

2-17-2010

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## Interior Secretary Fernando Gomez Mont Resigns From Party But Keeps Cabinet Post

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 2010-02-17

The resignation of Interior Secretary Fernando Gomez Mont from the governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) could not have come at a worse time for President Felipe Calderon, who is juggling two crises, the out-of-control violence in Ciudad Juarez and the aftermath of devastating floods that caused significant damage in central Mexico, including parts of Mexico City, resulting in dozens of deaths. Gomez Mont left the party in early February because of disagreements with PAN leaders on the decision to form alliances with the Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) and other center-left parties in gubernatorial elections in Oaxaca, Durango, and other states (SourceMex, January 27, 2010). But the rupture was more than just a simple political disagreement with his party.

Some analysts said the interior secretary had no choice but to leave the PAN because it failed to support him in a compromise that he made with the opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which now holds a plurality in the Chamber of Deputies. Gomez Mont apparently secured the PRI's support for certain tax measures promoted by Calderon, including a controversial consumption tax (SourceMex, September 23, 2009), in exchange for a PAN promise not to seek coalitions with the center-left parties in 2010 gubernatorial elections. "The fact that I couldn't live up to the commitments I made...was one of the reasons I made the decision to resign from the party," Gomez Mont said in interviews with two major newspapers in Mexico City.

There was concern that Gomez Mont's resignation from the PAN would lead to his departure from the Secretaria de Gobernacion (SEGOB), leaving the ministry without a leader when the Calderon government needed to handle several domestic emergencies. But Gomez Mont remained at the head of SEGOB after leaving the PAN despite rampant speculation that he was on his way out. "It would be an act of cowardice to renounce my service to the president," said Gomez Mont. "It is the president of Mexico and his government whom I serve." Gomez Mont was appointed to the post following the death of Calderon's close confidant Juan Camilo Mourino in 2008 (SourceMex, November 12, 2008), and it appears that he will retain the job in the long term.

President Calderon gives Gomez Mont vote of confidence Calderon made no comment about the situation in the days immediately following Gomez Mont's resignation from the party. But a week later, the president gave his interior secretary a vote of confidence in a statement from the president's press office. "Fernando Gomez Mont's reasons must have been very powerful. I don't judge them," Calderon said in comments released by his office. "He's a loyal man. He's an interior secretary who fulfills his mandate...and he has all my confidence." Still, some analysts insisted that Gomez Mont's resignation from the PAN could affect his relationship with Calderon, and this could hurt his ability to perform his duties effectively. "The relationship between Calderon and Gomez Mont probably won't be the same," said Jose Antonio Crespo, a political analyst at the Centro de Investigacion y Docencia Economica (CIDE). "Weakened before the PRI because of his inability to meet certain promises for which he had no control and irritated by the PAN because his party

failed to support his requests, Gomez Mont's resignation from the party could be a precursor to his departure from the Cabinet post that is in charge of domestic affairs," wrote syndicated columnist Miguel Angel Granados Chapa. Still, key congressional leaders said they were not concerned.

PAN Sens. Santiago Creel and Jose Gonzalez Morfin said they disagreed with Gomez Mont's decision to leave the party but said he was doing a good job at SEGOB and should retain his post as head of that ministry. Some opposition-party members went one step further, suggesting that Gomez Mont could become more effective if he were not beholden to any political party. Sens. Francisco Labastida, Manlio Fabio Beltrones, and Jesus Murillo Karam immediately gave the interior secretary a vote of confidence. "He is a man who can be trusted," said Labastida. Similar comments came from Deputy Pedro Jimenez of the Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD), who said Gomez Mont could give more confidence to the electoral process in July because he will not be perceived as favoring the PAN. Gomez Mont plays important role in Calderon's visit to Juarez While he was trying to defend his decision to leave the PAN, Gomez Mont had to tend to important official duties.

In early February, it was the interior secretary who initially apologized to the families of the young victims of a massacre for Calderon's comments in the aftermath of the incident. The young people, who were at a party, were killed by alleged drug dealers in an apparent case of mistaken identity (SourceMex, February 03, 2010). After the incident, Calderon had said that the victims were gang members linked to organized crime. This angered many residents of Juarez, who called for the president to resign and also demanded that the Army be withdrawn from the city because its presence compounded the violence. While offering an apology on behalf of the president, Gomez Mont also made arrangements for Calderon to visit Juarez and address citizens to offer his own apologies. "Whatever may have been the meaning of my words, I offered the parents my most heartfelt apology if any of my words offended them or the memory of their children," said the president.

As expected, Calderon was met with passionate demonstrations, with many young people asking why the federal government had not done anything to curb the violence in the border city. "I am convinced we have to review what we are doing," Calderon said. "We need a much more integrated approach...wider social actions. Police and military action alone is not enough." But Calderon told Juarez residents that he could not withdraw the Army from the streets in the near term because it would leave the city open to control by drug traffickers and exacerbate the violence. The administration was also asked whether it supported efforts by the administration of Chihuahua Gov. Jose Reyes Baeza, a member of the PRI, to assume the governance of Juarez. Gomez Mont responded, saying the decision was up to state and local authorities. A majority of Chihuahua state legislators voted to support the transfer of governance of Ciudad Juarez to the state government, but they failed to get the required two-thirds majority for this to happen.

Most who voted in favor of the move were members of the PRI. Most PAN legislators abstained, which was the equivalent of casting a nay vote. The single PRD member voted against the measure, while members of the Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL), PT, and Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM) supported the PRI position. The PAN and the PRD called the effort by the Reyes Baeza administration a ploy to try to influence the July 4 election, in which Chihuahua will be electing

a new governor. Interior secretary also key player in aftermath of floods in central Mexico As the developments in Chihuahua unfolded, the interior secretary was also called upon to tend to matters in the center of the country. Residents in parts of Mexico City and Michoacan and Mexico states were angry with all levels of government for their failure to take precautionary measures that would have prevented devastating floods that damaged scores of hundreds of homes and killed dozens of people. The floods were the result of torrential rains that pounded central Mexico for several days, which caused rivers to flood and unleashed fatal mudslides.

The Calderon administration said the floods could have been avoided if preceding federal and state administrations had invested more money in drainage and sewerage infrastructure. Calderon assigned Gomez Mont to meet with Gov. Enrique Pena of Mexico state and Mexico City Mayor Marcelo Ebrard to discuss measures to better manage water flows in the Valley of Mexico, which includes Mexico City and its suburbs. Also present at the meeting was Jose Luis Luege Tamargo, director of the Comision Nacional del Agua (CONAGUA).

The officials agreed to implement an emergency plan to take short- and long-term actions to shore up infrastructure, improve coordination, and boost inspection procedures. The officials agreed that that the scheme would require "billions of pesos." Some critics, including many environmental organizations and the Catholic bishops conference (Conferencia del Episcopado Mexicano, CEM), argue that problems such as the mudslides cannot be fixed by simply improving hydraulic infrastructure. The problem, they say, was caused partially by the uncontrolled cutting of trees in areas surrounding Mexico City, which left the land vulnerable during times of heavy rain.

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