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Charges Against Ex-Tabasco Governor Andrés Granier
Test President Enrique Peña Nieto’s Commitment to Fight Corruption

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The governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) has once again been linked to charges of massive corruption, which could affect efforts by the party and President Enrique Peña Nieto to regain the trust of the Mexican public. The latest case involves former Tabasco Gov. Andrés Granier Melo (2007-2012), who is under investigation, along with several associates, for embezzling billions of pesos. The ex-governor is said to have diverted about 20 billion pesos (US$1.5 billion) in public funds for personal purposes, with the whereabouts of US$1.9 billion pesos (US$143 million) still unknown.

But the discontent with the governing party might not necessarily translate into votes against the PRI in upcoming elections, particularly the July 7 gubernatorial race in Baja California state, because the alternatives, including the opposition parties, are considered part of a corrupt political establishment. Rather, citizens are finding other ways to demonstrate displeasure with the government, including registering animals as candidates in upcoming mayoral elections.

Charges center on embezzlement, mismanagement

The former Tabasco governor, who had been receiving treatment in the US for a heart condition, returned to Mexico from his home in Miami after the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) filed formal charges against him in mid-June. The Tabasco state attorney general’s office, the Procuraduría General de Justicia (PGJ), has also opened a criminal investigation against the former governor, who completed his term in December 2012.

In addition to the charges of embezzlement, both the federal and state investigations are looking at other allegations of malfeasance by the Granier administration, including charges that the governor falsified documents and mismanaged several state agencies, including the state hospitals.

While the federal investigation centers on charges that the governor diverted 20 billion pesos, Tabasco Gov. Arturo Núñez Jimenez, a member of the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), believes Granier might have diverted as much as 23 billion pesos (US$1.75 billion).

"Arturo Núñez not only inherited a state in ruins because of Andrés Granier's systematic plundering, but he found an economy in shambles and collapsed agricultural sectors," said syndicated columnist Ricardo Alemán.

Authorities have already detained several of Granier’s collaborators on the same charges, including three former high-level officials in the state finance department: José Manuel Saíz Pineda, Lucio López, and Esperanza Mayo Martínez. Former transportation director Mélida López Villanueva was also arrested.
Two PGR officials were sent to Hospital Ángeles in Mexico City to inform the ex-governor that he was under arrest, although they did not attempt to immediately remove him from the premises. Granier’s attorneys were eventually able to obtain a court order preventing a physical arrest as long as the governor was receiving treatment at the hospital, effectively placing him under a form of house arrest.

The ex-governor insists that he is innocent, and he made this known through a statement released by his attorneys, led by Eduardo Luengo Creel. "I did not instigate, formulate, carry out, or cover up any actions or omissions that caused harm to the public coffers of Tabasco state or unduly enriched me," said the statement.

**Ex-governor boasted about wealth**

But Granier’s troubles extend beyond the acts of embezzlement, mismanagement, and inept governance. There is also the perception of arrogance, a trait that does not bode well with the Mexican public at a time when much of the population, including a large percentage of the citizens of Tabasco, is struggling economically. In a widely circulated tape recording, the ex-governor boasted about his wealth, offering a laundry list of his possessions, including 400 pairs of pants, 1,000 shirts, and 400 pairs of shoes. In the recording, Granier said he shopped in Beverly Hills, on Rodeo Drive, and "the best of Los Angeles."

While there is no conclusive proof that he used state funds to amass those possessions, the suspicion is there. "Andrés Granier lied about the debt accumulated by his government. He said he was leaving a debt of about 4.8 billion pesos (US$363 million). But when Arturo Núñez arrived at the statehouse, he discovered that the debt was four times that amount," columnist Ana Paula Ordorica wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper Excélsior. "We do not know whether those resources were used to cover current spending, construct infrastructure, or to buy homes, trips, shirts, and shoes."

Granier attempted to distance himself from his own comments, saying that he made those statements while he was drunk and that he had greatly embellished his own net worth. But even if his arguments are true, they point to unacceptable character flaws. "[Granier’s legacy] includes extremely poor management, neglect of the hospital system, a suspicion that he plundered [the state treasury], an unexplained exile [to the US], drunken embellishments, and insincere apologies," columnist Carlos Marín wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper Milenio.

Others pointed to the irony of Granier using his illness to avoid facing the state and federal charges levied against him. "The same man who left the Tabasco health system in shambles because of his corrupt practices is now fighting the investigation with a medical diagnosis," Roberto Zamarripa wrote in his Tolvanera column in the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma. "Why do we need lawyers, when we have cardiologists?"

Other political observers said they are not surprised that this type of corruption occurred in Tabasco, a state known for colorful politicians, including ex-presidential candidates Roberto Madrazo and Andrés Manuel López Obrador. While both those politicians had a long political résumé, Granier was an academic, chemist, and toxicology expert before making the jump into politics by winning the election as mayor of Villahermosa, the capital city of Tabasco, in 2000. He won the gubernatorial election in 2006.
Excélsior columnist Leo Zuckermann said Granier’s indiscretions are part of a history of corruption and inept government that has had tragic consequences in Tabasco. For example, he pointed to a lack of urban planning along with the failure to spend federal funds on levees and other infrastructure during the administrations of Madrazo (1995-2000) and ex-Gov. Manuel Andrade (2002-2006), which exacerbated a major flood that caused devastation in much of Tabasco, including Villahermosa, in 2007 (SourceMex, Nov. 7, 2007). "Global climate change contributed to the problem, but we later learned that the state government’s ineptitude and corruption contributed to one of the worst catastrophes in our country," said Zuckermann.

Other governors accused of corruption

Even though Granier is a member of the PRI, the Peña Nieto government is anxious to prove that its anti-corruption stance is genuine and is moving ahead forcefully with the investigation against the ex-governor. The administration has already moved against two high-profile figures associated with the party.

In March, authorities detained Elba Esther Gordillo, former head of the teachers union (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación, SNTE), on charges of corruption (SourceMex, March 6, 2013). In May, the administration removed Humberto Benítez Treviño as director of the Procuraduría Federal del Consumidor (PROFECO). The ex-director of the consumer-protection agency apparently did not object when his daughter convinced inspectors to close down a restaurant in Mexico City where she had been denied a good table.

But critics say the moves against Gordillo and Benítez Treviño were easy decisions for the Peña Nieto government, and the greater political minefield will be prosecution of governors like Granier and ex-Coahuila Gov. Humberto Moreira, who is also accused of mismanagement and corruption (SourceMex, Dec. 7, 2011).

This is not the first time that a Mexican governor has been charged with corruption, mismanagement, and impunity. Several members of the PRI and the opposition parties have faced those charges, mostly after they left office. They include Moreira, Fidel Herrera of Veracruz, Tomás Yarrington of Tamaulipas, Ulises Ruiz of Oaxaca, and Mario Marín of Puebla. Three ex-governors from the center-right Partido Acción Nacional (PAN)—Emilio González Marquez of Jalisco, Marco Antonio Adame of Morelos, and Luis Armando Reynoso Femat of Reynosa—have also been linked with corruption. Other governors who left a tainted legacy in the eyes of some analysts are Juan Sabines Guerrero of Chiapas, who represented a center-left coalition, and Narciso Agúndez of Baja California Sur, a PRD member.

"Despite missteps and wrongful actions while they were in office, few governors have actually been jailed," columnist Gerardo Viloria wrote in Milenio. "Many of these cases have been resolved with the imprisonment of aides or cabinet members of the governors."

But Viloria suggests that Granier might not escape because the Peña Nieto administration might be seen as complicit if it does not act against the ex-governor. "This crisis involving the corruption of ex-governors could become a serious problem for this government, which is trying to show that it is different from PRI governments of the past," said the columnist.

And public opinion might be a factor in ensuring that the Peña Nieto government prosecutes Granier. In a recent poll by BGC-Excélsior, 54% of respondents said they believe that Granier
is guilty of embezzlement. A majority of respondents also said they believe that the Peña Nieto government will not protect the ex-governor.

César Camacho Quiroz, president of the PRI, offered an interesting theory on why PRI governors had gone astray in the past decade or so. "The cases of corruption increased when the PRI lost the presidency, which means that there was no discipline imposed from a central location," said Camacho, a former governor of México state. "We went from a situation where governors were greatly submissive to one where the exact opposite was true."

Others see a strategic reason for Peña Nieto to make an example out of Granier. "Tabasco could become the scene of the 'great battle' between Enrique Peña Nieto and Andrés Manuel López Obrador," said syndicated columnist Ricardo Alemán, in reference to the coming debate over energy reform. "And the battle, as everyone knows, will be for oil and the powerful state-run company PEMEX."

And López Obrador did not waste any time using the Granier case to his political advantage, demanding an investigation on whether the ex-governor used the embezzled money to funnel funds into the PRI presidential campaign in 2013. "It is not possible that they did not know how Granier managed the money," said the former presidential candidate, who now heads the Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena).

López Obrador also suggested that Peña Nieto was planning to protect Granier in much the same way as the PRI hierarchy gave cover to ex-governors Moreira and Yarrington.

**Potential backlash at ballot box**

The Granier case has caused some worrisome moments for the PRI ahead of July 7 state and local elections in some areas of the country. Fourteen states will be electing new state legislatures and/or mayors. The most important race is for governor of Baja California, a seat that the PAN has held for 30 years, or five successive terms. Several important mayoral elections are also scheduled in 2013, including Veracruz, Tijuana, Chihuahua, Puebla, Ciudad Juárez, Oaxaca, Cancún, and Mazatlán.

Despite some concerns about the situation, PRI officials are putting on a brave face. "This is not a matter for the party to resolve, but an issue for the government to address," Francisco Herrera León, PRI leader in Tabasco, said at a meeting of counterparts in Baja California. "We will not judge or exonerate anyone."

Still, PRI members in Baja California might have little reason for concern, since their candidate Fernando Castro Trenti is leading the public-opinion polls against chief rival Francisco Vega De Lamadrid, representing a coalition formed by the PAN, PRD, and Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL). Trenti leads Vega by a margin of 53% to 44%.

One big concern for authorities on July 7 might be voter apathy, given the disillusionment with politicians. But voters are making their discontent known in other ways. In Xalapa, the capital of Veracruz state, two citizens have managed to place Morris, a black-and-white cat, on the mayoral ballot under the campaign slogan "Cansado de Votar por Ratas? Vota por un Gato" (Tired of Voting for Rats? Vote for a Cat).

"He sleeps almost all day and does nothing, and that fits the profile of a politician," said Xalapa resident Sergio Chamorro, who, along with his friend Daniel Cruz, developed the campaign to put Morris on the ballot.
Chamorro and Cruz created a Web site, a Twitter account, and a Facebook page for Candigato Morris. The Facebook page has more than 115,000 'likes,' which makes him more popular in social networks than the five human candidates seeking to govern Xalapa for the next three years.

"The citizens behind Candigato Morris told reporters that their intention is to obtain 20% of the vote, which would result in the annulment of the election," Juan Pablo Proal wrote in the weekly news magazine Proceso.

The polls do not reflect the impact that Candigato Morris might have on the election, which shows a tight race between Abel Cuevas Melo of the PAN and Américo Zúñiga Martínez of a coalition led by the PRI.

Other animals will appear on mayoral ballots around the country, including El Burro Chon (Chon the Donkey) in Ciudad Juárez, Gata Maya (Maya the Cat) in Puebla, and Perro Tintán (Tintán the Dog) in Oaxaca.

"The citizen disgust with the political establishment has become universal, and sarcasm is a resource used by the voters to show their discontent with the politicians," columnist Jesús Cantú wrote in Proceso. [Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on June 19, 2013, reported at 13.21 pesos per US$1.00.]

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