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Governing Party Proposes Reduction in Size of Mexican Congress

by Carlos Navarro

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A proposal to reduce the size of the Mexican Congress has resurfaced in the Chamber of Deputies as part of a move to cut expenditures in the legislative branch. Under the proposal put forth by the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), the Congress would eliminate 100 at-large seats in the Chamber of Deputies and another 32 in the Senate in time for the 2018 election. The plan would cut the number of at-large seats in the lower house in half and eliminate them altogether in the Senate.

There are 500 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, 300 elected directly by citizens and 200 at-large posts assigned proportionally to each party based on the percentage of votes received during the election. The Senate has 128 members, including 96 directly elected seats and 32 at-large posts.

The PRI brought up the reduction earlier, when it proposed to bring the issue to a vote by citizens through a referendum (SourceMex, Aug. 27, 2014). That proposal did not prosper, and the initiative was shelved.

A cost-cutting measure

The latest effort was presented by the PRI delegation in the Chamber of Deputies in January with the support of the party’s national leadership. Under the plan, changes would be made in four articles of the Mexican Constitution to reduce to 100 the number of at-large seats in the Chamber of Deputies and eliminate them altogether in the Senate by May 30. The measure was introduced by Deputy Jorge Carlos Ramírez Marín, who is the second in command for the PRI in the lower house.

According to Enrique Ochoa Reza, the PRI president, the move could save the Mexican Treasury about 2 billion pesos (US$96 million) per year.

Ramírez Marín said that earlier proposals to cut expenditures for legislators, including travel and life insurance cost, would not achieve the desired savings.

“We want to reform the Congress, not only from an economic standpoint but also from a political point of view,” he said. “It is not feasible to have a Congress of this size in a country with so many economic inequalities.”

The PRI and its main ally, the Partido Verde Ecologista de México (PVEM), hold 250 of the 500 seats in Congress. The conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), which has drafted a similar initiative independent of the PRI plan, controls 109 seats in the lower house. The PAN proposal, however, goes one step further by recommending a reduction in the amount of government financing that is provided to the political parties.

“We’re pushing for both legislative chambers to become more efficient, and this could be accomplished by reducing the number of members,” said Deputy Marko Cortés Mendoza, PAN floor coordinator in the lower house.
The center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), which is represented by 60 legislators in the lower house, has not offered an official position on the proposals, but some legislators have expressed their support. Responding to a proposal by Nuevo León Gov. Jaime Rodríguez to eliminate at-large seats entirely in the federal Chamber of Deputies, PRD Deputy Waldo Fernández González said he opposed the governor’s suggestion but supported other proposals to reduce the number of seats. Fernández González argued that at-large deputies are necessary to ensure democratic representation in the Congress. “If the at-large deputies did not exist, we might have never debated such issues as medical marijuana (SourceMex, Feb. 3, 2016),” he said. “The PRI and the PAN would have never introduced this important matter, which is so important to many people who are sick.”

Some observers noted that the proposals from the PRI and the PAN would change very little in the two legislative chambers.

“The only ones who are going to suffer are the party presidents, who will have fewer bones to distribute,” wrote Diego Petersen, a columnist for the daily newspaper El Informador.

Petersen said, “We have said many times that having at-large members in the Senate is an absurdity, as the purpose of this chamber, at least in theory, is to ensure the representation of each state in the legislature. Having at-large seats creates a distortion.”

**Opposition from smaller parties**

While a segment of the PRD might support the reduction in the number of at-large seats, other smaller parties are adamantly opposed to the proposal. Representatives from Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena) and Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL), for example, suggested that the move would run counter to the democratic process in Mexico.

“We support the continuation of the system that allows at-large seats,” said Herlinda Vázquez, a Morena deputy in the Querétaro state legislature. “We believe that this is the best way to represent the citizens. We are a counterpoint to the majority parties who are in power … We represent the citizens who trust in our ideology and our way of thinking.”

Similar sentiments came from PANAL legislators.

“By eliminating these seats, we would be reducing the plurality of voices and ceding spaces to those who have attained power through the direct vote,” said William Herrera Vázquez, president of PANAL in Yucatán state. “If the problem is really one of austerity, why don’t they eliminate the Senate entirely?” Herrera Vázquez asked. “[This body] spends millions of pesos and does not meet its obligation to adequately review the legislation [that comes from the Chamber of Deputies], instead approving initiatives via fast track.”

National PANAL president Luis Castro Obregón echoed the party’s state leader in Yucatán. “Nueva Alianza has always had a better proposal, which would be to merge the two chambers into a single Congress,” he said.

Observers noted that the initiative to reduce the size of Congress is related to the poor opinion the Mexican public has of Congress.

“It is in the context of this lack of confidence that the PRI has proposed [eliminating] 100 at-large seats in the Chamber of Deputies and 32 in the Senate,” columnist Diana Mancilla wrote
in the daily newspaper Milenio. “The elimination of 132 at-large seats would definitely generate important savings for the Treasury. The truth is that the major parties do not consult with all the representatives of the [smaller] parties when forging their agreements. They are only asked to vote in favor or against certain proposals.”

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