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Two outgoing governors from northern states are under fire for using their offices to benefit their families in their businesses during their six-year terms. Complaints against Sonora Gov. Guillermo Padrés Elías, a member of the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), and Nuevo León Gov. Rodrigo Medina de la Cruz, affiliated with the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), were presented to the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR).

Myriad charges against Sonora’s Padrés Elías

Padrés Elías, who has been under investigation for the past several months, could face federal charges on myriad complaints, including allegations that he used his powers to grant unlawful tax breaks to businesses owned by his family and his collaborators. By some estimates, the tax breaks enabled businesses in Sonora to avoid paying federal taxes worth about 700 million pesos (US$44 million), according to an audit from the federal tax service (Servicio de Administración Tributaria, SAT).

The governor is also accused of extorting businesses in Sonora. "His brother, Miguel Padrés Elías, is known as ‘Mister 30 percent’ because of the commissions he presumably charged to businesses who obtained concessions for state projects," columnist Carlos Loret de Mola wrote in the daily newspaper El Universal.

Padrés Elías is also accused of constructing a dam on his property without first conducting an environmental impact study and without soliciting public bids for the project. "He was using water that was supposed to benefit the entire region."

Padrés Elías is no stranger to conflict. During his term in office, the governor constructed the controversial Acueducto Independencia. Yaqui indigenous communities, which have opposed the project from its inception, claimed that the Sonora government usurped their water rights and violated the law by ignoring court orders to halt construction and then to stop operations of the waterway (SourceMex, July 31, 2013).

Because the conflict regarding the Acueducto Independencia involved federal oversight, President Enrique Peña Nieto’s administration was forced to intervene, and a compromise was reached with the Yaqui communities (SourceMex, Feb. 19, 2014).

High-level sources said two federal agencies—the Centro de Información y Seguridad Nacional (CISEN and the Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público (SHCP)—have prepared an arrest order against Padrés Elías, based on the tax violations.

Even though the case against Padrés Elías is ready, the PGR has not taken action against the governor, whose term expires in September. This has attracted some complaints from citizen groups in the state who are urging Attorney General Arely Gómez to move faster. "We have seen delays in this process, and we want to push the authorities to expedite this case," Luis Miguel Vargas
Delgado, head of the citizens group Los Malnacidos said in an interview with the daily newspaper El Financiero. "That is why we are collecting signatures to present to the attorney general, so the biggest thief that our state has known can be sent to jail."

Padrés Elías' actions in office might have cost his party an opportunity to retain the governor’s seat. Claudia Pavlovich, who represented a coalition formed by the PRI and two other parties, defeated Javier Gándara Magaña of the PAN by about seven percentage points in the June 7 election.

Questions about Nuevo León governor’s property purchases

A citizen group has also requested that the PGR launch a formal investigation against Medina de la Cruz, who acquired properties in Texas worth about 20 million pesos (US$1.3 million). The Congreso Nacional Ciudadano (CNC) made the request to the federal authorities, after state prosecutors declined to review the complaints.

The case brought to the PGR, backed by 21,000 signatures from citizens in Nuevo León, urges the PGR to investigate the governor, his wife Gretta Salinas, and his brother Alejandro Medina de la Cruz.

CNC director Gilberto Lozano, who presented documents to back the organization’s case, said the Medina de la Cruz family does not make the kind of money needed to acquire the properties in question in Texas.

Furthermore, said the CNC, Medina de la Cruz and his family acquired 500 hectares of land in Nuevo León from residents of collective farms (ejidos) under false pretenses.

The PGR has not indicated whether the federal prosecutor’s office will take on the investigation against Medina de la Cruz, who will complete his term in October.

The allegations against Medina de la Cruz might have been a factor in the recent gubernatorial race, won by independent candidate Jaime Rodríguez Calderón, who defeated rivals Ivonne Álvarez García of the PRI and Felipe Cantú of the PAN by a comfortable margin (SourceMex, June 24, 2015).

The complaints against Medina de la Cruz became a campaign issue, with Rodríguez Calderón and other candidates calling for an investigation of the governor’s property purchases.

The governor-elect has said he would seek to imprison Medina de la Cruz if the allegations against the outgoing governor prove to be true. [Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on July 15, 2015, reported at 15.78 pesos per US$1.00.]

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