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México State Gov. Enrique Peña Nieto Pushes Through Reforms That Make Coalitions More Difficult Ahead of 2011 Gubernatorial Election

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México state Gov. Enrique Peña Nieto took what many consider a major step to strengthen and consolidate his position to become the opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) candidate in the 2012 presidential election. In a controversial move that drew protests from most other parties, Peña Nieto pushed through a change to the state constitution that makes it harder for multiple parties to run behind a single candidate. Peña Nieto's decree will make it more difficult for the coalition of center-left parties, led by the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), and the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) to repeat in México state what they did in several gubernatorial elections on July 4. In those elections, the PRI lost three important gubernatorial races to a coalition of the PAN and the center-left parties ([SourceMex, July 7, 2010](#)). Analysts agree that a PRI loss in the México state gubernatorial elections in 2011 would greatly weaken Peña Nieto's position in his quest to gain the PRI nomination for the 2012 presidential election.

Peña Nieto has presidential ambitions

Peña Nieto was able to advance his agenda by promoting a change to Article 12 of the México state constitution, which was easily approved by the PRI-dominated legislature and ratified by a majority of the state's municipalities. The controversial reform not only makes it more difficult for parties to form coalitions but also takes other steps designed to make it harder for opposition parties to pull an upset in the next state elections, scheduled for July 3, 2011. The reforms cut in half the time allotted for campaigning, reduce the amount of financing for vote-promotion efforts, and expand the amount of time that the sitting governor is allowed to promote his programs and achievements before the election.

Peña Nieto did not disguise the intent of his initiative, which he said was to eliminate the possibility of a blind coalition behind a single candidate. He pointed out that the measure, which was introduced in the state legislature by the PRI's ally the Partido Verde Ecologista de México (PVEM), does not prohibit parties from forming alliances. Rather, it creates stricter conditions that parties would have to meet before being allowed to run behind a single candidate. These conditions include a common platform. By not meeting these conditions, said the México state governor, the parties were "defrauding the electorate."

The governor's supporters accused critics of attempting to "lynch" Peña Nieto for backing this legislation. "This was a proposal from the Green Party that was supported by the PRI state legislators," said Hidalgo Gov. Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong, who is completing his six-year term. Hidalgo is one of three states, along with Veracruz and Durango, where the PRI defeated an opposition coalition by a narrow margin in gubernatorial elections in July ([SourceMex, July 7, 2010](#)).

Some analysts agreed that parties running behind a single candidate had advantages in other states, including access to the combined television and radio minutes allocated to all the parties that had

joined forces. "Before the reforms, the easiest path to an electoral alliance was for the parties to back a single candidate," wrote political commentator and blogger Liébano Sáenz.

Sáenz, a member of the PRI who served as chief of staff for ex-President Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000), said Peña Nieto's maneuver, while open to criticism, is also understandable. He said the governor is simply "a politician trying to minimize risks and enhance his political position within the party."

"The reform in question has an ethical and valid argument that cannot be ignored—the interest of the citizens and the obligation of the political parties to present with clarity their platform to the voters," said Sáenz.

Critics call reforms 'undemocratic'

But critics said the reforms create an unfair advantage for the incumbent party, since the governor is given more time to promote projects while the time allotted opposition candidates to introduce themselves to the electorate is severely curtailed. "The exposure of candidates is limited to 55 days, not even two months, in a state that has 125 municipalities and 10.5 million voters," wrote columnist Jesús Cantú in the daily newspaper La Tribuna de Campeche in Campeche City.

Cantú was part of a chorus of columnists who soundly criticized the reforms as deeply undemocratic. "By eliminating the common candidacy, the only option available to parties is the coalition, which imposes requirements under the México state electoral code that can translate to inequity," said the columnist.

Nestor Ojeda, a columnist for the Mexico City daily newspaper Milenio Diario, said the problem with the reforms is not a question of legality or legitimacy but perception. Ojeda said the maneuver was all about the 2012 presidential elections, and it was imperative for the PRI to ensure that no surprises occurred in the 2011 México state election because this would damage its potential front-runner.

Some early public-opinion polls show Peña Nieto far ahead of all potential rivals for both the party nomination and the presidential vote. "Peña Nieto and the PRI organization in México state valued pragmatism above democracy," said Ojeda. "The governor of México state demonstrated a sense of fear, horror, and panic at the thought that an opposition bloc would be competitive in next year's elections."

Ojeda said Peña Nieto's scheme was reminiscent of the "authoritarian culture that the PRI imposed in the second half of the last century." The PRI governed Mexico for seven decades.

"The PRI, as had been its custom, has done everything to ensure a victory before the votes are even cast," said Ojeda.

Manuel Camacho Solís, one of the architects of the coalitions between the PAN and the center-left parties, criticized Peña Nieto for "a lack of vision and his paternalistic management of power." If this maneuver brings him to power in 2012, the country could become very polarized.

"Enrique Peña wants to turn back the clock 20 years at a time when our country is becoming unstable because of weakening institutions and the eruption of violence," said Camacho, a former PRI member who later joined the PRD. "His so-called reforms, which weaken opposition parties and infringe on citizens' rights to form associations, are reminiscent of an era that our country has already experienced."

But others point out that the voting public has a short memory.

"As of today, Enrique Peña Nieto unfortunately leads the public-opinion polls," said columnist H. E. Cavazos Arózqueta in the online newspaper SDP Noticias. "It is incredible that the public has such a short memory....Sixty years of totalitarianism, authoritarianism, corruption, insecurity, an economic deficit, a lack of democracy, poverty, and oppression...all because of successive PRI governments. Do they want a return of this?"

Some analysts also suggested that Peña Nieto's maneuvers were not necessary. Two of the three states that the PRI lost in the July elections, Puebla and Oaxaca, were actually considered a referendum on very unpopular and corrupt PRI governors. In a recent public-opinion poll by the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal that measured the acceptance level of the governors of all 32 states, the outgoing governors of Puebla and Oaxaca received extremely low marks. Puebla citizens gave Mario Marín Torres a 56% disapproval rate. Ulises Ruiz of Oaxaca fared even worse with a 77% negative rating. The outgoing governors of three other states where the incumbent party was ousted received poor grades from their citizens. Amalia García of the PRD in Zacatecas, Héctor Ortiz of the PAN in Tlaxcala, and Jesús Aguilar Padilla of the PRI in Sinaloa received negative ratings of 60%, 56%, and 55%, respectively.

The grades for Peña Nieto were not bad, with his negative rating only at 31% and his positive mark at 67%. Five other states are also scheduled to elect new governors in 2011, including Guerrero on Jan. 30 and Baja California Sur on Feb. 6. The governors of the two states, Zeferino Torreblanca of Guerrero and Narciso Agúndez Montaña of Baja California Sur, both members of the PRD, each had a 50-50 positive-to-negative rating.

PAN, PRD face internal strife

The PAN and the PRD, the two main players in the opposition coalitions, are facing their share of internal problems as a result of the coalitions. In mid-August, the PAN started the procedure to expel former party leader Manuel Espino Barrientos for questioning the party's policies to such degree that the remarks became "offensive." Espino Barrientos served as party president in 2005-2007 ([SourceMex, March 30, 2005](#)).

Espino is accused of violating party statutes by levying uncorroborated charges of corruption against PAN leaders in México state and also openly and disparagingly criticizing the party's decision to form coalitions with the center-left parties in Veracruz and Durango.

The PAN's national executive committee (Comité Ejecutivo Nacional, CEN) voted almost unanimously to begin Espino's expulsion but said the final decision would be up to the PAN state committee in Sonora, which was the ex-party leader's last home state. The committee was expected to make a decision sometime in October.

Espino defended his actions, saying he had not done anything wrong. "I have not taken any actions that harm the party or its members," the ex-PAN leader said in a radio interview.

Some prominent PAN members, including ex-Sen. Juan José Rodríguez Prats, have come out against Espino's expulsion. Rodríguez Prats said the party would look very foolish if it expelled a former president. He also pointed out that there was a strong chance that Espino would win an appeal if he brought it before the electoral court (Tribunal Electoral del Poder Judicial de la Federación, TEPJF).

Espino, who is linked with some of the PAN's more socially conservative factions, has announced his intention to seek the PAN nomination in the 2012 election. It is not clear at this point who else would compete to represent the conservative party in the presidential race, although there is talk that Sen. Santiago Creel, Deputy Josefina Vázquez Mota, and outgoing party leader César Nava might consider throwing their hats into the ring.

The PAN's CEN also moved to expel ex-Aguascalientes Gov. Armando Reynoso Femat for throwing his support behind PRI candidate Carlos Lozano instead of endorsing PAN candidate Martín Orozco in the recent gubernatorial election. Reynoso Femat, who was elected in 2004 ([SourceMex, Aug. 4, 2004](#)), has become embroiled in other clashes with the PAN leadership. In 2007, the party threatened to expel him because he violated its statutes by incurring a high debt ([SourceMex, Feb. 7, 2007](#)).

After a hearing on Aug. 30 with Reynoso, the executive committee unanimously voted to expel him from the party. A defiant Reynoso said he would bring the case to the TEPJF. "Whether they like it or not, I am a member of the PAN," he said.

The PRD was facing an effort within its ranks to precipitate the exit of party president Jesús Ortega Martínez in December and force early elections. Ortega, who has said he would step down in March 2011, was one of the main proponents of the alliance with the PAN in several gubernatorial races, a move that was not universally endorsed within the PRD or by its supporters in other center-left parties.

Ortega's supporters in the PRD faction known as Nueva Izquierda blocked a motion to force the elections in December. Among those pushing for early elections are supporters of former presidential candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador and Mexico City Mayor Marcelo Ebrard. Lopez Obrador came out strongly against the alliances with the PAN, while Ebrard gave them lukewarm support. López Obrador and Ebrard are both expected to seek the nomination to represent the PRD and a coalition of center-left parties in the 2012 elections. The election of an ally to the party presidency would help them lay the groundwork for the campaign.

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