourceMex, 2004-07-28).

Fox's speech reflects lame-duck status

Analysts said the president's speech appeared to reflect his lame-duck status. Unlike his three previous state-of-the-nation addresses, the president failed to present any bold, new initiatives or promote his plan to implement major reforms to the country's energy, labor, and tax systems. After the speech, Fox and several key aides acknowledged that the legislative agenda the president would present to Congress during the next two years would be somewhat limited and passage would be subject to wide consensus in the Congress. "We will work with what is politically possible," said Interior Secretary Santiago Creel Miranda.

Analysts say Fox has no choice but to take that course of action to prevent major gridlock during the last two years of his administration. "He's not just a lame duck; Fox is a dead duck," said analyst George Grayson, who specializes on Mexico at the College of William and Mary in Virginia. "He's not going to get anything major through Congress in the next two years because of presidential politics."

The president did use the nationally televised address to cite advances in the fight against crime, drug trafficking, and corruption and to promote the growth of economic opportunities during his administration. He also used the occasion to reassure Mexicans that the country's democratic process was heading down the right path, despite the gridlock that seems to have gripped the country. "Democracy is not the absence of conflict. It is the freedom to debate problems and the best way to resolve them," said Fox, who delivered the speech at the San Lazaro congressional building.

Fox also pledged to continue to pressure the US government for a comprehensive deal to legalize the status of millions of undocumented Mexican immigrants. The president spoke of economic and social successes, such as an increase in housing for low-income and medium-income families. He spoke of his administration's ability to promote fiscal health, including declines in the fiscal deficit, the foreign debt, interest rates, and inflation.

Analysts and business leaders agree that the administration's fiscal discipline has been of some benefit to the economy. But they also say that Mexico's overall economic policies in the four years of Fox's government have failed to lift the country out of its doldrums. For example, COPARMEX officials raised concerns that Fox's economic policies have increased rather than reduced poverty during his four years in office.

COPARMEX president Alberto Nunez Esteva warned that Mexico faces a high risk of social unrest during the next two years because poverty levels have increased rather than declined. "The macroeconomic stability has not translated into a reduction in poverty," Nunez Esteva told the Mexico City daily business newspaper *El Financiero*.

The Centro de Estudios Economicos del Sector Privado (CEESP) said the high levels of poverty are reflected in part in Mexico's grim employment situation. In a report in early September, the CEESP noted that the number of jobs in the formal economy is lower now than when Fox took office in December 2000. "We are still about 300,000 jobs short of the levels prevailing at the end of 2000," said the CEESP. PRI Deputy Manlio Fabio Beltrones, who handled the official response of Congress to Fox's speech, urged the president to "accept the clear reality" that his policies are falling short of the needs of society.

The PRI legislator, who was recently elected as the speaker of the lower house, also chided the president for failing to work with Congress. "[Fox] has forgotten promoting the construction of a common vision and has instead chosen confrontation," said Beltrones. Referring in particular to Fox's insistence on partially privatizing the energy sector, Beltrones urged the president to "overcome his desire to impose projects that have not received a majority vote in the legislature and do not reflect the sentiment of the majority of the public." Still, Beltrones agreed on behalf of Congress to accept a "truce" proposed by Fox and to work with the president on a common vision during the next two years.

Mexico City Mayor Lopez Obrador offers own vision

Beltrones' speech was not the only reaction to Fox's economic and social policies presented during the week of the state-of-the-nation address. Lopez Obrador also presented his own vision for Mexico at a huge rally in Mexico City a week before Fox's address. The rally, organized by the PRD,

was intended to shore up support for the embattled mayor as he faces an ouster vote in Congress in the near future. The event, considered the largest outpouring of support for any politician or party in recent history, drew an estimated 250,000 to 300,000 participants.

Lopez Obrador used the rally to renew his criticism of the Fox government, the PAN, and the PRI for their efforts to discredit him, and he vowed to fight their efforts to oust him. "We will not give up, we will not back out," Lopez Obrador told the crowd. The mayor also took the opportunity to lay out an unofficial campaign platform, including a 20-point social and economic plan that among other things endorsed a return to state involvement in the economy and proposed to "take advantage of globalization, not just suffer from it."

The plan also presented a set of goals that included a commitment to end corruption and crime and to "pay our nation's debt to indigenous communities." Lopez Obrador's plan was not without its critics. One unexpected criticism came from PRD founder Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, who has staunchly supported the Mexico City mayor from the attacks of the PRI and the PAN during the ouster debates.

Cardenas said the mayor's 20-point plan was not specific enough regarding key issues of importance to Mexico, such as the Fox government's aim to privatize the energy sector and Mexico's position on the US-proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). "This seems to me an incomplete proposal," said Cardenas, who holds a slim hope of gaining his party's nomination in the 2006 election.

Some analysts saw Lopez Obrador's presentation of the plan as the unofficial declaration of his candidacy for president in 2006. "What we saw was really the jump-starting of his presidential campaign," said political analyst Federico Estevez of the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM).

The corruption scandals and the PGR move to oust the mayor from office have taken a toll on the mayor's popularity. In a public-opinion poll commissioned by the daily newspaper Reforma in August, only 31% of respondents said they would vote for Lopez Obrador, compared with 38% in February. Still, the poll showed Lopez Obrador far ahead of two likely rivals, Roberto Madrazo of the PRI and Santiago Creel of the PAN, each of whom received only 20% support. The Reforma poll indicated, however, that Lopez Obrador's personal popularity has not translated into support for his party. In the poll, 31% of respondents said they supported the PRI, compared with 20% for the PAN and 15% for the PRD. This could create difficulties for Lopez Obrador should he win the presidency because he would be facing a Congress dominated by the two opposition parties.

Interior secretary charged with campaign violations

Even while defending Lopez Obrador, the PRD has fired salvos against the Fox administration. In early September, the Mexico City electoral institute (Instituto Electoral de Distrito Federal (IEDF), which has a PRD majority, released a report charging Santiago Creel, the PAN candidate in the 2000 mayoral election, with violating campaign-spending limits. The IEDF said Creel, who narrowly lost the election to Lopez Obrador, surpassed the campaign-spending limit by 2.1 million pesos (US \$181,000) when he accepted a donation of 5 million pesos (US\$432,000) from a private foundation.

IEDF spokesman Hugo Morales said Creel could face some jail time for this infraction if convicted by the appropriate authorities. He noted, however, that the IEDF only has the power to levy a fine against the PAN for surpassing the spending limits. PRD sources said they planned to bring the issue to the Mexico City attorney general's office (Procuraduria General de Justicia del Distrito Federal, PGJDF).

Creel denied having violated the spending limits because his campaign was very careful to adjust expenditures to comply with the law. "I reiterate one more time my confidence that my campaign spending was within the limits established by the law," he said. "This is the truth and the only truth, and it is what my party and I are prepared to defend."

Critics questioned the timing of the IEDF's report four years after the election, which made it appear as a retaliatory move for the actions against Lopez Obrador. "This appears as a mean and obvious intent at revenge," said PAN Sen. Hector Larios. "But I have no doubt that this matter will be resolved through the legal system." Lopez Obrador called on the ALDF not to use the Creel case to create a case similar to his own.

Creel, considered one of the front-runners to gain the PAN nomination in the 2006 election, would have to disqualify himself from the race if convicted. "It's a question of ethics. We will not use the political process to eliminate potential adversaries in this manner," said Lopez Obrador. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Sept. 8, reported at 11.57 pesos per US\$1.00] (Sources: The New York Times, 08/30/04; Spanish news service EFE, 08/23-25/04, 08/30/04, 08/31/04; Reuters, 08/29/04, 08/30/04, 09/01/04; Los Angeles Times, 08/30/04, 09/02/04; The Dallas Morning News, Copley news service, The Washington Post, 09/02/04; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 08/23-25/04, 08/30/04, 08/31/04, 09/01/04, 09/02/04, 09/07/04; Notimex, 08/23-25/04, 08/29-31/04, 09/01/04, 09/02/04, 09/06/04, 09/07/04; Associated Press, 08/29/04, 08/30/04, 09/01/04, 09/07/04; El Financiero, La Jornada, 08/23-26/04, 08/30/04, 08/31/04, 09/01-03/04, 09/06/04, 09/08/04; Unomasuno, 08/23-26/04, 08/31/04, 09/01-03/04, 09/07/04, 09/08/04; El Universal, 08/23-26/04, 08/30/04, 08/31/04, 09/01-3/04, 09/07/04, 09/08/04; La Cronica de Hoy, 08/24-26/04, 08/30/04, 08/31/04, 09/01-03/04, 09/06/04, 09/08/04; The Herald-Mexico City, 08/24/04, 08/26/04, 08/30/04, 08/31/04, 09/01/04, 09/02/04, 09/07/04, 09/08/04)

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