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Fox Administration Finally Intervenes in Oaxaca; Resolution May be Difficult

by LADB Staff

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After weeks of sitting on the sidelines, President Vicente Fox's administration finally entered the bitter and sometimes violent conflict between the teachers union and the Oaxaca state government. In late August, Interior Secretary Carlos Abascal Carranza agreed to sit down with members of Section 22 of the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educacion (SNTE) to discuss demands for a salary increase.

While there was a potential breakthrough on the issue of compensation for the teachers, the SNTE's insistence on the removal of Oaxaca Gov. Ulises Ruiz Ortiz remained a major obstacle in what has become a crisis in the capital city of Oaxaca. Ruiz is a member of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which has governed Oaxaca for several generations. Abascal's decision to enter the talks offers a glimmer of hope for a resolution to the nearly five-month impasse between SNTE members and the Oaxaca state government regarding teachers' salaries.

Members of Section 22 walked off the job at the end of May to press their demands for higher pay and other concessions from the Ruiz administration. The walkout forced the cancellation of the last month of school for 1.3 million students in the Oaxaca school system. The strike has continued into the new school year, with students already missing the first month of classes. The governor refused the request, arguing that his government did not have the 1.4 billion pesos (US\$127 million) to cover the SNTE demands (see SourceMex, 2006-08-02).

Protesters paralyze state capital

Rather than meet the union's demands, Ruiz sent riot police to try to dislodge protesters from the Zocalo (central square), but the failed attempt only increased the SNTE's resolve. The Oaxaca government's refusal to meet the teachers' demands sparked a series of protests and acts of civil disobedience that have paralyzed the state capital.

The protests have grown beyond a mere dispute over teachers' pay, with several civic groups, farmers, students, and leftist organizations joining the SNTE in an umbrella organization called the Asamblea Popular del Pueblo de Oaxaca (APPO) to denounce corruption under successive PRI governments and to demand that state officials take steps to improve living conditions in Oaxaca.

As a central demand, protesters are asking that Ruiz step down or be removed from office. Ruiz has served less than two years of his six-year term, after being elected by a very narrow margin in 2004 (See SourceMex, 2004-08-04).

To underscore their demands, APPO members have taken control of major installations in Oaxaca City, including a dozen radio and television stations and key municipal and state buildings. The

movement succeeded in paralyzing most state government operations, forcing officials to work out of improvised headquarters and communicate via cell phones. "Meanwhile, no one's working at City Hall, the police station, or the nearby state capital offices," said the Los Angeles Times. "Each of the buildings is blocked by hundreds of men and women living under tarps."

A battle to control broadcast media

The tug-of-war between the protesters and the government has also become a battle for control of broadcast outlets. In August, unidentified assailants, thought to be linked to the government, destroyed the broadcasting equipment of Canal 9, which houses a public television and radio station that APPO had commandeered early in August to broadcast its version of events.

This prompted protesters to take control of several commercial radio stations, which they used to broadcast their demand for Ruiz's removal. "We have to take to the streets, people of Oaxaca, to remove...Ulises Ruiz from office," said the broadcast.

Other incidents contributed to the increased tensions, such as a drive-by shooting in late August at a barrier erected on a street by APPO. In the incident, a group of hooded assailants opened fire indiscriminately, killing a man at the site. Protesters, who said the government was behind the shooting, responded by erecting more barriers. Several public buses were also set on fire, but there was confusion about which party was responsible for the actions.

The government blamed the protesters, but one APPO leader said goons hired by the government had burned eight buses to "create confusion." The APPO actions succeeded in creating the appearance that Oaxaca has become ungovernable, which protesters said was reason enough to remove Ruiz from office.

"No police officers are in sight, except for the occasional rogue cops shooting from the back of pickup trucks in midnight raids," said the Los Angeles Times. "Businesses are suffering their worst tourist season ever. And fearful residents, who try to stay indoors at nightfall, take turns guarding the entrances to their neighborhoods with piles of rock, lumber, and burning tires."

State officials have avoided direct confrontation with the protesters to prevent violent incidents. But this has not stopped the Ruiz administration from attempting to discredit the APPO. "They are violent radicals, people with an ideology from the 1960s," said Oaxaca interior secretary Heliodoro Diaz. "Their only objective is to break our institutions and the state with the goal of putting in a populist government and making their own laws."

Oaxaca attorney general Lisbeth Cana Cadeza has accused groups seeking to overthrow the government of infiltrating the SNTE. "These people are saying, 'Hit me, so I can denounce you for hitting me,'" said Cana. "They are generating instability and chaos." Ruiz has placed at least some of the blame for the instability in Oaxaca on the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), which has encouraged the demonstrations.

The Oaxaca protests escalated just as a center-left coalition, led by PRD presidential candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, set up camp along Mexico City's busy Paseo de la Reforma to call

attention to what he perceived was a fraudulent presidential election on July 2 (see SourceMex, 2006-08-09 and 2006-08-30).

Slow federal reaction contributes to impasse

The Oaxaca state government and the APPO remain far apart but have both expressed a willingness to resolve the problem with help from the federal government. One problem was that President Vicente Fox's administration chose to remain on the sidelines during July and most of August, when tensions were highest. The Fox government's only contact with the two sides during that period was through low-level officials from the Secretaria del Trabajo y Prevision Social (STPS) and the Secretaria de Gobernacion (SEGOB).

The SNTE believes the conflict could have been prevented if Abascal and other high-level officials had agreed to intervene earlier. "If the interior secretary had acted months ago in a real and formal way, the conflict in Oaxaca would have been resolved," said Enrique Rueda Pacheco, secretary-general of SNTE Section 22.

The slow reaction by the Fox government is a symptom of the weakness in the current federal administration, critics contend. Syndicated columnist Sergio Sarmiento said the government was wise not to react violently, as was the case during incidents of unrest during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. At the same time, he criticized the Fox government of being spineless because of its failure to take any action at all. "A modern state cannot allow the blockade of an entire city, which is what is happening in Oaxaca," said Sarmiento.

Abascal has managed to get the SNTE to the negotiating table with an offer to adjust salaries and other concessions. In exchange, the interior secretary has demanded that the SNTE and APPO renounce all acts of violence. Demand for governor's removal remains chief obstacle Abascal's success in bringing the SNTE to the table is tempered by the unrelenting demand by the SNTE and APPO that Ruiz resign his post.

"Up to now, they have imposed a condition that they consider non-negotiable, which is the resignation of the governor," said Abascal. "We cannot agree to this condition because the federal government does not have the power to remove governors. There are other procedures to accomplish this." Under the Mexican Constitution, only the Senate has the power to remove Ruiz from office, and it would then name an interim governor.

The APPO already took steps in that direction by bringing the case to the joint congressional committee (Comision Permanente), comprising members of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, during the summer. The complaint charged that the Ruiz administration's failed attempt to dislodge SNTE strikers from the Oaxaca Zocalo violated the human rights of the teachers. The committee turned the matter over to the Senate, but consideration of the case was delayed because of the congressional and presidential elections in July. In mid-September, the newly installed Senate, mostly made up of members elected in July, decided not to proceed with the ouster of Ruiz on the grounds that evidence presented by the complainants was insufficient to warrant such a move.

Some PRD senators wanted the case to proceed, but they did not have sufficient numbers to overcome a majority led by the conservative Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) and the PRI, which together hold 91 of the 128 seats in the upper house. Ruiz also received a boost from the Confederacion Nacional de Gobernadores (CONAGO), which voted unanimously to oppose removing the Oaxaca governor. While the vote was symbolic, the move was a moral victory for Ruiz because of the support he received from members of the three major parties, including his own PRI, the PRD, and the PAN.

The APPO's effort to remove Ruiz from office has emboldened protesters in Puebla, another state led by a PRI governor accused of corruption. In mid-September, the Frente Civico Poblano organized a demonstration in the city of Puebla to call for removing Gov. Mario Marin Torres, who is accused of conspiring with local textile manufacturer Kamel Nacif to imprison prominent investigative journalist Lydia Cacho on bogus charges. Cacho was investigating Nacif in connection with a pedophilia case (see SourceMex, 2006-02-22). "We demand the removal of the governor now," said a sign at the protest in Puebla. "Our state deserves a just and dignified government," read another sign. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Sep. 13, reported at 10.98 pesos per US\$1.00] (Sources: Reuters, 08/21/06, 08/22/06; The New York Times, 08/24/06; Los Angeles Times, 08/28/06; Associated Press, 08/21/06, 08/25/06, 08/29/06; Milenio Diario, 08/22/06, 08/23/06, 08/28/06, 08/29/06, 09/01/06, 09/05/06, 09/07/06, 09/08/06; Spanish news service EFE, 08/28/06, 09/08/06; The Herald-Mexico City, 08/28/06, 08/29/06, 08/31/06, 09/01/06, 09/06/06, 09/08/06; Notimex, 08/21/06, 08/23/06, 08/29/06, 09/08/06, 09/11/06; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 08/21/06, 08/22/06, 08/28/06, 08/29/06, 08/31/06, 09/04/06, 09/06/06, 09/07/06, 09/11/06, 09/12/06; Reforma, 08/22/06, 08/29-31/06, 09/05/06, 09/07/06, 09/08/06, 09/11/06, 09/12/06; El Economista, 09/01/06, 09/05/06, 09/08/06, 09/12/06; La Cronica de Hoy, 08/22/06, 08/23/06, 08/30/06, 08/31/06, 09/05-08/06, 09/12/06; Excelsior, 08/22/06, 08/23/06, 08/28-31/06, 09/01/06, 09/06-08/06, 09/11-13/06; El Universal, 08/22/06, 08/23/06, 08/29-31/06, 09/01/06, 09/06-08/06, 09/11-13/06; La Jornada, 08/23/06, 08/31/06, 09/01/06, 09/05-08/06, 09/11-13/06; La Crisis, 09/01/06, 09/07/06, 09/13/06)

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