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Controversial Ex-Mayor of Mexico City Marcelo Ebrard Seeks Seat in Congress

by *Carlos Navarro*

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The presidential elections in Mexico are still more than three years away, but there is already some speculation on which party and candidate is going to carry the banner for the left. As of now, the consensus is that Andrés Manuel López Obrador will return for a third run at the presidency in the 2018 elections, representing the Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena) and perhaps a broader leftist coalition. López Obrador's path is far from defined, however, as the upcoming midterm elections on June 7 will go a long way to determine whether the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) or the upstart Morena will be a stronger party not only in the federal Congress but also in the legislatures of several states.

Former Mexico City mayor Marcelo Ebrard remains a likely rival for López Obrador, albeit a weakened one. Ebrard had hoped to move up the PRD ladder and possibly become the candidate in 2018, with the ex-mayor seeking to be one of the names on the list for at-large seats in the Chamber of Deputies, which are awarded to each party based on the percentage of votes received at the national level. The faction that leads the PRD had promised him he would be considered strongly for this list. However, Ebrard was surprised and angered when the PRD ultimately refused to include him in its list of at-large candidates. This was a temporary blow, as Ebrard left the PRD and latched on to another center-left party, the Movimiento Ciudadano (MC). Ebrard is at the top of the MC list for at-large seats.

Metro scandal haunts Ebrard

Ebrard should not have been surprised that the PRD decided to leave him off the list of candidates, given that the scandal surrounding his handling of the construction of Línea 12 of the Mexico City subway system was a significant black mark. Construction of the subway was completed in June 2012, and the route was inaugurated with much fanfare in October of that year. The project, which was late and overbudget, offered commuters in southern Mexico City a new transportation alternative. At the time, Ebrard described the new route as the "Línea Dorada" (Golden Line), which would offer cleaner, more comfortable, and more efficient trains.

In March 2014, authorities were forced to shut down a portion of the system because of major structural flaws that could cause trains to derail, and many pointed the finger at Ebrard. There were also charges that contracts for a portion of the work were awarded without a public bidding process. The ex-mayor, in turn, blamed builders, contractors, designers, and current administrators of the subway system. "No one told me anything!" Ebrard said at the time.

In September 2014, a group of consultants and engineers hired to review the system came up with a damning report, citing major mistakes in the operation, design, and maintenance of the system. The report recommended 32 corrective actions, which would cost close to US\$40 million.

The decision to shut down Línea 12 was an unprecedented development, since there had never been a partial or total shutdown of a Metro line in the capital only a few months after its inauguration.

Mayor Miguel Mancera, who succeeded Ebrard, announced in late 2014 that the repairs would take several months and that Línea 12 would reopen at the end of 2015.

The Mexico City legislature (Asamblea Legislativa del Distrito Federal, ALDF) and the federal Chamber of Deputies each created a special committee to investigate the irregularities related to the concession, construction, and operation of Línea 12. A document released by the special commission in the Chamber of Deputies (Comisión Especial sobre la Línea 12 del Metro) in January of this year determined that three possible crimes might have been committed: the improper use of faculties, the abuse of governmental functions, and embezzlement. The commission asked the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) to launch an investigation based on this determination.

The commission said the purpose of the probe was to determine what responsibility Ebrard, Mexico City's ex-finance secretary Mario Delgado, and project director Enrique Horcasitas had in the failures of Línea 12.

The congressional committee summoned Ebrard to testify, but the mayor did not offer any answers to the problem and, in fact, left more doubts, Deputy Marcos Arroyo said in an interview with the online news site *La Otra Opinión*.

Others offered evidence that Ebrard might have had a hand in the mismanagement of Línea 12. In a letter to the Chamber of Deputies, Horcasitas denied that he had anything to do with the decision to lease trains for the route that were incompatible with the rails that were constructed.

"This implies that the project director did not give the order to the engineering company CAF to lease the trains for Línea 12," said *La Otra Opinión*, which is edited by respected journalist Ricardo Alemán. "Only one other person could have gone over the head of the project director to give this directive—Marcelo Ebrard Casaubón."

Regardless of the extent of Ebrard's involvement and responsibility, analysts point out that he was the main promoter of Línea 12 and had oversight of the project. Therefore, the PRD's decision to distance itself from the ex-mayor was not surprising. "A disaster of this magnitude for an urban project brings consequences in any part of the world," columnist Pablo Hiriart wrote in the daily business newspaper *El Financiero* in February.

At that time, Ebrard had just announced his intention to seek an at-large post with the PRD, and Hiriart was raising the possibility that Ebrard might just get away with mismanagement of the Línea 12 project. "The consequence here is that Ebrard could become an at-large federal deputy," said Hiriart, who pointed to reports that the Nueva Izquierda faction of the PRD, which currently runs the party, had promised to include the former Mexico City mayor in its list of at-large candidates.

Others confirmed that Nueva Izquierda has promised Ebrard a slot in its field of at-large candidates. "A firm promise was made to Marcelo three weeks ago," columnist Francisco Garfias wrote in the daily newspaper *Excélsior*. Garfias said that Nueva Izquierda did not promise Ebrard that he would rise to a leadership post, but he was reassured that he would be on the list.

In the days leading to the PRD vote, amid uncertainty whether the PRD leadership would make good on its promise, Ebrard wrote a letter to party president Carlos Navarrete and other members of Nueva Izquierda to plead his case and offer reassurances that this was not a maneuver to gain immunity from potential prosecution for the Línea 12 fiasco. "I'm looking to be a federal lawmaker

for my party in the next legislature. Not to shield myself with parliamentary immunity that I don't need and doesn't exist anymore," the former mayor said in the letter.

However, in the end, the PRD decided not to include Ebrard in its list of at-large candidates because the party could not afford any more negative publicity. The PRD was already reeling from the defections of 30 members—including party founder Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and Sen. Alejandro Encinas ([SourceMex, Dec. 3, 2014](#), and [Jan. 21, 2015](#))—and the involvement of party members in the Ayotzinapa massacre in Guerrero state in September 2014 ([SourceMex, Oct. 15, 2014](#)).

In the aftermath of the decision, Ebrard threatened to quit the party, leading to a last-ditch effort by key leaders to keep him in the fold. "It's very important to unify the party, defend it, and avoid more desertions, more disagreements that deepen the crisis. I urge all colleagues from all the [factions], including Marcelo Ebrard, to remain in the PRD, to not make any decision that deepens the crisis," said René Bejarano, a member of the rival Izquierda Democrática Nacional, who also was left off the list.

Ebrard resigns from PRD, joins Movimiento Ciudadano

The argument did not sway Ebrard, who resigned from the PRD at the end of February. However, in his resignation letter, the ex-mayor did not focus on the leadership's decision to leave him off the list. Instead, he cited the PRD decision to compromise with President Enrique Peña Nieto and the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). "Like many others before me—Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, and Alejandro Encinas—I have come to the conclusion that the steady move of the party leadership toward President Enrique Peña Nieto and his party, the PRI, is incompatible with the objectives and obligations of the Mexican left," he said.

Some analysts said the decision to let Ebrard go leaves the PRD without a major personality to lead the party in the next presidential elections. "Perhaps the PRD lost the opportunity to hang its fortunes on a heavyweight with real possibilities to fight for the presidency in 2018," columnist José Cárdenas wrote in *Excélsior*.

Three weeks later, Ebrard ended up on the list of at-large candidates for a smaller center-left party, the MC. "I do want him to be one our candidates," said MC founder Dante Delgado, explaining why he recruited Ebrard. "He is one of the more prominent personalities in our country."

Some critics described Delgado as an opportunist who not only recruited Ebrard but also Manuel Espino, the controversial former president of the center-right Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), to at-large slots for the MC. "If there was a competition to select the most unscrupulous politician in our country, it would be Dante Delgado, owner of the Movimiento Ciudadano party," wrote the authors of the *Confidencial* column in *El Financiero*.

The possibility that Ebrard will remain in the public eye as a member of Congress keeps his presidential aspirations alive, although this might change if the ex-mayor is prosecuted for his role in the mismanagement of Línea 12. Regardless, a weakened Ebrard is not likely to offer much competition to López Obrador, whose only question at this point is his health ([SourceMex, Jan. 21, 2015](#)).

Some observers noted that Ebrard could be facing his mentor to represent the left in the 2018 election. "Once he was in the PRD, Ebrard knew how to put himself in the shadow of López

Obrador, who took him under his wing, protected him, and advocated on his behalf to the point that he eventually was elected mayor of Mexico City," Armando Román Zozaya wrote in *Excélsior*.

Román Zozaya said one of López Obrador's moves as mayor was to appoint Ebrard director of security, even though his protégé did not have any experience in that field.

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