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Ex-president Miguel De La Madrid Stirs Political Controversy With Accusations Against Carlos Salinas De Gortari

by LADB Staff

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Allegations have circulated for many years that the family of former President Carlos Salinas de Gortari had been involved in illicit activities, including drug trafficking, money laundering, and embezzlement. But no insider had dared point the accusing finger directly at the ex-president and his family until this year, when another former chief executive, Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado, candidly and openly told a television interviewer that Salinas "promoted his family's enormous corruption." De la Madrid later retracted his comments, but many believe he was pressured into doing so.

Allegations in interview with radio reporter De la Madrid made the charges against the Salinas family in an interview with radio journalist Carmen Aristegui of MVS Noticias. Although the comments merely repeated many of the allegations that had circulated for years, they elicited angry responses from Carlos Salinas and from high-level members of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which governed Mexico for seven decades. PRI officials directed their anger not at de la Madrid but at the reporters who "took advantage" of a frail man whose health is failing. De la Madrid, who is 75, governed Mexico from 1982 to 1988. Salinas succeeded de la Madrid and served between 1988 and 1994. In the interview, which took place in April and aired on May 13, the ex-president accused his successor of corruption, theft, and bad governance. Specifically, he charged that Salinas stole at least half of a special discretionary fund created for chief executives to use for official purposes. "[Salinas] committed serious errors, very serious," said de la Madrid. "The worst one was corruption." De la Madrid also accused Salinas of looking the other way while his brother, Raul Salinas de Gortari, used high-level connections to provide protection for prominent drug-trafficking organizations.

The ex-president did not give details, but there were various reports that Raul Salinas was working closely with the Tijuana and Gulf cartels and with Colombian drug-trafficking organizations (SourceMex, May 24, 2006). Mexican and international authorities were never able to develop a case against Raul Salinas, although the Swiss government tried unsuccessfully to link his assets in Swiss banks to illicit drug profits. In the end, Swiss authorities returned most of Raul Salinas' bank deposits to the Mexican government. They acknowledged that Salinas had engaged in illegal financial activities but could not prove drug connections (SourceMex, July 23, 2008).

De la Madrid also brought up allegations that Raul Salinas had profited from government contracts, particularly from the state-run oil company PEMEX, which he obtained illegally. Raul Salinas de Gortari has had a history of bucking the legal system. He spent several years in prison on charges of masterminding the 1995 murder of his brother-in-law, Jose Francisco Ruiz Massieu, who was then a

high-level PRI official (SourceMex, March 08, 1995). But an appellate court overturned the conviction in 2005, saying Raul Salinas was imprisoned without sufficient evidence (SourceMex, June 15, 2005).

In discussing Carlos Salinas' tenure, de la Madrid alluded to the PRI's old system known as the "dedazo" (finger pointing), in which the sitting president selected his successor. "I am very disappointed. I made a mistake," said de la Madrid of his decision to anoint Salinas. "But at that time, I did not have sufficient information about the Salinas family's lack of morality." Some observers characterized de la Madrid's statements as extremely damaging. "Don Miguel put the family of Carlos Salinas de Gortari in a very bad light," wrote columnist Alvaro Cueva in the Mexico City daily newspaper Milenio Diario. "He became the first former president in Mexico's history to cut his successor to shreds.

In the process, he set the PRI and other politicians ablaze." Cueva said that, even though most of de la Madrid's allegations were common knowledge, "the fact that they were made from someone inside the system...gives them an element of legitimacy and force." Others agreed. "Nothing can erase the impact of his insinuations," wrote columnist Joaquin Lopez-Doriga in Milenio Diario. "It has been an unwritten rule with the traditional PRI that a former president does not speak ill of his successor, in return for which his successor did not launch a witch hunt about the real or perceived transgressions of his predecessor," said George Grayson, a Mexico expert at the College of William & Mary in Virginia. De la Madrid retracts statements, but skepticism abounds Salinas did not let de la Madrid's statements stand, accusing Aristegui and the media of manipulating the interview and taking advantage of a frail man. "Instead of contributing to an informed debate...you resorted to testimony from people with limited capacity, which only encourages sensationalism and masks the clarity that is necessary [in this situation]," Salinas said in a letter to the journalist.

A few hours after the interview, de la Madrid issued a statement retracting his comments. He said he suffers from emphysema, which prevented him from properly processing Aristegui's questions. "My tone of voice sounds weak and confused," he said as proof. Aristegui immediately rejected de la Madrid's explanations, emphasizing that the ex-president was friendly and offered his thoughts freely. "He was willing [to participate in the interview] and had the time, faculties, and clarity to put what he thinks and what he knows about the Salinas family on the record," Aristegui wrote in a column in the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma. De la Madrid's comments did not "come from some bumbling person."

Other journalists who interviewed the ex-president said that de la Madrid has shown a tendency to speak his mind. For example, journalist Martha Anaya, who is writing a book about the fraudulent 1988 election that brought Salinas to power, said she interviewed de la Madrid a year ago, and he was very lucid and coherent. Anaya knew de la Madrid well because she covered him during his term as president and had frequent interviews with him after he left office. De la Madrid was a man who "did not hesitate to say what was on his mind," Anaya told the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada. "It should be emphasized that no one asked Aristegui and the photographer accompanying her not too push de la Madrid too hard because of health reasons," said syndicated columnist Miguel Angel Granados Chapa. "Because of this, the interview was conducted very candidly and without conditions and with the obvious freedom of the ex-president to say whatever he wanted to

say." "He's in failing health, and I think he wanted to set the record straight," said Grayson. "But there was a lot of pressure brought to bear on him."

The word on the street was that Salinas coordinated damage control from London along with PRI leaders and de la Madrid's two sons. "Francisco Rojas, Emilio Gamboa, Ramon Aguirre, Enrique and Francisco de la Madrid. They coordinated the 'regret' from Miguel de la Madrid after the interview with Aristegui," said the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal referring to an item by Ramon Alberto Garza in Reporte Indigo, an Internet-based multimedia operation. "With his team of confidants, [Salinas] made sure that de la Madrid and his sons put together the necessary message, which was to confirm that his predecessor was suffering from a disabling illness," added the article.

Several observers smelled something fishy in de la Madrid's retraction. "The Miguel that we heard yesterday morning was visited by the elite PRI mafia in the afternoon, and the retraction was formulated in the office of the former president." said journalist Lydia Cacho, who has been the victim of censorship by a PRI administration, that of Puebla Gov. Manuel Marin (SourceMex, February 22, 2006 and December 05, 2007). Added columnist Alvaro Cueva, "What is funny about this is that Mr. de la Madrid's comments only worsened the situation."

PRI concerned about impact on July 5 elections

There was talk that high-level PRI leaders also pushed for the retraction because of concerns that de la Madrid's statements could damage the party's chances in the July 5 elections. PRI president Beatriz Paredes Rangel accused the Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) of taking advantage of the situation to help its position in the upcoming vote, although she stopped short of accusing the governing party of orchestrating it. She emphasized that de la Madrid's health was not good and that the PRI was not going to allow other parties to use his declarations to defame the party. Paredes said the PAN was attempting to distract Mexican voters from more relevant issues, such as the economy. "I am convinced that the voters are more concerned about real issues, such as the loss of jobs, the high cost of basic goods," said Paredes.

The economy could become a major issue in the election. President Felipe Calderon's administration acknowledged in June that Mexico could face a contraction of 5% in GDP this year (see other article in this issue of SourceMex). Paredes minced no words in suggesting that Mexico's problems were the result of the PAN's inability to make the right decisions. "We in the PRI know how to govern, we know how to address an economic crisis so that we do not lose jobs," said the PRI president. "We do not forecast growth in the economy that later turns into a recession." The impact of de la Madrid's allegations on the elections is not yet known.

Many polls showed the PRI leading the PAN and other parties in the race to control the Congress (SourceMex, April 15, 2009 and May 13, 2009). Some observers suggest voters might be reluctant to bring the PRI back to power. "All you need is a food fight between notables in the PRI to underline the contention that the PRI hasn't changed one iota, that it's still the corrupt crowd that ruled the county for 71 years," Grayson said. Others like Alvaro Cueva suggest that the situation could have other consequences, such as keeping voter participation very low. Even Paredes acknowledged that de la Madrid's statements could cause problems for the party. "It is time for us to forget about old

feuds," said the PRI president, who emphasized that a united PRI has a better chance of performing well in the July 5 elections, which also include six gubernatorial races and several mayoralities and state legislative elections. But some members of the PRI are refusing to gloss over the situation.

Ex-senator Manuel Bartlett Diaz, who served as interior secretary for de la Madrid, accused the Salinas faction of unscrupulous actions. "They have already killed off Miguel de la Madrid. They have declared him crazy and have said he is an idiot," said Bartlett, who has been a frequent critic of Salinas, especially his neoliberal economic policies. "They are making this look like a suicide." Bartlett Diaz, who might have received the dedazo from de la Madrid instead of Salinas, said he was not bitter about the situation. "I do not have any resentment against him because he snatched the presidency away from me," said Bartlett. "Rather my differences with him are ideological. He shouldn't continue to have his tentacles all over the party."

PRD calls for investigation; PAN says it's a family feud

The opposition parties also weighed in on the situation. The center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) expressed indignation, with Sen. Tomas Torres Mercado and Deputy Juan Guerra planning to push for a resolution in the joint legislative committee (Comision Permanente) demanding that the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR) investigate de la Madrid's declarations. In comments to reporters, another high-level PRD legislator, Deputy Gonzalez Garza, said the PRD denounced Salinas' illicit activities 20 years ago. The PGR has not indicated whether it is inclined to pursue such a case, but another Cabinet department, the Secretaria de Funcion Publica (SFP), said it plans to look into the allegations. Sen. Ricardo Monreal, who coordinates the Partido del Trabajo (PT) delegation in the upper house, pointed to the dirty tactics employed not only by the Salinas family but by the political elite during the past 20 years. Some of the tactics, he said, have been in complicity with the PAN, particularly politicians like former Sen. Diego Fernandez de Cevallos. "[The government] has been in the hands of an unscrupulous gang whose principal characteristic has been impunity," said Monreal, who is closely allied with Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, who lost the 2006 presidential election by a narrow margin to Calderon. "Unfortunately, the same members of this political cartel continue to govern the country."

There were divergent opinions in the PAN about de la Madrid's declarations. Party president German Martinez called the statements "historic and delicate." But he also characterized the situation as an internal feud, which the PRI had to resolve. "We will not do anything but call on citizens to judge for themselves the comments and the rebuttals made in this case," said Martinez. But PAN Deputy Adriana Avila, who serves on the executive committee for the governing party, faulted de la Madrid for sitting on this information for so long. She said the ex-president should have denounced the Salinas brothers before the PGR a long time ago.

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