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In Controversial Move, President Felipe Calderon Names Top Aide To Head Secretaria De Gobernacion

by LADB Staff
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In a move strongly criticized by the center-left opposition, President Felipe Calderon appointed top aide Juan Camilo Mourino to head the Secretaria de Gobernacion (SEGOB). Mourino, who headed the president's campaign before the 2006 presidential election, replaced Francisco Ramirez Acuna, who resigned in mid-January. Critics had no problem with Ramirez Acuna's departure but questioned whether Mourino was qualified to assume the post, considered the second-most-powerful position in the executive branch. Mourino, who has served as chief of staff since Calderon took office in December 2006, replaces the enigmatic Ramirez Acuna, who was widely criticized for his ineffectiveness, particularly in his dealings with the opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI).

Ramirez officially resigned, but most political analysts believe he was forced out. "He was outmaneuvered by the PRI," said Rossana Fuentes Berain, a political analyst at the Instituto Tecnologico Autonomo de Mexico (ITAM) in Mexico City. "When things got done, it always looked like the feathers were in the caps of the PRI leaders and not in the cap of the president." Ramirez also came to office carrying some political baggage, including criticism that he violently repressed a demonstration at a European Union (EU)-Latin American gathering in Guadalajara while he was governor of Jalisco state (SourceMex, June 16, 2004).

Calderon placing top collaborators in key positions Mourino's appointment is seen as Calderon's effort to put more of his close collaborators in key positions. Just days before the Mourino appointment, the president named Ernesto Cordero as social-development secretary to replace Beatriz Zavala, who resigned to take a post with the PAN executive committee. Calderon also used his influence to ensure that former legislator German Martinez Caceres would be elected leader of the PAN in late 2007.

Partly because of Calderon's behind-the-scenes maneuvering, all potential challengers to Martinez withdrew from the race, leaving him as the only candidate. Martinez, a member of Calderon's moderate wing of the PAN, replaces controversial ex-president Manuel Espino, who was aligned with the ultraconservative faction of the party known as El Yunque (SourceMex, June 08, 2005). "The appointments of Mourino and Cordero, as well as Martinez's election, give Calderon the opportunity to relaunch his government and take control of the national agenda," said Pablo Hiriart, a columnist for the Mexico City daily newspaper Excelsior.

As head of SEGOB, Mourino will now lead Calderon's efforts to push major energy, labor, and judicial reforms through Congress. The energy reform is especially significant because legislators will be making decisions on major changes to the structure of the state-run oil company PEMEX. Critics question Mourino's inexperience Critics say, however, that Calderon would have been better served by appointing someone who could bring the country together rather than a member of his
inner circle. "This guy hasn't done anything in his life to deserve the crown jewel of the Cabinet," said ITAM political scientist Federico Estevez. "He's a blank page. Appointing him is an incredibly bold and risky move by Calderon." The new secretary, who is only 36, has not held a cabinet-level post before, but he does have some legislative experience, having served in the Campeche legislature and in the federal Chamber of Deputies.

In an editorial, the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada questioned Mourino's outright rejection of dialogue on key issues with Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, who narrowly lost the presidential election to Calderon. "Whether the Calderon administration likes it or not, Lopez Obrador is the main opposition figure in our country," said the left-leaning newspaper. But others say Calderon was able to make the change to this key post in his Cabinet this year because a sparse electoral calendar could promote greater cooperation. "There are elections in only six states, and these will be for state legislators and mayors. There is not a single gubernatorial race," said Leo Zuckermann, a columnist for the Mexico City daily newspaper Excelsior. "The lack of partisan competition gives the president greater space to seek collaboration." Mourino said he would negotiate with the parties through the Congress, which is the only institution where "all the ideologies are present. I'll make the appropriate contacts and keep the channels of dialogue open to promote understanding, collaboration, and the construction of accords," he said during a ceremony at the Los Pinos presidential palace.

La Jornada noted, however, that the PRI and the PAN together have a huge plurality in the Congress, which means the two parties could impose a common agenda. PRD officials said they would not negotiate directly with Mourino but instead would address important issues with legislators from the PAN and the PRI in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. "The PRD will maintain its posture of not entering into dialogue with the illegitimate government of Felipe Calderon," party president Leonel Cota Montano said in reference to charges by center-left parties that the PAN stole the 2006 election. "This includes the new interior secretary." The PRD rejection of Mourino was not unanimous, with Deputy Ruth Zavaleta, president of the Chamber of Deputies, welcoming Mourino to his new post and urging the new secretary to maintain a dialogue with legislators. "This was impossible with Ramirez Acuna," said Zavaleta. Legislative leaders from the PRI, the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM), the Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL), and the Partido Alternativa Socialdemorata y Campesina (PASC) also said they would work with the new secretary.

As expected, the governing PAN strongly endorsed the appointment. "Mourino will do a good job," said Sen. Felipe Gonzalez, who served as deputy interior secretary during the administration of former President Vicente Fox. "He is familiar with all the parties." "He is close to the president, he knows how the system works, and he knows how to listen," said PRI Sen. Francisco Labastida Ochoa, a former interior secretary. Syndicated columnist Sergio Sarmiento said the new secretary's closeness to Calderon could be an important factor in improving relations between the administration and Congress. "Mourino does not have any political weight, but he is the president's top confidant," said Sarmiento. "When one is negotiating with him, you will at least know you are negotiating with the president." Other analysts offered similar comments. "One could criticize Mourino's lack of experience," said Excelsior columnist Jorge Chabat. "But after seven years with low-profile secretaries at SEGOB, there will now be someone in the post who will take the job seriously." Mourino's Spanish birth also a subject of controversy Some critics also questioned
whether the appointment was legal because Mourino was born in Madrid, moving to Mexico with his family at age 7. He became a naturalized Mexican citizen at age 18.

Questions about Mourino's nationality are legitimate because the lack of a vice president in Mexico leaves the head of SEGOb as the de-facto second in command in the executive branch. If something were to happen to Calderon, Mourino would presumably take over the presidency, at least temporarily. Mourino's Spanish birth would be problematic, since the Mexican Constitution requires that anyone assuming the post of president be born in Mexico. "President Calderon cannot violate the Constitution, even if the new appointee is one of his close allies or a friend," said Sen. Silvano Aureoles and Deputy Valentina Batres, both members of the PRD. Article 82 of the Mexican Constitution explicitly bans any foreign-born individual from becoming president of Mexico. But Article 30 offers a loophole, allowing anyone whose parent or parents are Mexican nationals to automatically claim Mexican nationality at birth. Mourino's mother is Mexican.

Citing Article 30, the opposition PRI defended Calderon's decision to appoint Mourino to the post. "[Mourino] is a Mexican national," said Sebastian Lerdo de Tejada, the party's legal counsel. "Our Mexican laws certify that he is a Mexican national." Furthermore, Lerdo de Tejada said the PRD cannot use the Constitution to block Calderon from making the appointment. "This is a prerogative of the president, to appoint his own ministers," said the PRI counsel. In the past, the interior secretary's post has been considered a springboard to a party's presidential candidacy, particularly during the years when the PRI was the dominant party. During those years, the sitting president designated his successor through the infamous "dedazo." Regardless of whether Mourino can legally run for president, the new secretary insisted that that consideration did not factor into his decision to accept the SEGOb appointment. "That is not my goal," Mourino told reporters. Thorny issues await new secretary Mourino will be facing many difficult domestic issues during his first year.

First and foremost, he must get around the conflict-of-interest question when promoting the energy reforms. Mourino's family has operated several PEMEX gasoline franchises for the last three decades, leading opposition members to question whether he could be impartial. In an interview with Noticieros Televisa, the new secretary said he distanced himself from the family business when he became involved in politics.

Some PRD critics say that is beside the point, with Lopez Obrador suggesting that Mourino was put as head of SEGOb to oversee "the surrender of PEMEX to foreign companies." In response, Mourino repeated the administration's position that PEMEX would not be privatized. "We will not sell even a screw to private companies," he said. He acknowledged, however, that several initiatives have been proposed in Congress to hire private companies to conduct key functions, including deep-water exploration. The PRD contends that recent increases in oil-export prices have given PEMEX sufficient capital to take care of those functions itself.

The PRD agrees with the administration and the other parties in Congress on the need to end the current structure by which a large share of PEMEX revenues is transferred to the federal treasury. Another major area where the secretary will have to lead the dialogue with various players on behalf of Calderon is the government's anti-crime efforts, particularly the crackdown on drug cartels. Some
legislators and party officials are pushing for the administration to make the war against organized crime more effective.

Among those is PRI president Beatriz Paredes, who urged Mourino to ensure that SEGOB places a high priority on fighting crime and protecting Mexico's national security. Paredes recently held a meeting with Mourino to express her party's willingness to cooperate with the Calderon administration on important matters. But some actions by the Calderon administration to combat drug cartels have been problematic for others. In early 2007, Calderon launched a comprehensive campaign against the major drug organizations, dispatching army units to areas where the cartels were most active (SourceMex, January 24, 2007). The effort has had mixed results (SourceMex, May 30, 2007, October 12, 2007 and November 28, 2007).

Jose Luis Soberanes Fernandez, president of the semi-autonomous human rights commission (Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos, CNDH), has questioned the use of military personnel to conduct the anti-drug operations. Soberanes says the soldiers have been allowed to operate with impunity, at times violating the rights of local residents. In an appeal to Mourino, Soberanes asked that he come up with a plan to replace the military with a civilian police force. "We are not asking for the immediate withdrawal of the army," said Soberanes. "Rather, we seek a gradual transfer of powers to civilian authorities." While there was no immediate comment from SEGOB on Soberanes' request, the government is not likely to heed the CNDH proposal.

The reason the Calderon administration resorted to greater involvement by the military in the anti-drug effort was because many local police departments had been corrupted by the drug cartels. In another sensitive issue, Mourino said the administration would continue to crack down on what it considers subversive groups like the Ejercito Popular Revolucionario (EPR). In 2007, the EPR conducted several acts of sabotage against PEMEX facilities (SourceMex, July 25, 2007 and September 12, 2007). "This is a subversive group that is in permanent defiance of the state," said Mourino. Critics said the government should look at the big picture when considering the actions of the EPR. "We do not justify or legitimize the methods of this armed organization," said La Jornada. "But there is no doubt that these groups exist because of the economic policies employed during the past several administrations, which have led to a growing inequality and marginalization."

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