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Scandal Involving Puebla Governor Damages PRI Presidential Campaign

by LADB Staff
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A political scandal involving Puebla Gov. Mario Marin could further damage the already floundering presidential campaign of Roberto Madrazo Pintado and his former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Marin is accused of conspiring with textile-manufacturing mogul Kamel Nacif Borge to imprison prominent investigative journalist Lydia Cacho on bogus charges.

Marin, a member of the PRI, was implicated through a tape of an alleged conversation with Nacif, in which the two men were discussing plans to arrest and prosecute Cacho. The tape was sent anonymously to the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada and to W Radio, also based in the Mexican capital. Cacho was detained in Cancun in December and transported to Puebla to face libel and defamation charges. She was subsequently released on bail.

The libel charges were dropped, but Cacho must still go to court to answer the defamation accusations. Cacho's book, Los Demonios de Eden (Demons of Eden), describes several networks of pedophiles and child pornographers and indirectly implicates Nacif. In the book, Cacho said Nacif had ties to Jean Succar Kuri, an accused pedophile currently in Arizona awaiting extradition to Mexico.

Governor accused of plotting against journalist

In the tape, Nacif was heard thanking Marin for helping him "teach a lesson" to Cacho. "I told her that, here in Puebla, the law is respected and there is no impunity," the governor allegedly said in response. The governor insisted repeatedly that his voice was not on the tape, which he called a poorly made fraud. "[These allegations] are all lies and falsehoods," Marin told reporters. The recording, apparently made through a wiretap on Nacif's telephone line, leaves little doubt that the governor participated in such a conversation, said journalists in Puebla who have covered the Marin government.

The case has attracted so much attention in Puebla that copies of the tape have surfaced on the black market. The incident provided fodder for the parties competing against the PRI in 2006. In the Chamber of Deputies, delegations from the governing conservative Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), and other parties immediately called on Marin to resign. The PRD, PAN, and other parties also made a formal request that the high court (Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nacion, SCJN) determine whether Cacho's constitutional rights were violated.

Presidential candidates Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador of the PRD and Felipe Calderon Hinojosa of the PAN also referred to the issue during campaign stops in February. "President Vicente Fox has
to ask for the court's intervention because we know that [Marin] is not going to resign," said Lopez Obrador.

The Fox government was noncommittal about whether it would ask the court to intervene, but presidential spokesperson Ruben Aguilar promised a full federal investigation of the matter. "The presidency condemns acts by any authority that violate the rule of law and try to limit freedom of expression, especially liberty of the press," Aguilar said in a news conference. "Cases like this one have no place in the republic."

PRI candidate Madrazo, concerned that the issue could hurt his chances in the presidential race, added his voice to those asking for the matter to be investigated. "I will not allow anything like this to affect my campaign," said Madrazo. "The Mario Marin case must be investigated thoroughly."

In calling for a full probe, the Madrazo camp was put in a major dilemma. Marin is a protege of former Puebla governor Melquiades Morales, who is playing a key role for the PRI in Puebla, the country's fifth-most-populous state. Puebla has traditionally voted for the PRI, with Marin winning the 2004 gubernatorial election by a wide margin (see SourceMex, 2004-11-17).

"The Mario Marin case reinforces the image of corruption and impunity that for many years was synonymous with the PRI," said columnist Jose Gil Olmos in a piece carried by Agencia de noticias Proceso (apro). The Marin administration, however, downplayed Madrazo's efforts to distance himself from the Puebla governor. "Madrazo was only asking for an investigation and punishment of any guilty party," said gubernatorial spokesperson Valentin Meneses Rojas. "He was only adding his voice to those asking for the intervention of the high court, not breaking with the governor."

PRI legislators seek probe of wiretap

PRI legislators initially attempted to minimize the incident, focusing instead on the illegal way in which the recording was acquired. "Whoever obtained the recordings acted in an unconstitutional manner," said Deputy Emilio Chuayffet, who leads the PRI delegation in the lower house. "These are illegal practices, which must be punished." Similar comments came from the Senate. "We have to reject these kinds of telephone espionage," said PRI Sen. Dulce Maria Sauri Riancho.

Some PRI members ascribed blame for the wiretaps to the Fox administration, and specifically to the Centro de Investigacion y Seguridad Nacional (CISEN). "This scandal was orchestrated by the PAN and the Fox government to beat up on the PRI in the middle of the electoral campaign," said Carlos Sobrino, a PRI leader in Yucatan state.

Other important officials also raised concerns about the wiretaps. "It would be regrettable if the recordings that were released had originated from a government entity," said Jose Luis Soberanes Fernandez, president of the Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH).

PRI legislators eventually joined other parties in calling for the SCJN to investigate whether Cacho's constitutional rights were violated. Sauri condemned any efforts to suppress freedom of expression.
as "unacceptable," and urged Marin to step down because he has lost credibility. "This is something he has to consider," said Sauri, a former governor of Yucatan who resigned her post in 1993 because of a disagreement with the national party leadership (see SourceMex, 1995-06-14).

For all the spin, the PRI cannot hide its concern about Madrazo's inability to catch Lopez Obrador and Calderon Hinojosa in voter-preference ratings. Public-opinion polls released in January and February showed Lopez Obrador increasing his lead to about the 34% to 39% range, with support for Calderon Hinojosa ranging between 31% and 34%. Support for Madrazo ranged between 25% and 29%.

PRI candidate remains behind in polls

Madrazo's failure to jump-start his campaign was a significant concern even before the Marin case broke. Rumors circulated in late January that the PRI was strongly considering replacing its candidate. Some PRI members were very blunt about their desire to replace Madrazo with a more appealing candidate. Those voices were led by Sen. Manuel Bartlett Diaz, who said Madrazo's decline in popularity could affect the party's chances in gubernatorial and congressional elections. "The PRI has never started any presidential campaign in third place," said Bartlett. "This is a very serious matter, and that's why I'm calling for Madrazo to be replaced." Interestingly, Bartlett heads the political faction in Puebla that includes former governor Morales and Gov. Marin.

Even with Madrazo's troubles, senior PRI officials denied any plans to replace their candidate. "The presidential campaigns only started 12 days ago," said PRI Sen. Enrique Jackson Ramirez, referring to the officially sanctioned start of the campaigns on Jan. 15. "We have five more months of campaigning." Jackson, whose name was mentioned among possible replacements, acknowledged some concern among the PRI leadership. "We will be very attentive to the trends," said Jackson. "We will continue to take his pulse and see how he advances in confidence among voters."

Madrazo's struggling campaign prompted Bernardo de la Garza, leader of the PRI's coalition partner, the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM), to distance himself from the PRI candidate. The PVEM forged a coalition with the PRI to seek the presidency as the Alianza por Mexico (see SourceMex, 2005-11-30). De la Garza announced in late February that he was dropping out of Madrazo's campaign. "It was a mistake" to give up his own presidential aspirations in favor of Madrazo, said de la Garza.

Responding to the criticism, Madrazo deflected the dissatisfaction with his campaign and instead blamed party dissidents Elba Ester Gordillo and Arturo Montiel. Gordillo feuded with Madrazo and other party leaders during her tenure as congressional leader and later as PRI secretary-general (see SourceMex, 2003-12-03 and 2005-09-28). The powerful teachers union (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educacion, SNTE), which at one time was led by Gordillo, has announced it will not support Madrazo in 2006. The SNTE instead is backing Roberto Campa Cifrian, a former PRI member who is now the candidate for the newly formed Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL).

Montiel led the dissident party faction Unidad Democratica, informally known as Todos Unidos Contra Madrazo (TUCOM), in a strong campaign against Madrazo for the PRI nomination in 2005.
(see SourceMex, 2005-08-17). Montiel, the former governor of Mexico state, dropped out of the race just before the primary after reports surfaced that he was under investigation for illicit enrichment (see SourceMex, 2005-10-26).

The attorney general's office for the state of Mexico (Procuraduria General de Justicia del Estado de Mexico, PGJEM) concluded in January that it did not have enough evidence to charge Montiel. The federal attorney general's office (Procuraduria General de la Republica, PGR), however, is continuing its investigation against Montiel for tax evasion. Madrazo claims the disputes with Montiel and Gordillo may have cost the PRI 14 points in the polls. "The Marin-Nacif case could cost [Madrazo] even more because it is more recent, and the transgressions are more offensive to society," said Adrian Trejo, a columnist for the Mexico City daily business newspaper El Economista. "Furthermore, the problems are not caused by a rival like Montiel but by an ally who had embraced the Madrazo campaign."

PRI denies rumors that Madrazo will be replaced

With the PRI clearly not intending to replace Madrazo, the blame for the party's poor standing in the polls began to shift to other officials, especially party president Mariano Palacios Alcocer. Among those advocating Palacios' replacement was Gov. Ulises Ruiz of Oaxaca, who said the party president had already fulfilled his commitments. "I think Mariano Palacios' term was one of transition," said Ruiz. Palacios was appointed in September 2005 to replace Madrazo as party president.

The strong criticism by Ruiz and others forced the party's executive committee (Comite Ejecutivo Nacional, CEN) to issue a terse statement denying that any changes were planned. Palacios was retained to "guarantee the continuity" in Madrazo's campaign, said the CEN. Madrazo also defended the party president. "Mariano Palacios will continue at the helm of the party," said Madrazo. "I have asked him not to step down and to continue moving our campaign forward."

The PRI's faltering campaign created other rumors, including a report that the party was already prepared to resort to its old tricks of bribing voters in important electoral states like Mexico state. In January, officials from the PAN, PRD, and Partido del Trabajo (PT) said they had uncovered evidence that the PRI was stockpiling bags of cement at the home of a local legislator affiliated with the PRI in Atizapan, Mexico state. The parties asked for an extensive investigation from the state electoral agency (Instituto Electoral del Estado de Mexico, IEEM).

PAN, PRD campaigns also fight corruption charges

The ghost of corruption is also haunting the PAN and PRD campaigns. In early February, the Chamber of Deputies created a special commission to investigate whether Manuel and Jorge Bribiesca Sahagun, sons of first lady Marta Sahagun, received favorable treatment or otherwise used government contacts for personal enrichment. The commission has no power to bring charges against the Bribiesca brothers, and any decision on whether to prosecute would have to come from the PGR.

Sahagun denied that her sons were involved in any illicit deals and asked critics to provide hard evidence to back their accusations. PRI Deputy Sofia Castro said the committee would proceed with
its investigation to determine whether the Bribiesca brothers received favorable treatment in state housing contracts.

PAN leaders have taken great pains to separate the Bribiesca case from the Calderon campaign. "Calderon is the candidate of the PAN and has nothing to do with this case and all the other projectiles opponents are sending against Fox and the federal government," said PAN Deputy Federico Doring.

Lopez Obrador, meanwhile, is keeping a distance from old ally Rene Bejarano, who was caught on videotape last year accepting bribes from businessman Carlos Ahumada (see SourceMex, 2004-03-10 and 2004-11-10). Ahumada and Bejarano were both imprisoned on charges of corruption as a result of the videotape. Bejarano was released several months ago after being exonerated of money-laundering charges. Ahumada remains in prison, where he faces charges of fraud and money laundering.

Lopez Obrador often defended Bejarano last year, but has now decided to distance himself from his former aide, who remains a political liability despite being legally exonerated. Bejarano is not participating directly in PRD activities but has continued to influence a faction of the party known as the Izquierda Democratica Nacional (IDN).

In a recent incident, Bejarano supporters threatened the PRD leadership because of the party's decision to leave Bejarano's wife, Deputy Dolores Padierna, off the list of candidates for an at-large seat in the Senate. Bejarano's behind-the-scenes involvement has made PRD leaders nervous. "We have made it very clear that those who have been expelled from the party during the corruption crisis that the PRD experienced last year cannot come back and participate in activities reserved exclusively for the PRD," party president Leonel Cota Montano told reporters. (Sources: Associated Press, 11/11/05, 02/14/06, 02/15/06; El Financiero, 02/17/06; Los Angeles Times, 02/18/06; The Dallas Morning News, 02/19/06; The New York Times, 02/20/06; Reforma, 01/30/06, 02/01/06, 02/15-19/06, 02/21/06; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 02/14/06, 02/15/06, 02/21/06; La Cronica de Hoy, 02/15-17/06, 02/20/06, 02/21/06; La Crisis, 01/19/06, 02/02/06, 02/17/06, 02/20-22/06; The Herald-Mexico City, 02/01/06, 02/15-17/06, 02/20-22/06; La Jornada, 02/01-04/06, 02/10/06, 02/15-17/06, 02/20-22/06; El Universal, 02/10/06, 02/16/06, 02/17/06, 02/19/06, 02/20-22/06; Reuters, 02/15/06, 02/20/06, 02/22/06; El Economista, 02/15-17/06, 02/21/06, 02/22/06)

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