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PRI Faces Minicrises Before Presidential Campaign Is Fully Under Way

by *Carlos Navarro*

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Mexico's presidential election took an interesting twist even before the presidential campaigns officially get underway in March 2012. Two developments, perhaps related, appear to have taken the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) down a notch in the eyes of the public. The first development was the resignation of party president Humberto Moreira, who was unable to shake off a financial scandal that followed him after he left his post as governor of Coahuila state.

The other development involved PRI candidate Enrique Peña Nieto, whose public blunder at the International Book Fair (Feria Internacional del Libro, FIL) in Guadalajara appeared to confirm some allegations that the ex-México state governor is a puppet of the PRI hierarchy. When asked to name his favorite books, Peña Nieto was unable to provide an adequate response. And when he did name one book, he got the author wrong. Some suggest that Moreira might have been able to prevent Peña Nieto's blunder if he had not resigned.

Allegations of corruption force PRI president to resign

The timing of Moreira's resignation on Dec. 2 came as a surprise, since the PRI's unofficial presidential campaign was finally gaining traction after Sen. Manlio Fabio Beltrones dropped his bid to seek the nomination, leaving Peña Nieto as the sole candidate. Under Mexican electoral laws, campaigns cannot be officially underway until sometime next year, but this does not preclude candidates from making public appearances.

Moreira had vowed to fight allegations by the opposition parties that he ran a corrupt and inefficient government. Moreira left a debt of 34 billion pesos (US\$2.5 million) when he resigned to take over the reins of the PRI ([SourceMex, Oct. 12, 2011](#)). Some critics pointed to allegations that Moreira used funds from the Coahuila state treasury to help finance a number of PRI campaigns around the country. Additionally, Javier Villarreal, who served as state finance secretary during Moreira's government, is under investigation for amassing unexplained wealth.

Moreira submitted his resignation as PRI president on Dec. 2, citing a need to preserve the integrity of the PRI presidential campaign.

But there was a sense that Moreira's problems left the party in a precarious position, especially since the ex-Coahuila governor became vulnerable to prosecution following the conclusion of the term in office to which he was elected. Under the Mexican Constitution, a sitting elected official enjoys strong immunity, and this might have applied to Moreira, even though he left the post to become the PRI president.

Some analysts said the allegations against Moreira were serious enough that it was necessary that he step down to mount a defense. "He became much more vulnerable to judicial action," political analyst Jesús Cantú said in an interview on the Radio Fórmula network.

"The other factor that we have to take into account is the timetable for the PRI," said Cantú. "In other words, Moreira completed his mission as president of the party, which was to oversee Enrique Peña Nieto's rise to the candidacy."

There was some talk that the old guard of the PRI demanded that Moreira step down because he was becoming a liability to the party and the Peña Nieto campaign. "Ultimately, this situation proved to be unbearable for the powerful interests who control the PRI and Peña Nieto," Horacio Zaldívar of Radio Pasillo wrote in an opinion piece published by the Coahuila-based newspaper Vanguardia.

PRI leaders lamented Moreira's departure but said the development would ultimately have little or no impact on Peña Nieto's presidential campaign. "The president of our party has made the very personal decision to retire from his post," said Deputy Francisco Rojas. "I have no doubt that Moreira's resignation was intended to promote party unity and to help the PRI return to Los Pinos presidential palace in July."

Peña Nieto blamed the situation entirely on the opposition parties, which he said were conducting a campaign of negative attacks instead of engaging in a constructive dialogue. "The opposition is more concerned with attacks, particularly because the polls show the PRI ahead in voter preferences," he said.

The party has not selected a replacement for Moreira, but Peña Nieto and others favor a politician associated with the old guard: Sen. Pedro Joaquín Coldwell, an ex-governor of Quintana Roo and tourism secretary during the administration of former President Carlos Salinas de Gortari.

Candidate Peña Nieto makes embarrassing appearance at book fair

Some suggested that the timing of Moreira's resignation hurt the PRI, especially in light of Peña Nieto's blunders at the book fair in Guadalajara. Peña Nieto was invited to speak at the book fair as the author of a newly published book, *México, la Gran Esperanza* (Mexico, the Great Hope). Some Mexican presidential candidates release a book to launch their campaign. For example, Vicente Fox published *A Los Pinos* in 1999, ahead of his 2000 presidential race.

Peña Nieto's appearance would not have been out of the ordinary if he had not committed a series of blunders that attracted great attention in the Mexican media. "Mexico's leading presidential contender floundered in confusion for about four minutes when the audience at a book fair asked him to name three books that had influenced him. He was able to correctly name only one he has read 'parts of,' the Bible," said the Associated Press. "He then rambled, tossing out confused title names, asking for help in recalling authors, and sometimes mismatching the two."

Another big blunder for Peña Nieto was to confuse the author of the political work of fiction *La Silla del Aguila* (the Chair of the Eagle). He attributed the work to historian Enrique Krauze instead of prominent novelist Carlos Fuentes.

"This is not a matter of crucifying Peña Nieto for confusing Krauze with Fuentes. This was a huge mistake that was magnified by the hesitations displayed by the candidate—a sign of an evident cultural void," said Martín Moreno, a columnist for the Mexico City daily newspaper *Excélsior*.

Peña Nieto's appearance at the book fair was transmitted on television throughout Mexico, and the incident is also available on YouTube. This has provided material on social media for many of his

critics. There were several references to the candidate as "the Justin Bieber of the PRI," referring to the US entertainer's difficulty in naming all seven continents during an appearance on the CBS television program *The Late Show* in November.

Other tweets were more creative, allowing users to invent titles of books that the candidate has "read." These books, which mocked Peña Nieto, were contained in a category dubbed *Librería Peña Nieto* (Peña Nieto's Bookstore).

Peña Nieto's teenage daughter Paulina made matters worse by responding to the criticisms with her own tweets, which used a slur and a separate offensive term for poor people while defending her father. Peña Nieto was forced to apologize the next day for Paulina's tweets.

Some political observers suggested that Peña Nieto's mistake was magnified by absence of Moreira, who had served as the lightning rod for criticisms against the PRI. "The former Coahuila governor was absorbing most of the negative public opinion, which prevented any blows against candidate Peña Nieto," columnist Angélica Beltrán wrote in the politically oriented newspaper *Dossier Politico*.

Beltrán also reinforced the perception that Peña Nieto is a "puppet" for the political elite in the PRI. There are allegations that ex-President Salinas de Gortari is one of the powerbrokers behind the PRI presidential campaign. "With this fall, [Peña Nieto] went from being the most charismatic and popular candidate to one of the most uncultured individuals," said the columnist.

Some also suggested that Moreira might have been able to "manage" Peña Nieto's appearance at the book fair, possibly avoiding the candidate's gaffes.

How much impact the incident will ultimately have on public-opinion polls is uncertain, but PRI officials say they are not too worried. "We are human beings, and we all commit mistakes," said Abdiel Pineda Morín, in charge of one of the party's outreach efforts. "I don't think this incident will have much impact. As the leading candidate in the polls, he is a big target." [Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Dec. 7, 2011, reported at 13.50 pesos per US\$1.00.]

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