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Governing Partido Acción Nacional Suffers Political Fallout from Recent Casino Arson in Monterrey

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The political fallout from the fire that killed 52 people at a casino in Monterrey in August is becoming clearer, and it is not looking good for two politicians associated with the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), which has governed the city for the last two terms. The Casino Royale fire was the result of arson, probably by the Zetas drug cartel, which was thought to be punishing an owner who refused to pay protection fees ([SourceMex, Aug 31, 2011](#)).

The case exposed some embarrassing improprieties by the administrations of current Monterrey Mayor Fernando Larrazabal Bretón and his predecessor Adalberto Madero Quiroga. There are allegations that Larrazabal looked the other way while his brother Manuel Jonás Larrazabal solicited bribes from casino owners. Strong evidence indicates that Manuel Jonás Larrazabal was involved in malfeasance, including the appearance of several videos showing the mayor's brother accepting cash at another casino. Manuel Jonás contends that the videos showed him receiving payment for food products, including cheese from Oaxaca, that he had procured on behalf of the casino.

Authorities have taken the mayor's brother into custody pending charges, under a legal maneuver known as the arraigo. And while Manuel Jonás was in jail, Fernando agreed to testify in private before a committee of the Nuevo León state legislature. Details of the session were not made public.

Fernando Larrazabal in the past has insisted that he was not aware that his brother was involved in any illegal activities related to the operation of the casinos. But critics insist that the mayor must have known about the bribes to his brother. And, if he didn't know, his administration is incompetent or corrupt for not setting up mechanisms to prevent extortion or bribes at gaming centers, the critics say.

Scandals affect two PAN mayors

Many have called for the Monterrey mayor to step down or take a leave of absence during the investigation, including national PAN president Gustavo Madero Muñoz and federal Interior Secretary Francisco Blake Mora. Larrazabal has declined to remove himself from office, saying his duty is to the citizens who elected him. "The PAN reiterates that it will not tolerate any lack of discipline by its members, and states that the party's image, prestige, and commitment to the people and transparency are above any personal plan," Madero said.

Madero Muñoz said the mayor would face some disciplinary action through the state PAN chapter but pointed out that any decision to remove Larrazabal from his post would have to come from the Nuevo León legislature. A group of national and state PAN leaders has met to discuss the Larrazabal case. "I don't think things are going to go his way," said Raúl Monter Ortega, a PAN leader in Nuevo León. "I'm not sure if we'll take the step of expelling him or removing him from the party temporarily, but there will certainly be some sort of sanction."

Some influential business organizations, including the Consejo Cívico de Instituciones de Nuevo León (CCINLAC), have openly called for Larrazabal's resignation. CCINLAC director Miguel Treviño said the city could not operate in the current "climate of uncertainty."

While there is no proof that Fernando Larrazabal was involved directly or indirectly in his brother's activities, some evidence has surfaced that his predecessor, Madero Quiroga, had a role in setting up the current system that has allowed casinos to operate illegally. The ex-mayor is said to have ignored federal regulations governing the granting of permits for casinos, which contributed to the tragedy at the Casino Royale. On top of that, the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) has accused Madero Quiroga of embezzlement and other acts of malfeasance while he was in office.

On Oct. 9, federal authorities took Madero Quiroga into custody on charges that he embezzled 2 million pesos (US\$151,000) in federal funds and that he made false statements to authorities. PAN president Madero Muñoz has hinted that he will seek to expel Madero Quiroga from the party.

The problems of the PAN mayors diverted attention from negative publicity surrounding Humberto Moreira, the president of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Moreira, who resigned early from his post as governor of Coahuila to take the reins of the PRI ahead of the 2012 election, left the state with a burdensome debt of 34 billion pesos (US\$2.6 billion), or about 8% of the state budget. Moreira's budget mismanagement dominated the headlines in Mexico for a few weeks, but this news was overshadowed by coverage of Larrazabal's problems.

The publicity about the Moreira case prompted many PRI leaders, including the party's likely presidential candidate Enrique Peña Nieto, to accuse the PAN and other opposition parties of playing politics to create divisions within the PRI. But the PRI concerns were short-lived, as the Larrazabal case, and later the Madero Quiroga situation, managed to turn attention away from Moreira. "The media spotlight has changed direction: from Moreira to Larrazabal, from PRIista to PANista," columnist Leo Zuckermann wrote last week in the Mexico City daily newspaper *Excélsior*.

Lost in the Monterrey mayoral scandals was the news that authorities detained the alleged mastermind of the Casino Royale arson, Zetas drug cartel leader Roberto Carlos López Castro, also known as Comandante Toruño. López Castro was arrested in late September in the Guadalajara suburb of Zapopan in Jalisco state. At the time of López Castro's arrest, authorities said they had captured 11 of the 18 people said to have participated in the arson. In early October, three other suspects were taken into custody in Nuevo León.

Recent Cabinet shuffle tied to 2012 presidential race

For now, the problems in Monterrey appear to be affecting mostly the reputation of the PAN as a party but not any of the candidates who have thrown their hats into the ring. This includes Ernesto Cordero, who left his job as finance secretary in early September to devote all his energies to seeking the nomination. President Felipe Calderón appointed Energy Secretary José Antonio Meade to replace Cordero at the Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público (SHCP) and Jordy Herrera Flores as the new head of the Secretaría de Energía (SE). Herrera comes from Pemex Gas y Petroquímica Básica, a subsidiary of the state-run oil company PEMEX.

Health Secretary José Ángel Córdova Villalobos also left his post in September to seek the PAN nomination in the Guanajuato gubernatorial race in 2012. Salomón Chertorivsky Woldenberg, an adviser to Calderón on health-related issues, replaced Córdova at the Secretaría de Salud (SSA).

Cordero, whom Calderón is said to favor, is far from a shoo-in. A recent poll showed the former finance secretary far behind in the preferences among PAN supporters. A poll published by the daily newspaper Milenio in September showed Cordero a huge 30 percentage points behind Deputy Josefina Vázquez Mota, who took leave from her legislative duties to run her campaign, and 20 points behind Sen. Santiago Creel. A subsequent poll published by Consulta Mitofsky in October showed similar trends, with Vázquez Mota receiving 44% support, Creel, 33%, and Cordero, a mere 9%.

Enrique Peña Nieto declares candidacy for PRI nomination

For the PRI, there is no mystery about who the candidate will be, even though the party has announced plans to go through the motions of holding a presidential primary in February 2012. Former México state Gov. Peña Nieto had long been considered the prohibitive front-runner in a race where only Sen. Manlio Fabio Beltrones is providing token competition.

The ex-governor had for months hinted that he would seek the nomination but did not officially declare until late September. But there was no need to rush, as most polls had shown him far ahead of all potential rivals. For example, the Mitofsky poll published in October showed 47% of respondents favored Peña Nieto, compared with 17% each for Vázquez Mota of the PAN and Andrés Manuel López Obrador of a center-left coalition led by the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD).

Peña Nieto has sought to portray himself as a reformer from the modern era of the PRI who would reverse the policies of the past two PAN administrations. The move to distance himself from the PRI of the past is important for Peña Nieto, mostly to appeal to the new generation of voters. Roughly one-third of Mexico's electorate is under 30, and many view the youthful Peña Nieto as an alternative to the PAN, which has presided over a country that has suffered through an explosion of drug violence and an economic crisis that has left many unemployed.

But some critics suggest that Peña Nieto is just a younger manifestation of the old corrupt and authoritarian PRI. "He's not very modern," José Antonio Crespo, a political analyst at the Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE), told the Associated Press. "At least his behavior has nothing to do with a renewed PRI."

Others point out that the PRI has carefully managed Peña Nieto in the past several months to preserve his image for the electoral campaign. "His presentations and interviews have been carefully prepared, and he has never strayed from the script," said nationally syndicated columnist and political analyst Sergio Sarmiento. "Perhaps he has not come across as a brilliant individual, but he also has not committed any major mistakes."

Center-left voters to decide on candidate in November plebiscite

The center-left coalition is also attempting to portray itself as an alternative to the PAN, but strong divisions have left the party's identity undefined ahead of the 2012 elections. Members of the parties that comprise the leftist coalition--including the PRD, the Partido del Trabajo (PT), and the Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD)--will participate in a plebiscite in November that will determine the candidate who will face the PRI and the PAN in the 2012 race. Voters are faced with the choice of López Obrador, a veteran politician and passionate orator who is often associated with the PRD of the past, and a more youthful Mexico City Mayor Marcelo Ebrard, who can appeal

to independents but who has not fully convinced the party faithful that he can best represent their interests.

The polls reflect the ambivalence among center-left parties. The recent Mitofsky survey, conducted only among voters who define themselves as sympathizers of one of the center-left parties, showed López Obrador with a commanding lead of 71% to 18% for Ebrard. But this result reflected a discontent with Ebrard's proposal to consider a coalition with other parties, including the PAN, for the 2012 election. When voters were asked which candidate they would support if a coalition were ruled out, the results were much closer. In this case, López Obrador led by only 32% to Ebrard's 28%.

Still, Ebrard contends that the PRI cannot be defeated without a coalition, and many voters across the political spectrum tend to agree. A poll released by Gabinete de Comunicación Estratégica (GCE) in late September showed Ebrard with a lead of 39% to 32% for López Obrador. The results reflected answers from the general population. But GCE also focused on would-be voters who identify with the various parties. Among center-left voters, an impressive 62% went for López Obrador and only 27% for Ebrard. Ebrard was also the choice of independents and PRI and PAN voters.

The strong support for López Obrador among center-left voters in both polls suggests that he is likely to win the November plebiscite but would have his hands full trying to convince independents and members of other parties to support him. There had been concern that López Obrador would run a separate campaign if he lost the plebiscite, further splintering the left. This concern stems from a decision that López Obrador and his supporters from the PT, PCD, and a faction of the PRD made a few months ago to form the Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional (MORENA).

But López Obrador and Ebrard moved to allay concerns that the left would be divided going into the 2012 election. The two candidates pledged to respect the results of the November plebiscite and to work with each other after the election. "I reiterate my decision that whichever candidate is in better position in the polls should get the nomination," López Obrador recently told his supporters. "I know many of you are behind me, but I cannot be a candidate if I do not count on the full support of all the progressive forces."

Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Oct. 12, 2011, reported at 13.20 pesos per US\$1.00.]

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