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LADB Staff

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Panamanian President Moscoso Battles to Keep Legislative Coalition Together

by LADB Staff

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After five months in office, President Mireya Moscoso has been able to hold her congressional majority together, but it has been threatened by controversial legislative proposals. Leaders of some of the five parties that make up the coalition are asking to renegotiate the pact that brought them together in September, while at the same time, the opposition Partido Revolucionario Democrático (PRD) has taken tentative steps toward cooperation with Moscoso. Since its presidential candidate Martín Torrijos lost to Moscoso in the 1999 elections, the PRD has alternately defied Moscoso and sought rapprochement with her.

Torrijos, now PRD secretary general, has agreed to hold formal talks with the coalition but has rejected signing any political pact. Raul Montenegro, the PRD's second vice president, said Moscoso has not made the purpose of the talks clear, but he said the PRD wanted to discuss outstanding issues such as what the administration intends to do with the Instituto de Acueductos Nacionales (IDAAN).

Former President Ernesto Pérez Balladares (1994-1999) had intended to privatize the water utility, but Moscoso campaigned against it. Also of major importance to the PRD is getting Moscoso to promise not to lay off government employees, without which there will be no talks, according to Montenegro. In December, the PRD's Comité Ejecutivo Nacional (CEN), its Consejo Directivo, and 25 PRD Legislative Assembly deputies met in Alanje, Chiriquí province, to decide how far the party should go in cooperating with the administration.

In January, Torrijos issued the party's response, contained in the Declaration of Alanje. Presenting the party as the champion of the people, the declaration laid down the principle that the PRD would talk with the governing coalition "to avoid a continued deterioration of the country, so that the people will not suffer greater injury."

However, the PRD would not join any political alliance and would remain an opposition party, the document said. PRD leaders base much of the party's opposition on the performance of the economy under Moscoso and want to use the promise of cooperation with her as leverage to debate her economic program.

The PRD and even some coalition members hold that Moscoso has no coherent economic program and that her policies have led to an economic downturn, a reduction in foreign investment, and increases in the cost of basic goods and services. Torrijos said that if Moscoso wanted to talk with the PRD about social programs the centerpiece of her administration, she should first lay out her economic program in detail.

The PRD has also claimed Moscoso's preoccupation with negotiating an elaborate national-security program with the US has allowed organized-crime activity and common street crime to increase. The criticism links two problems facing Moscoso: crime including drug trafficking and money laundering and the touchy issue of which party can best manage the canal while staving off real or imagined US efforts to reassert its influence in the country.

Meanwhile, the PRD proposes a legislative agenda that includes a reduction in the cost of prescription medicines, subsidies to reduce electricity and potable-water rates, and a plan to deploy police forces according to the geographic distribution of crime. At the same time, the party declaration promised to support Moscoso's initiatives in crime reduction, job creation, and poverty reduction.

The PRD has already cooperated with some other administration proposals. In November, PRD legislative leader Alberto Cigarruista said the party would support Moscoso's proposal to eliminate the fixed terms Perez Balladares gave to directors of the Registro Publico and the Autoridad Maritima Nacional (AMN).

Cigarruista said he did not agree with the former president's attempt, through the appointments, to project his influence beyond the end of his term. He said Moscoso should be allowed to make her own appointments.

Trouble develops in coalition pact

So far, the coalition's Acuerdo Legislativo y de Gobernabilidad also called the Pacto de la Pintada, after the place in Coclé province where it was signed has held together. It succeeded in killing Perez Balladares' last-minute enlargement of the Corte Supreme de Justicia (CSJ) and his decree creating new three-day holidays (dias puente).

The coalition also agreed to the appointment of Alvin Weeden as comptroller general even though he is a member of Moscoso's Partido Arnulfista (PA). But in October, the Arnulfistas had to smooth over a rift developing with the Partido Solidaridad to keep the coalition going. The price was an administration promise not to fire Solidaridad government functionaries and to rehire those already sacked by the previous administration (see NotiCen, 1999-10-14).

Later in October, Arnulfistas struck a deal with the PDC to heal another rift. That one arose over the vote on the dias puente. In that vote, the PRD joined the PA to put the bill over. PA-PRD cooperation outraged Ruben Arosemena of the PDC, who said the coalition could no longer count on the five votes from his party's deputies. Moscoso denied charges that PA-PRD cooperation stemmed from a secret pact. She said conversations with Torrijos are aimed at reaching legislative agreements for the good of the country.

In December, Solidaridad president Carlos Clement said communication among the coalition partners had broken down and that they should hold meetings every two weeks to re-evaluate the pact. Suggestions soon emerged that the coalition negotiate a new pact so that rifts do not appear with each new legislative debate. The fundamental problem, say some coalition members, is that

Arnulfistas think they have an agreement locking the five parties into automatic support for every administration proposal, while Clement and other leaders want freedom to vote as they please.

Besides fear of the PRD whose delegation in the legislature is the largest the pact is held together mostly by agreements to rotate the presidency of the Assembly and other Assembly leadership posts among the pact's member parties. In early February, rumors surfaced that current Assembly president Enrique Garrido would break with the power-sharing agreement and seek another term. Garrido denied the rumors and said he and the other former Arnulfistas (saltamontes) were still adhering to the pact.

Saltamontes are the Arnulfistas who were kicked out of the party for failing to support Moscoso's presidential nomination. They are currently awaiting a Tribunal Electoral ruling on their petition for reinstatement in the party. Coalition crumbles over Supreme Court nomination The coalition momentarily shattered when Moscoso nominated former President Guillermo Endara (1989-1994) for a seat on the Corte Suprema de Justicia.

Though several legislative leaders said Endara was qualified for the post, a movement against him gathered momentum as the PRD, Solidaridad, and Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC) leaders, and Assembly president Garrido united in opposition. Endara was a sharp-tongued antagonist of Perez Balladares and the PRD. Endara once said that, in Perez Balladares' final days as president, he was "a good example of people who go mad when they lose power." On another occasion, he described the former president as a "pig" who always wants "to muddy everyone else with his filth."

Despite Endara's promise to be more circumspect on the bench, the opposition said it would not support either Endara or Cesar Pereira Burgos nominated for a second vacancy on the court because of their Arnulfista party affiliations. With little support outside the PA, Endara withdrew from consideration at the end of December, and the Assembly voted unanimously for Adan Arnulfo Arjona, who has no party affiliation.

Dropping its objections to Pereira, the Assembly also unanimously confirmed his appointment to the court. Weeden said the defeat of Endara's nomination was because the PDC voted with the PRD against Endara out of "hatred" for him. But Torrijos, magnanimous in victory, said this was not the time to speak of who won or who lost, but to think of the future challenges facing Panama. (Sources: Notimex, 10/29/99, 12/18/99, 12/30/99; El Panama America, 10/19/99, 10/20/99, 10/26/99, 10/27/99, 11/07/99, 11/12/99, 12/05/99, 12/16/99, 12/22/99, 12/23/99, 12/24/99, 12/29/99, 12/31/99, 01/12/00, 01/16/00, 01/17/00, 01/22/00, 01/27/00, 01/30/00, 02/07/00)

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