

7-1-2009

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### Recommended Citation

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## **Fatal Fire At Child-care Center Has Repercussions On Gubernatorial, Mayoral Elections In Sonora State**

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 2009-07-01

A fire in a child-care center, even when it results in numerous fatalities, does not usually have national political repercussions in Mexico. But this is the electoral season, and the fire at the Guarderia ABC in the northwestern city of Hermosillo, which killed dozens of children, has become the subject of a heated political dispute between the administration of Sonora Gov. Eduardo Bours Castelo and President Felipe Calderon's government. The two sides are engaged in a fierce battle regarding which branch of government has jurisdiction and whether the other side is to blame for the catastrophe. The issue could have a bearing on the July 5 state elections.

Guarderia ABC, housed in a converted warehouse, was privately run under the authority of the Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social (IMSS), which oversees the operation of more than 1,500 day-care centers throughout Mexico. Initial investigations show that the fire in mid-June, which killed 47 children and left scores of others injured, was caused by a short circuit or overheating of the air conditioner in a neighboring warehouse used by the Sonora state government to store tires, license plates, documents, and other items. The state-operated warehouse lacked fire alarms and extinguishers.

In the aftermath of the fire, the Bours administration moved quickly to address the situation by detaining seven officials in charge of warehouse operations. "They are employees and officials with the state finance department who have a direct responsibility for the warehouse where the fire started," Sonora state Attorney General Abel Murrieta said. But the federal government argued that the matter was within its jurisdiction because of IMSS licensing of the child-care center. Officials also took action by filing a criminal complaint against the division of the Sonora state government in charge of the warehouse and against the owners of Guarderia ABC for not taking appropriate precautionary and emergency measures.

### ***Federal, state governments exchange accusations***

The federal intervention ruffled some feathers in the Bours administration, especially after Interior Secretary Fernando Gomez Mont announced in late June that federal authorities would take control of the entire investigation. "Today the attorney general's office has taken over the investigation so that there are no doubts about it and to avoid any political disputes," Gomez Mont said. In a statement reacting to the announcement, Bours angrily claimed that that the federal government had overstepped its boundaries. He said it was the state's responsibility to investigate the fire, while federal authorities only had oversight for any violations at IMSS-sanctioned child-care facilities. Bours denied that there was any agreement between the federal and state governments on the matter. "The interior secretary is brutally confused," said the Sonora governor. The Sonora governor also took issue with the manner in which the federal government announced its decision to bring legal action against state authorities.

In addition to Gomez Mont's announcement that the state was taking over the investigation, IMSS director Daniel Karam announced plans to seek legal action against the Sonora government. "I don't believe that Mr. Karam would have announced such an action without the authorization of President Calderon," said Bours. Complicating the situation is that one of the co-owners of the child-care center is a relative of Calderon's wife, Margarita Zavala, although both federal and state authorities said that family ties would not play a prominent role in the investigation.

The highly politicized feud has repercussions for July 5 elections in the city of Hermosillo and the gubernatorial and federal congressional races in Sonora state. Alfonso Elias Serrano, the gubernatorial candidate for Bours' Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), has led rival Guillermo Padres Elias of Calderon's Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) in most polls, although the margin appears to have narrowed in recent weeks, particularly in the aftermath of the Guarderia ABC fire. Elias Serrano and Padres Elias are second cousins, which has led to accusations that Mexican politics continues to be run by an elite group (SourceMex, June 24, 2009).

In an interview with the W Radio network, state leaders for the three major parties acknowledged that the fire has changed the election's dynamics, with the PRI losing the most. The PRI remains at the front of electoral preferences in Sonora but no longer has the edge it enjoyed several weeks ago, said PRI state party leader Roberto Rubial, who was interviewed along with fellow state party leaders Enrique Reina of the PAN and Juan Jose Lam of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD). The PRI is also leading voter preferences in Hermosillo, where its candidate Epifanio Salido Pavlovich is ahead by about six percentage points over PAN Javier Gandara Magana, according to a recent poll conducted by Consulta Mitofsky. The PRI and the PAN accused each other of making political hay of this situation. "I am very bothered that this case has been so politicized. I am concerned that our discussions are not centering on getting to the bottom of this situation," said Bours, who questioned whether the federal government had sufficient control of the operation and management of IMSS child-care centers, not only in Sonora but also throughout the country. Members of the PAN also weighed in. "It would be regrettable if a tragedy like the one we just experienced in Hermosillo becomes the subject of a dispute between politicians," said Cesar Nava of the PAN, who is running for the Chamber of Deputies.

Some political observers said the PRI and the PAN are both at fault for politicizing the issue. Among them is syndicated columnist Sergio Sarmiento, who noted that the two leading parties have each pointed the finger at the other for failing to take the appropriate actions that would have prevented the incident and for interfering in subsequent investigations. "The actions taken in reaction to the incident are entirely political," said Sarmiento. "To dismiss officials from the IMSS or from the state government who apparently have no direct responsibility for the situation is useless, as is cancelling the permit for the operators of the Guarderia ABC in Hermosillo." Syndicated columnist Jose Santiago Healy Loera said Sonora citizens are tired of the fighting between the two leading parties, as evidenced by three massive marches organized by citizens who are demanding action.

An estimated 10,000 citizens participated in the marches. Healy Loera agreed with Sarmiento that the actions taken by the two governments are merely symbolic. "These actions have attracted more criticisms than praise," said the columnist. "The state employees who were detained are third- or fourth-level workers who could not have done anything to prevent the fire." Regarding the IMSS,

Healy asked why federal authorities did not file any charges against the institute's official in charge of operations in Sonora rather than simply dismiss him.

### *Gubernatorial elections scheduled in five other states*

The Nuevo Leon gubernatorial election is just as disputed as the one in Sonora, with the PRI and the PAN at each other's throats. The latest public-opinion polls suggest that the seat will remain in the hands of the PRI. A recent poll by the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal shows Rodrigo Medina de la Cruz, who is representing the PRI and three other smaller parties, with 49% of voter preferences, compared with Fernando Elizondo Barragan of the PAN. The two parties have accused each other of dirty campaign tactics, with the PAN accusing outgoing PRI Gov. Natividad Gonzalez Paras of actions that constitute illegal campaigning on behalf of his party's candidate. "All our meetings and activities are done strictly for the benefit of Nuevo Leon state," said Gonzalez Paras.

Many political observers predict that the PRI will win five of the six gubernatorial elections scheduled for July 5, retaining the seats in Nuevo Leon, Sonora, Campeche, and Colima, and ousting the PAN in San Luis Potosi. The PAN is expected to retain the gubernatorial seat in Queretaro. "It appears to me that the PAN leadership is worried not only that it will lose its majority in the Chamber of Deputies but that it could lose some important gubernatorial posts," Ulises Corona Ramirez, a political scientist at the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM), told the Mexico City daily newspaper El Sol de Mexico. There are also important state legislative and mayoral elections, including the seats in Guadalajara and Monterrey, Mexico's second- and third-largest cities.

Analysts predicted that the PRD would retain control of two key state legislatures, Michoacan state and Mexico City, but make few gains elsewhere. As for congressional elections, the latest poll from Consulta Mitofsky, conducted in June, shows the PRI with 34% of voter preferences, compared with 29% for the PAN and 13% for the PRD. The PRI margin is down from previous polls. "The success in this election will be determined not so much by the number of votes but by the number of deputies elected in the Chamber of Deputies," said Consulta Mitofsky. "The PRI is poised to obtain more than twice the number of seats it won in 2006, although the number will be similar to those it attained in 2003. This will be far from an absolute majority." "The PAN would lose its role as the leading party in Congress, but it can still win more seats than it did six years ago and is in a good position to reach 167 deputies, which would represent roughly one-third of the lower house." Corona said a wild card would be the level of participation in the elections. Many citizens are not pleased with the options in these elections and have started independent campaigns to launch a protest vote. In the campaigns, known as Voto en Blanco or Voto Nulo, voters would simply mark a big X across the ballot to show their displeasure with the choices (SourceMex, June 25, 2009).

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