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## Major Parties Begin Maneuvering Ahead of State, Presidential Elections

by Carlos Navarro

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The three major political parties announced key moves at the start of 2011 to put them in a better position to compete for the 2012 presidential election. Some of the changes were intended to shore up the parties' positions ahead of the México state gubernatorial election on July 3 of this year, considered a bellwether of the 2012 race to succeed President Felipe Calderón.

One of the more significant changes involved shuffling important positions in President Calderón's Cabinet, including the reassignment of Energy Secretary Georgina Kessel and the departure of Communications and Transportations Secretary Juan Molinar Horcasitas, who will handle electoral strategy for the governing Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) in 2011 and 2012.

The Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) moved to consolidate support for outgoing Coahuila Gov. Humberto Moreira as party president. Moreira resigned in early January to lead the party's national efforts to regain the presidency in 2012 behind highly popular México state Gov. Enrique Peña Nieto.

The Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), meanwhile, sought to convince all factions of the center-left party to back ex-Mexico City mayor Alejandro Encinas Rodríguez to represent the party in the México state election. While Encinas is acceptable to all PRD factions, there is a strong difference of opinion on whether the party should form a partnership with the conservative PAN. PRD-PAN coalitions won gubernatorial elections in Oaxaca, Puebla, and Sinaloa states in 2010.

### *Cabinet changes related to elections*

On Jan. 7, Calderón announced that Kessel would be reassigned to head the public works bank (Banco Nacional de Obras y Servicios Públicos, BANOBRAS) and that Molinar Horcasitas had resigned as head of the Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Transportes (SCT) to move to the PAN's executive committee (Comité Ejecutivo Nacional, CEN), from where he will help coordinate the party's strategies for the gubernatorial elections this year and the presidential race in 2012. In addition to México state, gubernatorial elections are scheduled in Coahuila, Baja California Sur, Guerrero, Nayarit and Michoacán. This was the 25th change in Calderón's Cabinet since taking office Dec. 1, 2006.

Kessel's demotion was a surprise, since she is an expert on energy and by all accounts had been doing a good job as head of the Secretaría de Energía (SENER). But some commentators suggested that the changes had nothing to do with performance but rather with political maneuvering.

"Reading between the lines, this was apparently an effort by Calderón to strengthen the position of his ally, Finance Secretary Ernesto Cordero," said the agencia de noticias Proceso (apro). Calderón is said to be supporting Cordero for the PAN nomination in the 2012 presidential election.

Conversely, Molinar's departure came amid questions about his performance at the helm of the SCT. "Molinar leaves behind multiple problems at the SCT and a terrible relationship with the Congress," wrote columnist Maricarmen Cortés in the Mexico City daily newspaper

The news agency apro mentioned some of the unresolved problems associated with Molinar's tenure at the SCT, including the bankruptcy of Mexicana ([SourceMex, Jan. 5, 2011](#)), the closure of Aviacsa airlines, the threat of bankruptcy for Satélites Mexicanos (SATMEX), and the shortage of highways and port facilities.

Critics also lamented that Kessel and Molinar were replaced by individuals with no experience in the positions they were about to assume. José Antonio Meade, who will head SENER, and Dionisio Pérez Jácome, who will assume the top post at the SCT, were both deputy finance secretaries under Cordero. The two men are considered technocrats, because of their educational backgrounds. Meade is a graduate of Yale University, while Pérez Jácome received a degree from Harvard.

"What most worries the private sector about the new changes in Felipe Calderón's Cabinet is that neither José Antonio Meade nor Dionisio Pérez Jácome have direct experience in the ministries that they will preside," said Cortés. "Now the two men will have to undergo a 'fast track' learning curve so they can attempt to resolve difficult problems during the 23 months that remain in the current administration."

Meade takes over SENER at a time when the government must continue to find ways to expand the country's oil reserves and find new sources of renewable energy ([SourceMex, March 20, 2009](#)).

Along with the two Cabinet changes, Calderón announced the departure of his personal secretary, veteran politician and former PAN president Luis Felipe Bravo Mena, who is expected to seek the PAN nomination in the México state gubernatorial election. He will be replaced by Deputy Luis Gil Zuarth, giving Calderón an expert on elections on his staff.

### *Coahuila governor to lead PRI through 2011, 2012 elections*

The contest to replace Beatriz Paredes as PRI president was never in doubt because only one candidate, outgoing Coahuila Gov. Moreira, threw his hat into the ring. This elicited comparisons to the days when the PRI anointed its leaders through the "dedazo" rather than in a competitive election.

Observers said many would-be competitors cast their ambitions aside in favor of a candidate who is seen as a politically savvy leader and who is well liked by all factions of the PRI. Most importantly, he has the support of all the PRI state coordinators and a large number of party faithful across the country. "The party will take on a new impetus," said Deputy Francisco Rojas, who heads the PRI delegation in the Chamber of Deputies. "I am sure that we will enjoy a new era of political growth and many victories in the future."

"With Humberto Moreira, the PRI is sending a signal of change, of inclusion of the state party organizations, of unity, and of political savvy," said Roy Campos, president of the prominent polling organization Consulta Mitofsky. "The party will not look anything like it did during the past 10 years, and Moreira will be the one coordinating all the candidates and will also be the main spokesperson in the campaigns."

In assuming the post as top PRI leader, Moreira promised that one of his tasks would be to move beyond party interests and seek dialogue instead of confrontation with rival parties.

Moreira's most important endorsement came from the man he is expected to help lead into Los Pinos presidential palace, Gov. Peña Nieto. "[Moreira's] role will be important in helping the party recover the confidence of the citizens," said the México state governor.

## *Strategies anticipate México state election*

One of Moreira's first tasks will be to coordinate strategy for upcoming gubernatorial elections on Jan. 30 in Guerrero, on Feb. 6 in Baja California Sur, on July 3 in Coahuila, México state, and Nayarit, and on Nov. 13 in Michoacán. The PRI is hoping to take momentum into the 2012 presidential election not only by retaining Coahuila, México state, and Nayarit but also ousting the PRD from the governor's seat in the three other states.

Still, the most important prize in 2011 is México state, and the PAN and the PRD are committing a lot of resources to win that election. The PRI has yet to nominate its candidate for México state, which includes a large number of Mexico City suburbs, and all the likely candidates are unrecognizable names: Ernesto Nemer, president of the state legislature; Huixquilucan Mayor Alfredo del Mazo, Deputy Luis Videgaray; Ecatepec Mayor Eruviel Ávila, and state party president Ricardo Aguilar.

Regardless of who gets the nod for the PRI, the PAN and the PRD believe that a victory in México state is essential to stop the PRI from retaking the Mexican presidency. A victory in the state would remove some of the mystique from Peña Nieto, presumably because the PRI candidate would ride the ex-governor's coattails.

Peña Nieto, who has gained immense popularity, is an early leader in public-opinion polls taken in late 2010. "A leader in the campaign needs a high level of recognition and high approval ratings, and his numbers are outstanding on both counts," columnist León Krauze wrote in Milenio.com. "It is not a coincidence that Peña Nieto can boast of advantages as high as 25 points in recent public-opinion polls."

Others agreed that the prospects are looking good for the PRI in 2012 with Peña Nieto as its candidate.

"Peña Nieto is driving a good car, and he is a good pilot," Campos said in an interview with radio commentator José Cárdenas in early January.

But Campos cautioned that the campaign, which will last into the summer of 2012, is just getting started. "The race has not even begun," he said.

In the last presidential election, center-left candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador had a wide lead in the polls 16 months ahead of the actual election, which Calderón eventually won ([SourceMex, April 13, 2005](#)).

For now, public-opinion surveys seem extremely favorable to Peña Nieto. One poll by Gabinete de Comunicación Estratégica (GCE) gave the likely PRI representative about 42% of the vote, compared with 17% for Mexico City Mayor Marcelo Ebrard of the PRD and 14% for Sen. Santiago Creel of the PAN. Another poll by Berumen y Asociados has Peña Nieto with 40% support, far ahead of possible rivals from the PAN (Finance Secretary Cordero and Creel) and the PRD (Ebrard and López Obrador), which had support levels ranging from 12% to 16%.

But the gap is not as big when respondents are asked to express their preferences based on the party and not on a candidate. In the GCE poll, 30% of respondents said they would vote for the PRI, compared with 25% for the PAN, 16% for the PRD, and 29% for other parties. The margin was even

closer in the Berumen y Asociados poll, which showed 27% support for the PRI, 24% for the PAN, and 10% support for the PRD.

Based on those numbers, the opposition parties believe that, if they can raise doubts about Peña Nieto among the electorate, they have a chance of closing the gap in the presidential race. A first step in discrediting Peña Nieto would be a victory in México state.

And yet, it could be difficult to cast the PRI as a political entity offering "more of the same," since the party that governed Mexico for seven decades until 2000 has centered its electoral strategies on portraying itself as the "party of change." This seems to be working. In a poll from Grupo BGC, Ulises Beltrán y Asociados, 45% of respondents said that a PRI victory would represent a move forward for Mexico, compared with 26% who thought it would be a move backward.

And the efforts by opposition parties to make the México state election a referendum on Peña Nieto are somewhat disorganized. The PRD seems to be coming together behind ex-Mexico City mayor Encinas, who is aligned with the faction that supports López Obrador. That's the good news. The bad news is that there are huge divisions in the party on whether to form alliances with the PAN. Among those who support a partnership with the PAN are party president Jesús Ortega, who has organized a referendum among party faithful in México state on an as-yet-to-be-announced date to determine whether such an alliance should be pursued.

Ortega says a partnership with the PAN offers the best chance to defeat the PRI in México state. He cites elections in Oaxaca, Puebla, and Sinaloa in 2010, in which the parties together took gubernatorial seats from the PRI ([SourceMex, July 7, 2010](#)).

But Peña Nieto and the PRI-dominated state legislature have made it more difficult for parties to form a full coalition in the upcoming election in July. Among other things, reforms approved in September 2010 create stricter conditions for parties seeking to unite behind a single candidate ([SourceMex, Sept. 29, 2010](#)).

The changes to the electoral process in México state have not dissuaded some PRD and PAN leaders from considering an alliance in the 2011 race, including the PAN's newly elected national president Gustavo Madero.

Ortega and Madero face strong opposition within their own ranks, including many followers of López Obrador. Encinas, a close ally of the ex-presidential candidate, has made conflicting statements regarding a possible partnership with the PAN. Initially, he said he would withdraw as the candidate if the PRD faithful came out in support of the alliance with the conservative party during the referendum. "It would not be feasible because [my candidacy] would not strictly represent the aspirations of all the members of the coalition," Encinas said at that time.

But Encinas later changed his mind and said he would remain as the candidate if PRD state voters approved the alliance in the referendum, although he reiterated that he still opposes any political partnerships with the PAN.

Encinas' opinion is important because the various PRD factions and allies like the Partido del Trabajo and Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD) seem to be uniting behind his possible candidacy. His decision to seek the nomination prompted other potential candidates like Yeidckol Polevnsky Gurwitz to withdraw from the race.

Some state and national PAN officials are also reluctant to support a coalition, especially if the candidate is Encinas. "He represents positions that are radically different from those of the PAN," said PAN secretary-general Cecilia Ortega.

And some prominent PAN politicians are preparing to compete for their party's nomination, including Bravo Mena, federal Deputy Josefina Vázquez Mota, and México state senator Ulises Ramírez. State PAN president Octavio Germán said the three candidates are opposed to an alliance with the PRD.

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