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When authorities arrested Luis Fernando Reynoso Femat on charges of corruption and embezzlement in early May, he became the third former governor in Mexico to be placed behind bars because of corruption during the past year. Former Tabasco Gov. Andrés Granier Melo (2007-2012) was arrested in 2013, also for embezzlement of state funds (SourceMex, June 19, 2013). More recently, authorities detained Jesús Reyna, former interim governor of Michoacán, on charges of colluding with criminal organizations (SourceMex, April 30, 2014).

Reynoso Femat, who governed the central state of Aguascalientes from 2004 to 2010, is charged with the fraudulent sale of land owned by the state of Aguascalientes for around 26 million pesos (US$2 million). The ex-governor, who was elected under the banner of the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), is also accused of falsifying purchases of medical instruments for the state at a cost of 13.5 million pesos (US$1.1 million) and telecommunications equipment for 25 million pesos (US$1.9 million). In both cases, Reynoso is accused of pocketing the money instead of buying the equipment.

State authorities have filed all the embezzlement charges. "In this state, there will be no impunity or corruption as long as I am in charge of the prosecutor’s office," state attorney general Felipe de Jesús Muñoz said at a press conference announcing the decision to arrest Reynoso.

The federal Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) has also launched an investigation of Reynoso for embezzling money from a fund he managed through the Aguascalientes-based professional soccer club Necaxa.

A black eye for the PAN

Reynoso’s arrest is a black eye for the PAN, which had prided itself on governing honestly. "He will go down in history as the first PAN governor to end up behind bars," the newspaper Excélsior said in its daily political column "Frentes Políticos" on May 5. "Other [PAN governors] have been more skillful in hiding their misdeeds and preventing arrest. Regardless, this is proof of the moral degradation of a party that had set itself as an example of ethics."

The concerns about corruption appear to be splitting the PAN apart, and the issue was present in a disputed battle in the election of the next party president. Incumbent president Gustavo Madero won re-election against rival Sen. Ernesto Cordero amid accusations of illegal and heavy-handed tactics during his last term. "Some allies of the newly elected president, including legislative leader Luis Alberto Villarreal, have been accused of charging fees to PAN mayors in exchange for having the Congress allocate funds to their municipalities," said CNNMéxico.

"Madero does not have the qualities required by the PAN," former Nuevo León Gov. Fernando Canales said in the days leading to the party’s leadership election. "We are tired of corruption, which occurs in all political parties. Madero has not taken a single action to address this issue."

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There is some irony regarding Reynoso Femat’s PAN affiliation. Members of the PAN in Aguascalientes have twice attempted to expel him from the party, not because of corruption but because he openly campaigned for PRI candidate Carlos Lozano de la Torre instead of Martín Orozco Sandoval of the PAN in the 2010 gubernatorial election. Reynoso filed an appeal with the federal electoral tribunal (Tribunal Electoral del Poder Judicial de la Federación, TEPJF) following the last attempt at expulsion. The court ruled that Reynoso could retain his PAN affiliation. Lozano de la Torre went on to win the election, and it is his administration that is leading the prosecution against Reynoso Femat.

The former governor insists that the charges are not true and that the arrest was politically motivated. "It was easy for [state judge Margarita Zavala] to issue the arrest warrant in less than three hours, when it took more than 51 hours to give us copies of the file to study the case and my attorneys were without means to analyze it," Reynoso said.

Rather than file an appeal in a state court, the former governor said he would bring his case to a federal court, which he said, "is not manipulated."

Other governors have faced corruption charges

Other governors have faced legal trouble in recent years, mostly because of their relationship with criminal organizations. The most prominent case involved former Quintana Roo Gov. Mario Villanueva Madrid (1993–1999), who is in custody in the US (SourceMex, July 11, 2007, June 2, 2010, and Aug. 15, 2012). Tomás Yarrington Ruvalcaba, who governed Tamaulipas between 1999 and 2004, has been accused by the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) of laundering money for two criminal organizations (SourceMex, May 30, 2012). Yarrington went into hiding and remains a fugitive.

Other governors in addition to Granier and Reynoso Femat have recently faced corruption charges. Jorge Juan Torres López—who served as interim governor in Coahuila state from Jan. 4, 2011, until Dec. 1, 2011—is accused of laundering large sums of money embezzled from the Coahuila state treasury in Texas and other offshore banks. US authorities have issued an arrest order for Torres López, who remains in hiding.

Narciso Agúndez, who served as governor of Baja California Sur state, was taken into custody in May 2012 on charges of embezzlement related to the questionable sale of land near Los Cabos. The transaction resulted in the loss of 27 million pesos (US$2 million) for the state. Authorities did not have sufficient evidence to make the charges stick, and the embezzlement charges were dropped against Agúndez, a member of the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD).

Former Chiapas Gov. Pablo Salazar Mendiguchía spent 17 months in jail on charges of diverting funds intended for recovery efforts in the aftermath of Hurricane Stan (SourceMex, Sept. 21, 2011). The ex-governor, who represented a broad coalition of parties, left prison after the charges were dropped.

Salazar Mendiguchía’s successor, former Gov. Juan Sabines Guerrero, was also accused of mismanaging state funds but was not charged with fraud or embezzlement. Critics say Sabines, also elected under a coalition banner, left the state treasury about 40 billion pesos (US$3.1 billion) in debt because of mismanagement of funds. [Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on May 21, 2014, reported at 12.92 pesos per US$1.00.]