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President Enrique Peña Nieto's Political Agreement with Opposition Parties in Jeopardy

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The working agreement that President Enrique Peña Nieto forged with the opposition parties to try to push through important reforms for Mexico appears to be falling apart because of charges that a Cabinet member and a governor are engaging in corrupt practices favoring the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in upcoming local elections.

The agreement, known as the Pacto por México, enabled Peña Nieto to start off his administration on a positive note and demonstrated his willingness to cooperate with the opposition parties (SourceMex, Dec. 5, 2012, and Jan. 9, 2013). Because of the pact, the Congress and the administration were able to push through legislation to overhaul public education (SourceMex, Dec. 12, 2012, and March 6, 2013) and the telecommunications sector (SourceMex, March 27, 2013).

Telecommunications legislation has been approved in both chambers of Congress, but the measure must go to state legislatures because it involves changes to the Constitution.

But the coalition that brought those changes appears to be unraveling before Congress can debate important legislation to overhaul the energy sector, open up the commercial banking and financial services industry, and reform the tax and fiscal system.

Another important reform, an overhaul of Mexico’s labor code, was approved shortly before Peña Nieto took office, but the measure was strongly endorsed by the then president-elect (SourceMex, Nov. 14, 2012).

Cooperation threatened by charges of vote buying in Veracruz

In mid-April, the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) and the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) announced they would halt any cooperative efforts with the Peña Nieto government because of the party’s refusal to end its corrupt practices. The two parties said they had entered into the agreement with the new president because he promised that the PRI was a new party committed to transparency and political fairness.

The fissures in the coalition appeared in mid-April, when PAN president Gustavo Madero, Sen. Ernesto Cordero, and Deputy Luis Alberto Villarreal denounced Social Development Secretary Rosario Robles Berlanga and Veracruz Gov. Javier Duarte for using federal government resources to secure the support of voters in Veracruz for PRI candidates in the July 7 state legislative and mayoral elections.

Robles, who is coordinating Peña Nieto’s ambitious campaign to reduce hunger in Mexico (SourceMex, Jan. 23, 2013), is accused of using funds from that program to bribe voters to support PRI candidates in Veracruz.

While the accusations have centered on activity in Veracruz, Robles has also traveled around the country to promote the anti-hunger program, including to some of the more than a dozen states that are also holding state legislative and mayoral elections on July 7. Those states include Quintana

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Roo, Oaxaca, Hidalgo, Durango, Tamaulipas, Aguascalientes, Zacatecas, Chihuahua, Baja California, Puebla, Tamaulipas, Sinaloa, and Coahuila. Baja California, which has been governed by the PAN, will also be electing a new governor.

Robles, who once served as interim mayor of Mexico City while a member of the PRD, is aware that her role as coordinator of the campaign will bring questions about patronage and vote buying. Speaking to reporters, she responded to the charges by emphasizing that the anti-hunger campaign carries a "social legitimacy that unites all Mexicans."

Despite Robles' insistence that the campaign has no direct correlation to the upcoming state elections, Madero filed a complaint with the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) against Robles and Gov. Duarte, offering evidence that the two PRI officials used government resources to try to gain the support of would-be voters in Veracruz.

The PRD joined the PAN in questioning the PRI's actions and filed a similar complaint against Robles and Duarte before the federal election watchdog (Instituto Federal Electoral, IFE). The PRD asked the IFE to order the immediate suspension of the anti-hunger campaign in Veracruz until after the election.

Despite taking action before appropriate authorities, the PAN and the PRD said their complaints are not being taken seriously by the Peña Nieto government, which led the two parties to announce they would suspend participation in the Pacto por México.

Independent political analyst Sergio Aguayo noted that Peña Nieto kept quiet when the PAN and the PRD first presented evidence of the vote buying in Veracruz on April 17 and 18. And when he finally spoke, it was with words of reassurance to Robles, telling her not to worry because these were politically motivated charges from people who are only worried about winning elections.

"This was disconcerting because Rosario [Robles Berlanga] had just suspended a delegate in Veracruz [accused of leading the vote-buying effort] and other officials," said Aguayo. "This was not a matter of trying to appease the critics, but a case where there was legitimacy in the evidence brought before the PGR."

Aguayo said Peña Nieto exhibited an "absurd and self-destructive attitude" by nonchalantly dismissing the scandal created by the PRI operation to buy votes in Veracruz. "Perhaps he was celebrating that the rest of the world was praising him as a modernizing figure in Mexico," said Aguayo, referring to a recent issue of Time magazine, which named the Mexican president as one of the 100 most influential personalities in 2013.

Columnist Jorge Zepeda Patterson, in a piece published for SinEmbargo.com, said Peña Nieto's reaction to the charges against Robles was much different than to similar cases that developed while he was a presidential candidate. In particular, he pointed to Peña Nieto move to dismiss party president Humberto Moreira, who was accused of mismanagement and corruption while governor of Coahuila (SourceMex, Dec. 7, 2011).

Zepeda Patterson also noted that Peña Nieto has to act decisively on these charges or answer questions on why he is reneging on his pledge to push for a more transparent and democratic government in Mexico. He made this pledge to students who organized a massive protest against the then PRI candidate at the Universidad Iberoamericana in May 2012 (SourceMex, May 23, 2012).
Opposition parties want action

Zambrano warned the federal government to take the PAN and PRD concerns seriously "or sabotage the continuity of the agreement." But the two parties left the door open to return to the coalition if the administration took appropriate steps to remedy the situation between now and the July elections.

"The political commission and the executive committee [Comité Ejecutivo Nacional, CEN] gave their approval for the PAN to remain in the Pacto por México, but only as long as the federal government demonstrates its commitment to comply with the law, transparency, and democracy," said Madero.

But the PAN leader said one way to remedy the situation would be to rewrite the agreement to include language obligating the Mexican president as well as governors to act with transparency, become accountable for their actions, and commit to truly combating corruption.

Some analysts suggested that the PRD and PAN are being hypocritical in their sudden change of position regarding the Pacto por México. "Despite having promoted the agreement as perhaps the last opportunity to negotiate deep reforms, the PRD and the PAN are attempting to negotiate issues that have nothing to do with the pact," columnist Carlos Ramírez wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper El Financiero.

But others noted that the tensions with the PAN and the PRD provide the Peña Nieto government an opportunity to demonstrate true leadership. "The Pacto por México represents a litmus test for the administration to show its capacity for negotiation and consensus building," said Jesús Sánchez, also a columnist for El Financiero.

Banking-reform initiative delayed for now

The break with the PAN and PRD has already created a small problem for the Peña Nieto government. The president had been planning to introduce his initiative on reforms for Mexico’s financial and banking system on April 22, but he decided to postpone the move while his administration attempts to appease the opposition parties.

"The only way to achieve the true transformation that Mexico requires is to engage in dialogue," said a statement from the president’s office. "We will not abandon efforts to ensure that the Pacto por México remains an instrument of change."

Among other things, the reforms proposed ways to increase the amount of money available for loans from commercial banks to small businesses and the public at large in an effort to boost the Mexican economy. The plan, developed by Finance Secretary Luis Videgaray and his team, would create incentives for commercial banks to boost the amount of money available for loans.

Zepeda Patterson said the banking reform is so important to the administration that it must make a difficult choice. "The PRI will now be forced to decide whether to follow the path of political legitimacy or the one of corruption in order to remain in power," said the columnist.