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Senate Approves Far-Reaching Political Reforms, Measure Sputters in Chamber of Deputies

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The Senate, in a rare display of unity, overwhelmingly approved an initiative that would deeply transform Mexico's electoral process. The Senate passed the reforms quickly with the intention of having them take effect for the 2012 presidential, congressional, state, and local elections. But the measure has encountered a roadblock in the Chamber of Deputies, where the dominant party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), has opted for a slower approach, even if the reforms are not in effect until after 2012.

Reforms would promote independent candidacies, re-election

The legislation approved by the Senate contained several steps to make the country's electoral system more accountable to voters, including proposals to allow independent candidacies, re-election of elected officials at all levels, and citizen referendums. The plan would allow independent candidates for any office, but the re-election change would apply only to federal legislators.

Analysts say the huge discrepancy between the positions of the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies reflects political maneuvering ahead of the 2012 presidential election. The political tug-of-war involves the usual suspects: the PRI, President Felipe Calderón's Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), and the center-left coalition, led by the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) and the Partido del Trabajo (PT). Divisions are also evident within the PRI, reflecting a power struggle between the party's Senate floor leader Manlio Fabio Beltrones and outgoing México state Gov. Enrique Peña Nieto. The latter is considered the front-runner to represent the PRI in the 2012 presidential election, but the former has made it known that he is also very interested in becoming the party's candidate and won't just hand over the nomination to Peña Nieto.

The Senate, including PRI members, has accused the PRI leadership in the Chamber of Deputies of stonewalling to prevent the measure from taking effect for the 2012 elections. Some analysts say the delay would benefit Peña Nieto, who is seeking to remove any obstacles on his path to the Mexican presidency.

"The Senate is not obstructionist. We have completed our work," said PRD Sen. Carlos Navarrete. "Regrettably, there are politicians who, instead of taking into account the interests of the country at this point in time, are more interested in protecting their political aspirations ahead of 2012."

Initiative divides PRI

Some analysts said the differing positions in the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies have created divisions within the PRI. "Political reform has become the bone of contention between the PRI senators and deputies," columnist Juan Bustillos wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper *Impacto*. "The deputies, directed by Francisco Rojas, are like the 'bad guys' in a movie. They are supposedly subject to the whims of Enrique Peña. According to many analysts, the México state governor opposes independent candidacies."

The PRI national leadership, however, denies that Peña Nieto has had anything to do with the party's position in the Chamber of Deputies. "Peña Nieto had no role in stopping the initiative," said PRI president Humberto Moreira Valdés. "He is not a legislator. He is the governor of a state, where he has done a great job. But he did not intervene in any way."

The outgoing Mexico state governor has reason to be nervous, as the opposition parties maneuvered in 2010 to deny the PRI victories in key states where the party had governed recently ([SourceMex, July 7, 2010](#)). In early 2011, the PRI lost elections in states where it sought to oust the opposition ([SourceMex, Feb. 9, 2011](#)). The PRI had been counting on victories in these states to pave the way for its effort to retake the presidency, which has been in the hands of the PAN for two terms.

Still, analysts agree that the election with the most impact on the presidential race is the upcoming gubernatorial contest in México state on July 3. A PRI victory would go a long way to boost Peña Nieto's position ahead of 2012, while a loss could inflict major political damage to his aspirations. The PRI seems to be in a good position going into that race, as the PAN and PRD failed to form a coalition and are fielding separate candidates to run against Eruviel Ávila of the PRI ([SourceMex, March 30, 2011](#)).

Moreira insisted that the legislation dealing with political reforms, labor reforms, and security have not been halted in the lower house. "All the initiatives have to be reviewed carefully," said the PRI president. "We have to listen to all groups that want to present their concerns."

Still, the PRI move to delay a vote in the lower house comes at the end of the legislative session, and supporters of the measures are concerned that if they are not approved now, they might not be considered in time to take effect by the all-important presidential election. "If there is no reform before June 30, then we won't be able to apply any changes to the electoral process in 2012," said PRD Deputy Armando Ríos Peter.

Deputy Josefina Vázquez Mota, who heads the PAN delegation in the lower house, said legislators from her party and the center-left coalition have reviewed the Senate version of the reforms and are ready to approve them as they are. The problem is that the PRI and its ally, the Partido Verde Ecologista de México (PVEM), control 261 of the 500 seats in the lower house and appear united in opposing a speedy approval of the political reforms.

In contrast to the lower house, there is wide agreement in the Senate about the political reforms. The upper house approved the initiative by an overwhelming margin of 94-5, with eight abstentions. But the senators left 44 of the bill's provisions open to possible revision, including the possibility that mayors be allowed to stand for re-election once the plan is approved for federal legislators to run for multiple terms.

Senators are passionate in defense of the reforms as necessary to bring greater democracy to the political process. "[The proposed changes] will create a more democratic system, one closer to the people, that represents the interests of society," said PRD Sen. Graco Ramirez.

"The political reforms that we approve contain far-reaching changes on two different fronts," said Beltrones. "We want to expand the political rights of the citizens and modernize the legislative and executive powers with new rules that would improve relations between the two branches with the aim of restoring society's confidence in government."

"I call on the Chamber of Deputies to not leave a matter of this magnitude pending," said PAN Sen. José González Morfín. "These reforms should no longer be just a dream, and that's why I invite deputies from all parties to embrace these proposals."

Columnists offer different perspectives

Political columnists are divided on whether the reforms should be implemented immediately or set aside for further study. "What do senators gain by forcing the deputies to schedule a special session?" columnist José Fonseca wrote in the Mexico City business daily. "Why do they want to force the deputies to expedite approval of legislation that took them two years to put together?"

Liébane Sáenz, a political blogger who was once chief of staff for ex-President Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000), said the political-reform proposal sent by the Senate to the Chamber of Deputies does not go far enough and therefore, must not be approved hastily. Among the things that need to be fixed, said Sáenz, are the rules for television advertising, which allow quick spots and not in-depth discussions. "The independent candidacies are, without a doubt, attractive," noted the blogger, who is a long-time PRI member. "But the substantive changes need to be directed toward democratizing and modernizing parties and opening these institutions to average citizens."

Columnist Juan Ramón Picazo of the daily newspaper said the Senate proposal left out other important reforms, such as reducing the members of each legislative body and increasing the percentage of the vote that each party would need to maintain registration.

But some columnists believe that the move to allow greater citizen participation in the political process is extremely important to help correct some of the deficiencies of a flawed system that continues to allow manipulation or vote-buying, systemic violation of electoral laws, and an electoral process where high abstentionism allows a winner to claim a mandate.

"That is why I believe that the most relevant step at this moment is to continue promoting a redesign of institutions toward a true democracy," Hilda Gómez wrote in Milenio.com. "We have to support any reforms that allow a Mexican state that performs more efficiently, promotes greater accountability, and allows citizens greater participation and responsibility."

Political maneuvering in other parties ahead of 2012

In addition to the Beltrones' challenge to Peña Nieto for the PRI nomination, there is also some pre-electoral jockeying in the PAN and the center-left coalition led by the PRD.

Seven PAN members are exploring the possibility of seeking the party's presidential nomination in 2012. The list includes Labor Secretary Javier Lozano Alarcón, Social Development Secretary Heriberto Félix Guerra, Public Education Secretary Alonso Lujambio, Finance Secretary Ernesto Cordero, Jalisco Gov. Emilio González Márquez, Sen. Santiago Creel Miranda, and Josefina Vázquez Mota, coordinator of the PAN delegation in the lower house.

Although President Calderón will not likely publicly endorse any candidate, he is said to be supporting Cordero. The most intriguing candidate would be Vázquez Mota, who would be the first woman presidential candidate in Mexico. The idea does not seem so far-fetched. In a poll by BGC-Excelsior in March, 82% of respondents said they like the idea of a woman president.

The polling company said the favorable stance toward a woman president in Mexico is rooted in the successful tenure of some women leaders in Latin America (including Cristina Fernández in

Argentina, Michelle Bachelet in Chile, Laura Chinchilla in Costa Rica, and Violeta Chamorro in Nicaragua). In addition, women have succeeded as governors in Mexico, including Amalia García in Zacatecas, Rosario Robles in Mexico City, Beatriz Paredes in Tlaxcala, and Ivonne Ortega in Yucatán.

"These favorable opinions about the possibility of a woman in Los Pinos [presidential palace] are based on the very positive perception about the governments presided by women in Mexico, Latin America, and other parts of the world," said BGC-Excelsior.

Only a handful of polls have been taken thus far, but Vázquez Mota said a public opinion survey by GEA-ISA among PAN members showed her with 32% support, compared with 12% for Creel, 9% for Cordero, and 6% for Lujambiano.

The field is much clearer in the center-left coalition, where only former presidential candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador and Mexico City Mayor Marcelo Ebrard are vying to represent an alliance among the PRD, the Partido del Trabajo (PT), and the Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD).

Many analysts suggested that López Obrador had gained the upper hand after the PRD and PAN failed to form a coalition to run jointly in México state, even though participants in a referendum said they supported such an alliance ([SourceMex, March 30, 2011](#)). López Obrador had staunchly opposed collaboration of any kind with the PAN and even briefly quit the PRD because of the possibility that the alliance would come to fruition in México state. Ebrard took a more pragmatic stance, pointing to the success of PRD-PAN alliances in Sinaloa, Oaxaca, and Puebla and a de facto coalition in Guerrero.

In the end, the coalition was sunk by the failure of the two parties to agree on a unity candidate.

While López Obrador seems to have gained some advantage, Ebrard is not conceding to his rival and friend. At a forum at the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM), he emphasized that there is no disagreement on the issues, only on the approach. He suggested that the PRD can only win if it brings in a broad voter base. "We have a clearly different vision on the path to attain our common objectives. I believe that we have to convince and respect the middle class and a good portion of the business sector," said the Mexico City mayor. "We have to think less about who has the moral superiority and more about the segments of the population we need to join us to attain the goals for our country."

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