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President Vicente Fox's Cabinet Undergoes Major Changes

by LADB Staff

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President Vicente Fox lost three of his Cabinet members in the span of 10 days, beginning with the death of Public Security Secretary Ramon Huerta in a helicopter crash on Sept. 20. Huerta, one of Fox's closest advisers, was en route to a ceremony at La Palma federal penitentiary when his helicopter became lost in a dense fog and crashed into a mountainside.

Huerta's death was followed by the resignations of Agriculture Secretary Javier Usabiaga Arroyo and Energy Secretary Fernando Elizondo Barragan, both of whom left their posts at the end of September to prepare to run for office in the 2006 elections. Usabiaga is competing for the nomination of the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) in the Guanajuato gubernatorial race, which will be held the same day as the presidential election on July 2, 2006.

Fox was governor of Guanajuato before resigning to participate in the 2000 presidential election. Huerta was named as interim governor when Fox left and was later appointed public security secretary. Elizondo left his post at the Secretaria de Energia (SENER) to seek the PAN nomination in the Senate election in 2006, representing his native state of Nuevo Leon.

Fox moves quickly to fill vacancies

Fox appointed Eduardo Medina Mora to replace Huerta as head of the Secretaria de Seguridad Publica Federal (SSPF). Medina previously was director of the national security agency (Centro de Investigacion y Seguridad Nacional, CISEN).

The president appointed Francisco Mayorga Castaneda to replace Usabiaga, who spent five years as the controversial head of the Secretaria de Agricultura Ganaderia, Desarrollo Rural, Pesca y Alimentacion (SAGARPA). Usabiaga, who owns a vast tract of farmland in Guanajuato, was often criticized for favoring corporate agriculture at the expense of small-scale farmers. He has often clashed with agriculture organizations, many of which had called for his resignation (see SourceMex, 2002-05-29 and 2003-02-12).

Mayorga will leave his post as Jalisco state secretary of rural development to take the top post at SAGARPA. The new agriculture secretary has already served in the Fox government, leading the SAGARPA marketing arm, Apoyos y Servicios a la Comercializacion Agropecuaria (ACERCA), during Fox's first years in office.

Fox appointed Economy Secretary Fernando Canales Clariond to replace Elizondo to head SENER. Canales and Elizondo are both former governors of Nuevo Leon. To replace Canales as economy secretary, the president promoted Sergio Garcia de Alba, who had served as deputy secretary for small and medium-sized businesses at the Secretaria de Economia (SE).
Cabinet much different from start of administration

The changes in the Fox Cabinet left the president without many of his early collaborators. Before taking office, the president made a major production of hiring a headhunter so he could assemble the best talent possible, which led many critics to refer to his group of secretaries as the "Montessori Cabinet."

Other high-profile Cabinet members who have left the administration include Jorge Castaneda (foreign relations), Victor Lichtinger (environment), Santiago Creel (interior), Rafael Macedo de la Concha (attorney general), and Leticia Navarro (tourism). Luis Ernesto Derbez was shifted from economy secretary to foreign relations secretary following Castaneda's resignation (see SourceMex, 2003-01-15).

Carlos Ramirez, a columnist for the Mexico City daily political newspaper La Crisis, said only three current Cabinet members are talented enough to deserve their post: Finance Secretary Francisco Gil Diaz, Defense Secretary Ricardo Clemente Vega, and newly appointed Public Safety Secretary Medina Mora. "Outside of these three, the common denominator for this Cabinet is mediocrity," said Ramirez.

Critics said the changes in the Fox Cabinet over the years have also come at the expense of gender-based diversity. Social Development Secretary Josefina Vazquez Mota is the only woman who currently holds a top post in the administration. The Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal said two women ministers who resigned were replaced by men who happened to be cronies of Fox.

Rodolfo Elizondo, who had served as presidential spokesman, was promoted to replace Navarro as head of the Secretaria de Turismo (SECTUR), and businessman Florencio Salazar Adame took over the Secretaria de Reforma Agraria (SRA) when Maria Teresa Herrera Tello left that post. Additionally, the Congress forced Fox to strip the special office for indigenous affairs, run by Xochitl Galvez, of its Cabinet-level rank (see SourceMex, 2001-12-19).

Important non-Cabinet members also leave

The Fox administration has also suffered defections from other important officials who were not members of the Cabinet. Among these was Mireille Roccatti Velasquez, the special prosecutor assigned to investigate the murders of hundreds of women in Ciudad Juarez during the last 12 years.

Roccatti, who served as director of the Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH) during the administration of former President Ernesto Zedillo, had only been appointed as chief prosecutor for the Juarez cases in May of this year (see SourceMex, 2005-06-01).

Roccatti left that post to become environment secretary in the administration of Mexico state Gov. Enrique Pena Nieto, who was elected in July (see SourceMex, 2005-07-20). No replacement for Roccatti had been announced at the start of October.
Santiago Levy, the controversial director of the Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social (IMSS), also resigned in early October. Levy stepped down after failing to reach an agreement with the institute's union (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores del Seguro Social, SNTSS) regarding a planned increase in pension contributions. The dispute stems from legislation approved by Congress in 2004 to save Mexico's social security system from bankruptcy by curtailing overly generous benefits for workers (see SourceMex, 2004-07-28 and 2004-08-11).

The changes have yet to be implemented, pending negotiations with SNTSS leaders. Talks between Levy and the union failed to produce any agreement, with each side accusing the other of inflexibility. "We oppose the intolerant attitude of Levy," said SNTSS president Roberto Galina Vega, a few days before the IMSS director announced his resignation.

Fox immediately appointed deputy labor secretary Fernando Flores y Perez to replace Levy, a decision that pleased the SNTSS. "[Flores' appointment] is a sign of goodwill on the part of the federal government because conditions for dialogue have improved," said Francisco Castillo, an SNTSS leader in Jalisco.

Questions surround public security secretary's death

Several questions surrounded the helicopter accident that took Huerta's life, including the possibility that the aircraft might have been the target of sabotage. In addition to Huerta, the helicopter was carrying Tomas Valencia Angeles, director of the Policía Federal Preventiva (PFP), and Jose Antonio Bernal, an official with the Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH). Everyone aboard died in the crash. The officials were traveling to La Palma for a swearing-in ceremony for new guards.

Reports were circulating that Huerta and Bernal had received death threats from drug-trafficking organizations. The threat against Huerta could not be confirmed, but the CNDH acknowledged that Osiel Cardenas Guillen, the notorious leader of the Gulf cartel who is being held at La Palma, made a death threat against Bernal. Cardenas was said to be unhappy about Bernal's refusal to recommend that he be granted greater privileges.

Still, Fox administration officials said their investigation concluded that death threats against Bernal were not related to the crash, which they said was caused by poor visibility. Dense fog and heavy clouds were reported at the site in the mountains just west of Mexico City. The Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) also said mechanical failure in the Bell 412 helicopter was unlikely. "This is one of the most modern aircraft in our entire fleet," said Attorney General Daniel Cabeza de Vaca.

Nevertheless, the conspiracy theories have not gone away, with the public-safety committee (Comisión de Seguridad Publica) in the Chamber of Deputies calling on the Fox administration to conduct a full investigation into the circumstances leading to the crash. "Those of us who are on the committee have seen very little information," said Deputy Lizbeth Rosas Montero, a member of the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD). "There has been very little willingness on the part of the Fox government to clarify this incident."
Elizondo, Usabiaga leave at inopportune time

Critics also questioned the timing of the departures of Elizondo and Usabiaga, both of whom were working on important matters for the Fox government at the time of their resignation. Usabiaga left as difficulties emerged with sugar-cane legislation approved by Congress during a special summer session. Fox had initially threatened to veto the measure on the premise that continuing production subsidies distorted the market (see SourceMex, 2005-07-27).

After reaching a compromise with sugar-cane growers, the administration decided against exercising its veto power (see SourceMex, 2005-08-31). The administration's delay in publishing the new law and its insistence on challenging some measures before Mexico’s high court (Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nacion, SCJN) prompted organizations representing sugar-cane growers to threaten national blockades. After intense consultations at the end of September, the administration and the sugar-cane growers agreed to hold formal talks, and Usabiaga was one of the major participants. The secretary, however, resigned to pursue his political ambitions rather than continue with the talks, which have been left in the hands of his replacement Mayorga.

A similar situation exists with Elizondo, who left his post at SENER a few weeks after Fox announced an ambitious plan to promote more energy independence for Mexico. Fox announced the plan in mid-September, after global oil prices rose sharply in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, which temporarily disabled refineries and wells in Louisiana and Mississippi (see SourceMex, 2005-09-14).

The measures proposed by the president include a ceiling on price increases for gas and electricity, along with reforms to allow more private investment in exploration and production of natural gas. At the time the package was unveiled, the president said Katrina not only threatened to bring significant increases in energy prices but also could affect supplies to Mexico. "This has made the vulnerability of our energy-supply structure evident," Fox said. "The lack of deep reforms in the energy sector seriously limits the capability to take advantage of our underground natural gas."

Fox was counting on Elizondo to help lay the groundwork for implementing the plan, especially with the strong opposition in Congress to some elements of the plan. Elizondo, however, also decided to leave the administration to pursue his goal of becoming a federal senator. "It is not clear why [Usabiaga and Elizondo] were in such a hurry to leave," said Ana Maria Salazar, a columnist for the Mexico City daily English-language newspaper The Herald. "Had they both waited until the end of the year, their political ambitions would not have been seriously affected, and the president would have had more time to find their replacements.

Salazar also criticized the appointment of Canales to replace Elizondo at SENER. "Canales Clariond is not considered the brightest light bulb in the Fox Cabinet, and there is some serious questioning as to why the president would be rewarding the former economy secretary by appointing him to head up a ministry that faces difficult and complicated problems," said Salazar.

Other analysts said the appointment of Canales, a political crony of Fox, rather than a SENER insider might signal that the president has given up his effort to push through energy reforms during the last few months of his administration. "By not naming someone already within SENER,
there's not much expectation that major projects will really move forward," said John Padilla, director of energy-consulting company IPD Latin America. "He's got to start all over."

Elizondo is not the only key energy official who may depart the administration. Juan Bueno Torio, director of Pemex-Refinacion, the refining subsidiary of the state-run oil company PEMEX, has hinted of plans to run for the Senate in his native Veracruz. Bueno Torio, however, is said to be willing to wait until the end of the year, which would allow Fox to find a qualified replacement.

(Sources: El Economista, 09/13/05; Reuters, 09/21/05; El Financiero, 09/13/05, 09/22/05; Spanish news service EFE, The Dallas Morning News, Los Angeles Times, 09/22/05; Associated Press, 09/22/05, 09/27/05, 09/28/05; Agencia de Noticias Proceso, 09/12/05, 09/14/05, 09/21/05, 09/22/05, 09/26/05, 09/28/05, 09/29/05; El Universal, 09/12/05, 09/28/05, 09/29/05, 09/30/05, 10/03/05; La Cronica de Hoy, 09/13/05, 09/15/05, 09/22/05, 09/28/05, 09/29/05, 10/04/05; The Herald-Mexico City, 09/13/05, 09/15/05, 09/22/05, 09/29/05, 10/03/05, 10/04/05; La Jornada, 09/13/05, 09/22/05, 09/28/05, 09/29/05, 09/30/05, 10/04/05; La Crisis, 09/13/05, 09/22/05, 09/29/05, 10/03/05, 10/04/05; Notimex, 09/22/05, 09/23/05, 10/04/05)

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