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LADB Staff

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PAN Candidate Creel Accused of Misusing Position While Interior Secretary

by LADB Staff  
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Santiago Creel Miranda, considered the front-runner to win his party's nomination for the 2006 presidential election, has been accused of misusing his post as interior secretary to grant illegal favors to a firm linked to Televisa, the nation's leading television network. According to the allegations, Creel granted 65 concessions for off-track or electronic betting outlets to Televisa affiliate Apuestas Internacionales, S.A., in exchange for favorable coverage of his campaign to represent the governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) in next year's election. Creel's leading rivals are former energy secretary Felipe Calderon Hinojosa and ex-Chihuahua governor Francisco Barrio Terrazas.

Barrio and Calderon also served as leaders of the PAN delegation in the Chamber of Deputies. The questions about Creel's integrity came not only from the Barrio and Calderon camps but also from PAN members in Congress as well as legislators from the opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and the Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD). "It is evident this was a [case involving] quid pro quo," said PAN Sen. Javier Corral, a strong advocate of electoral reforms. "This was a discretionary use of power to grant favors in the hope of being rewarded with media coverage."

Barrio and Calderon, meantime, called on newly appointed Interior Secretary Carlos Abascal Carranza to conduct a thorough investigation into the allegations. "The authorities have to clear this case for the good of our electoral system and the credibility of our institutions," said Barrio. Internal probe clears Creel, Congress pushes own investigation Heeding the request of Barrio and other PAN leaders, Abascal and the Secretaria de Gobernacion (SEGOB) followed through with an investigation into the permits awarded by Creel.

In the end, SEGOB said its investigation uncovered no evidence of improprieties. "[These permits were awarded] with strict adherence to the law, and all appropriate requirements were met," SEGOB said in a statement. Creel had earlier received support from the party's national executive committee (Comite Ejecutivo Nacional, CEN) and from a special committee in charge of policy (Comision Politica Permanente), which said the permits were legal and were awarded in a transparent manner.

Creel is not out of the woods, however, with the Secretaria de Funcion Publica (SFP), the ministry in charge of investigating corruption, agreeing to take on the case. Additionally, Congress has voted to create a special committee to examine the charges against Creel more closely. The committee will be comprised of members of all parties and will answer to the political coordinating commission (Junta de Coordinacion Politica) of the Congress.
Additionally, the PRI plans to turn the matter over to the congressional audit agency (Auditoria Superior de la Federacion (ASF). Some legislators raised concerns about the timing of a large number of the permits, which Creel approved just five days before leaving his post at the Secretaria de Gobernacion (SEGOB). "A total of 130 permits were approved to operate gambling sites in 28 states and the Mexican capital," said Deputy Amadeo Espinosa Ramos of the Partido del Trabajo (PT). The actions against Creel have divided PAN members in the lower house. Some legislators like Jose Antonio de la Vega Asmitia accused the opposition parties of promoting an investigation with "electoral implications."

Conversely, those PAN members supporting an investigation were concerned not only with the allegations that Creel was seeking to gain an advantage in the media against Calderon and Barrio but also questioned whether a PAN administration should be endorsing any sort of gambling operation, whether legal or not. "There are various politicians, inside the party and out, who are opposed to this kind of activity," said Deputy Alejo Lopez.

The permits awarded to the Televisa affiliate are legal because of a loophole in Mexico's statutes regulating gambling. The Congress has discussed several proposals to allow casinos to operate in Mexico, but has failed to hold full votes on these proposals because of ongoing concerns that these operations would give organized crime another venue to operate in Mexico (see SourceMex, 1996-11-06 and 2002-12-11).

If investigations determine any culpability on the part of Creel, the former interior secretary could face criminal charges. "Since no one can run for elected office who is facing criminal charges, the legal fallout could render him constitutionally ineligible to be a candidate," said Kenneth Emmond, who writes a column for the Mexico City English-language daily newspaper The Herald. The case would have some similarities to that of Mexico City mayor Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, who had been accused of violating the Mexican Constitution by ignoring a court order. The government eventually decided to drop contempt-of-court charges against the Mexico City mayor (see SourceMex, 2005-05-04).

Creel falls in polls; Environment secretary joins race
Creel could well survive this battle with some members of his own party and with Congress over the permits, but the PRI has arranged for the congressional investigative commission to extend its probe until April 2006. "The upshot is that this will be one of the most-investigated actions of 2005," said Emmond. In any case, the former interior secretary enters his party primary in a weakened state.

A public opinion poll conducted by the Mexico City daily political newspaper La Crisis said his standing has gone down among likely PAN voters and also in a general election should he eventually win his party's nomination. According to the poll, Creel's support among respondents with PAN affiliation declined to 26% from slightly more than 27% in the course of a month. The beneficiary appears to be Calderon, who attained 21% support, an increase of one percentage point from a month ago.

In a general poll, Creel received 20% of the vote, far behind his likely rivals Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador of the PRD (with 34%) and Roberto Madrazo Pintado of the PRI (with 33%). In addition to
Barrio and Calderon, Creel will also be facing ex-Jalisco governor Alberto Cardenas Jimenez in the PAN primary.

Cardenas officially launched his candidacy on June 23, leaving his post as environment secretary. In announcing his candidacy, Cardenas focused on foreign policy, pledging to continue Fox’s "multilateralist" policies, which focus on maintaining good relations with the US, Canada, Latin America and the European Union (EU). Additionally, he praised Fox's efforts to control the drug trade. "Mexico will be a more secure place when the next administration takes office in December 2006," said Cardenas.

Cardenas enjoyed strong support during his tenure as Jalisco governor (1995-2001), but many have questioned his performance as head of the Secretaria del Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT), particularly his tendency to support big business at the expense of environmental protection (see SourceMex, 2005-02-02). Still, Cardenas is confident he can overtake Creel, even though he remains far behind in the polls. As a first step, he has hired Carlos Rojas Magnon, who played a key fundraising role in Fox's presidential election in 2000. The former environment secretary faces very difficult odds, however.

The June poll conducted by La Crisis, showed Cardenas with only 2.4% support among likely PAN voters. This is not only much lower than his likely rivals, but also a decline from May, when his support stood at 6%. Cardenas was replaced at SEMARNAT by Jose Luis Luege Tamargo, who previously had run the federal environmental protection agency (PROFEPA). Ex-Queretaro governor Ignacio Loyola Vera was selected to replace Luege as head of PROFEPA.

Both appointments were immediately criticized by environmental advocates like Greenpeace Mexico, the Centro Mexicano de Derecho Ambiental (CEMDA) and Grupo de los Cien, who questioned the commitment of the two men to environmental protection. Still, there was a glimmer of hope that a new administration of SEMARNAT would begin to undo the damage caused under Cardenas' tenure. "[Luege] will have a major responsibility to protect and conserve the natural patrimony of our country," said CEMDA president Gustavo Alanis. "He must not cede, as Alberto Cardenas did, to pressures brought by those who are more interested in profits than in environmental protection."

Sen. Veronica Velasco of the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM) was a little more skeptical, questioning Luege's timid response as head of PROFEPA to industry. In particular, she noted that the state-run oil company PEMEX has been able to get away with little or no blame for environmental damage caused by its equipment, including a major spill in Veracruz state in late 2004 (see SourceMex, 2005-01-05). "[Luege] failed to take action against PEMEX despite all the charges of contamination," said Velasco, who chairs the environmental committee (Comision del Medio Ambiente) in the upper house. (Sources: Spanish news service EFE, 06/15/05, 06/23/05; Notimex, 06/15/05, 06/19/05, 06/20/05, 06/23/05; La Crisis, 06/11/05, 06/13/05, 06/15/05, 06/17/05, 06/20/05, 06/21/05, 06/22/05, 06/24/05; El Universal, 06/11/05, 06/13/05, 06/15-17/05, 06/20/05, 06/21-25/05; La Jornada, 06/11/05, 06/12/05, 06/16/05, 06/17/05, 06/20/05, 06/21/05, 06/23-26/05; The Herald-Mexico City, 06/17/05, 06/20/05, 06/21/05, 06/27/05; La Cronica de Hoy, 06/11/05, 06/15/05,
06/16/05, 06/20/05, 06/23/05, 06/28/05; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 06/14/05, 06/20/05, 06/22-24/05, 06/28/05)

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