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PAN Endorsement of Ex-Spanish Prime Minister Creates Controversy in Mexico

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Jose Maria Aznar, Spain's former prime minister, created a major controversy during a recent tour of Mexico, when he endorsed Felipe Calderon, the candidate for the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN). Aznar, a member of Spain's conservative opposition Partido Popular (PP), was in Mexico City in late February to speak to members of the PAN at the party's headquarters. During the speech, he praised the achievements of Calderon and President Vicente Fox. "Yes, I'm also here to say that I hope that Felipe Calderon will be the new president of Mexico," said Aznar, "for the well-being of all Mexicans and for the well-being of the country."

The comments drew immediate criticisms from opposition parties, which accused Aznar of violating Mexico's electoral code (Codigo Federal de Instituciones y Procedimientos Electorales (COFIPE). Also, Article 33 of the Constitution states that foreign nationals "cannot, under any circumstances, interfere with the internal politics of Mexico." Aznar accused of violating Mexican Constitution "It is legitimate for a conservative politician to support a fellow conservative," said Gerardo Fernandez Norona, spokesperson for the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD). "But it is illegal for any foreigner to take part in the internal politics of Mexico. The Constitution expressly prohibits such involvement."

A later statement from the PRD was less diplomatic, taking issue with the content of Aznar's comments. "Jose Maria Aznar doesn't know the reality of our nation," the statement said. "Because of that, he rates as positive the results of [the current] government that has been profoundly ineffective."

PAN president Manuel Espino called the PRD hypocritical for criticizing Aznar while accepting advice and counsel from Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's administration in 2005. "[The PRD] forgets that Chavez interfered in the internal political matters of our country through Ambassador Vladimir Villegas, who participated in a series of meetings with the PRD." Villegas was at the center of a controversy between Mexico and Venezuela in November 2005 after the Summit of the Americas, when Chavez called President Fox "a lapdog" of the US for his strong support of US policies (see SourceMex, 2005-11-16). The two countries then proceeded to temporarily withdraw their ambassadors.

Aznar's endorsement caused some discomfort in the Calderon camp. At a news conference in Mexico state, the PAN presidential candidate said that he was "not looking for the support of Prime Minister Aznar," and that "the campaign we are running and will run is exclusively for Mexicans." He added, "I respect Prime Minister Aznar's comment and I appreciate it. Prime Minister Aznar was, in my view, simply expressing a personal opinion and nothing more."
The Fox government also acknowledged that Aznar's comments were inappropriate. "The letter of our laws does not allow a foreigner to make these kinds of statements, the kind that he made yesterday," presidential spokesperson Ruben Aguilar Valenzuela told reporters.

The administration and opposition parties differed on the type of sanctions that Aznar deserved for violating the Mexican Constitution. Under certain circumstances, foreigners who violate the electoral law face immediate deportation if the government determines that their presence is "inconvenient for the country."

In this case, said opposition politicians, it would have been appropriate to deport Aznar. "Someone like Aznar, who is already very politically savvy, cannot come to our country and make a statement as implicit as this," said Deputy Emilio Chuayffet, one of the congressional leaders of the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). That request became a moot point because Aznar had already returned to Spain the previous day.

Interior Secretary Carlos Abascal Carranza told reporters had sent the proper letters informing Aznar that he had violated Mexican electoral law. "We took all the appropriate administrative and legal measures in the Aznar situation," said Abascal. "I now consider this case closed." The concerns about foreign interference in the Mexican elections have all parties on edge.

In a resolution presented to the IFE, a multiparty delegation in Congress drafted a resolution asking the institute to launch an investigation of the various presidential campaigns to determine whether foreigners are taking improper roles in electoral efforts in Mexico. "Foreign nationals cannot work as advisors, consultants, or representatives of the candidates," said PAN Deputy German Martinez Cazares. Ugalde said, however, that the IFE could not act on the request unless one of the parties presented proof of a specific violation. (Sources: Associated Press, 02/22/06; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 02/22/06, 02/23/06; El Financiero, The Herald-Mexico City, El Universal, 02/23/06; La Crisis, 02/23/06, 02/24/06; La Cronica de Hoy, 02/24/06; Reforma, 02/22/06, 02/23/06, 02/28/06; El Economista, La Jornada, 02/23/06, 02/24/06, 02/28/06)